

Mona Lisa smiles

The Eiffel Tower or 'Tour Eiffel' (pronounced in French as Thigh-Eiffel) and the city of Paris are almost synonymous. Much has been said and written on this lofty tower, 300 metres high, by so many visitors, including some from our own country. This gigantic steel-frame with its 'towering' height impressed me so much that whenever I used to get time, I would walk past it just to catch a glimpse of its lofty and lovely sight.

Things were, however, a little different with my colleague who, while discussing between ourselves, once said that the tower did not impress him much, since he happened to see another giant steel-frame right from his childhood — the Bhauab bridge over the mighty Meghna. He was, in a sense, right; but his remark almost instantly reminded me of the two amusing anecdotes which I had heard years back.

Here is the one: A German youngman had gone to the United States for sight-seeing. But to everything he would be shown by the tourist-guide, he would respond by stating that such things exist in his country as well. Ultimately, the guide took him near the Niagara waterfalls and thought that this time he would not say anything like that. But what the bewildered guide heard the youngman say, after he had observed the mighty falls for sometime, is this — "Well, we have a plumber in our country, who can mend this bloody leak".

The other one appears to me even more interesting: Two person of different nationalities were boasting to each other of their respective countries. One said, "In our country we dug the earth to the depth of five thousand feet and discovered some copper wires". The other man asked, "What does it prove?" The reply was: "It proves that telegraphic wire system existed in our country even before five thousand

years". It was now the turn of the other person. He said, "In our country, we dug the earth to the depth of 10 thousand feet and did not find any wire". This time the question was: "Does it prove anything?" The reply: "Yes, it proves that wireless system existed in our country even before 10 thousand years".

However, we next visited the celebrated Louvre Museum, which alone draws 18 million visitors a year. The Louvre (pronounced in French as 'Luvr') preserves among other collections the most famous painting of the world 'La Joconde' (Mona Lisa) of Leonardo da Vinci. ('La Joconde' was, I learnt here, the name of the painting the artist gave it and 'Mona Lisa' was the name of the model he utilised) and two other important sculptures, though comparatively a little less famous — 'The Venus of Milo' and 'The Victory of Samothrace.'

The prestigious collections of the Museum are, in fact, divided into six departments: painting and design, Antiquities Egyptian, Antiquities Oriental, Antiquities Greco-Roman, sculptures and the objects of art. So vast and enormous are the collections that I could not complete seeing all in one day, despite the fact that I was constantly on foot for more than four hours. Hence I had to go there for the second day and even then I could not be fully satisfied.

As I was looking at Mona and observing her minutely, I was reminded of her most spectacular journey to New York in 1963 and, more recently, to Tokyo. For obvious reason, the rush of visitors was maximum in front of 'Mona Lisa' which was found preserved with extraordinary precaution and care.

But then, there were also other paintings of the different schools and ages of Italy, Holland, Spain and France, which are no less spectacular. The paintings of Raphael, Rubens, Van Dyck, Van Gogh, Picasso; Pissarro; Cezanne and Gauguin may be cited as examples. A 'salle' (room) dedicated to

Rubens (1577-1640) and filled up with reproductions of all the important works of this celebrated Flemish painter of the 17th century has been added to the museum only in recent years, and it appeared to be the most attractive of all. Trainee artists from various countries of the world were found making reproductions of the important pieces.

In the department of sculptures as well as of Antiquity Greco-Roman, as I stood before the busts of Roman heroes and emperors (Augustus, Caesar, for example), I could not help thinking of the glory that was once Rome and the grandeur that was Greece. As for the Egyptian antiquities, those were so varied and numerous that it appeared to me for some time as if I was visiting a museum in Egypt and not in France. The spectacle which at-



MONA LISA by LEONARDO DA VINCI

tracted me most in this department was the 'mummies', which I was seeing for the first time in my life and I could not help wondering how the Egyptians could perform the feat several thousand years before the birth of Christ.

Close to the department of Egyptian antiquities, having observed a radiating diamond from a certain distance, I advanced towards it and found the following words written on a paper-board mounted by its side "Le Regent — Diamond 136 carats 7/8. Brought from Madras to England by Thomas Pitt in 1702 and acquired from the Duke of Orleans for the crown of France in 1762". As I read the above writings in French, I indeed felt sorry for all the treasures that have been taken away by outsiders from this subcontinent from time to time.

The 'Chateau' or the Palace of Versailles is a historical monument and though it is some miles away from the main city, one has to make time to go there. It was Louis XIV, who planned and built the palace in the 17th century at a cost of more than a hundred million dollars and reportedly at a time when many Frenchmen were starving.

The Palace is indeed a good example of great extravagance of the French court, which is said to be one of the main reasons behind French Revolution. Louis XIV would not like the narrow streets and untidy mobs of Paris and so he decided to build a magnificent royal residence twelve miles southwest of Paris. He commanded the leading architects and artists to build and decorate the Palace and its courtyards. Versailles was thus a dreamland of Louis XIV and the men and women of his court; but at the same time it was a nightmare of suffering and taxation for the common people.

Visiting Versailles one sunny Sunday morning, I was simply astounded by the enormous dimensions of the palace. It will be more than half a mile long and a beautiful green lawn sweeps down from the palace to a ground canal. Shrub, trees and flower beds are laid out in geometric patterns and scores of fountains and beautiful marble statues decorate the extensive grounds. It has hundreds of rooms, the most important and famous of which is the Hall of Mirrors where many of the historic international conferences have been held.

Standing in the Hall of Mirror, I tried to visualise the moment when the peace treaty of World War I was signed and later as I passed in queue through the bed-rooms of Louis XIV's fashionable and extravagant queen Marie Antoinette, who was guillotined after the Revolution, I tried in vain to find an exact definition of pomp and grandeur.