

[Mark Twain's Little Known Travels in India](#)

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"East is East and West is West,"and finally the Twain have met."--Pudd'nhead Wilson's Lost Cousin Thrice Removed

"In religion, all other countries are paupers. India is the only millionaire." So quipped the American humorist Mark Twain in his diary as he traveled through India and Sri Lanka from January to April, 1896. Twain's tales of his encounter with India and Hinduism are typical of the curmudgeonly essayist--witty, sagacious, exaggerated and cynical. Yet few people know he ever went to dharma's homeland or wrote so extensively about what he saw there. Herewith we correct that flaw.

SECTION ONE:

A Pressing Need for Money

The journey was not a pilgrimage, though in many ways it became exactly that. Samuel Clemens, 60, had fallen on hard times. The literary genius who gave the world Huckleberry Finn , The Adventures of Tom Sawyerand The Innocents Abroadhad become a pauper. It happened when he undertook two large business enterprises with Charles Webster Publishing and

Paige Typesetting Machine; they both failed miserably. Twain had borrowed heavily for the ventures, and felt personally responsible to investors who had trusted in him. So he set sail for the East.

It was to Twain's credit that he refused to let those who had trusted in him suffer. He fussed for weeks and finally crafted a plan to recoup their losses doing what he did best--lecturing and writing books. The debt was vast, around \$100,000, and so the plan had to be equally ambitious. He chose to circle the globe. It would be a long, arduous journey and he was sick much of the time, mostly from a cold and a carbuncle. The itinerary took him to Hawaii, Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, India, Mauritius, South Africa and England.

Though he traveled far and experienced much, Twain's three months in India were the highlight of his year-long trek and the intriguing centerpiece of his revealing 712-page book, *Following the Equator*.

So it was that the self-proclaimed vagabond and literary gadfly set out on July 15, 1895 to pay his debts; but what he really gave the world was a saga, a romance and a human adventure. Ironically, it was poverty that took him to India and it was poverty-stricken India that made him solvent again--an observation he might have made himself were he not so close to the facts of the matter.

Twain traveled with his wife Olivia and daughter and with a colleague, Mr. Smythe, who made all of the India travel and

lecture arrangements. Landing in Bombay from Colombo, he was overwhelmed by the color, the ancientness of the land. He wrote: "This is India! the land of dreams and romance, of fabulous wealth and fabulous poverty, of splendor and rags, of palaces and hovels, of famine and pestilence, of genii and giants and Aladdin lamps, of tigers and elephants, the cobra and the jungle, the country of a hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand religions and two million gods, cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of tradition, whose yesterdays bear date with the mouldering antiquities of the rest of the nations--the one sole country under the sun that is endowed with an imperishable interest for alien persons, for lettered and ignorant, wise and fool, rich and poor, bond and free, the one land that all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for all the shows of all the rest of the globe combined. Even now, after a lapse of a year, the delirium of those days in Bombay has not left me and I hope it never will."

At Home in India

A trained mind could infer that Mark Twain was impressed with India. But work called. He had chosen a conversational style for his presentations and called them "At Home." He thought lectures too formal, too stiff, for his manner and purpose. They were to him "speech" and he preferred "talk." That is not to say that Twain's informal talks, with their long and detailed stories, their tearful pathos and side-hugging fun, were either careless or totally spontaneous. Rather they were crafted, rehearsed, improved, refined and changed according to each audience. Such a studied approach paid off.

With his white suit, curly hair, shaggy eyebrows and magnetic smile, Clemens's appearance was compelling. "The prominent points about Mark Twain's personal appearance are his long untidy hair, the ferocious moustache and the gray eyes that are not ferocious but kind and gentle and pathetic; and the deep furrows falling outwards from the thin beaked nose to the sides of his mouth, which are the external and audible signs of the nasal drawl that characterizes the very thoughts of the man before he had given utterance to them."

His face did not suggest his latent humor but recalled the appearance of a stern and serious man as he paced up and down on the stage, a slender but well-built man in a spotless white suit. Said a Bombay paper, "With his feet planted some distance apart and a hand sometimes in his trousers' pockets, elbow sometimes placed against his cheek and supported by the other arm whilst his eyes oftener than not gazed as he would in the presence of a group of familiar friends and never once raised his voice above a conversational pitch."

Many members of Indian audiences, accustomed to British speech and pronunciation and formality, found in his American accent a certain piquancy. They liked it. America was something of a mystery for most people he encountered. They knew about George Washington, about Chicago and its World's Fair that made Swami Vivekananda a world figure. That was about the extent of general knowledge in those days.

The main purpose for which Clemens traveled around the world was fulfilled satisfactorily, for he collected money enough to pay off a large part of his debt. Much of the success

came in India where his once-in-a-lifetime presence and Smythe's sizeable media hype drew large crowds. Most of the theaters where he appeared accommodated about 1,000 people and in some extra seats had been provided. In Bombay the Novelty Theatre held 1,400. Prices in India were Rs 1, 2, 3 and 4, depending on how close one wished to be to the celebrity. He collected about Rs 2,600 (or \$650 in those days) for each evening. Stories, anecdotes, human sketches, and homilies, excerpts from Huck Finn and such filled the 3-hour evenings. His wife always felt the audience should get its money's worth and urged him to not end after just an hour or two.

One man wrote: "So, Mark Twain came to India and conquered the people. What the British with nearly a hundred and fifty years of strong rule could not achieve, he could work wonders in one day by being 'At Home' to the people. They had read Mark Twain and were greatly responsive to his subtle humor and highly exaggerated stories"

A Tall, Tall Tale

Twain knew from extensive reading that India was a place where moral and philosophical subjects were welcome. Since it was his penchant to ponder these matters, he devised a preposterous plan which he presented to Indian audiences whose uncontrollable mirth contrasted with but never shattered the serious demeanor of the man. We share in brief Twain's "Moral Regeneration of the Whole Human Race Scheme."

"I've got a scheme for the moral regeneration of the human race, which I hope I can make effective, but I can't tell yet. But I know it is planned out upon strictly scientific lines and is up to date in that particular. I propose to do for the moral fabric just what advanced medical art is doing for the physical body. To protect a healthy person forever from smallpox, hydrophobia, diptheria and so on, the doctor gives him those very diseases--in a harmless form--inoculates him with them--and he's safe then from ever catching them again. That great idea is going to be carried further and further. Fifty years from now the doctors will be inoculating for every conceivable disease. They will take the healthy baby out of the cradle and punch it and slash it and scarify it and load it up with the whole of the 1,644 diseases (those known to be fearful) that constitute their stock in trade--and that child will be a spectacle to look at. But no matter; it will be sick a couple of weeks, and after that, though it live to be a hundred, it can never be sick again. The chances are that that child will never die at all. In that great day there won't be any doctors any more--nothing but inoculators--and here and there a perishing undertaker. Now then, I propose to inoculate for Sin. Suppose that every time you commit a transgression, a crime of any kind, you lay up in your heart a memory of the shame you felt when your Sin found you out, and so make it a perpetual reminder and perpetual protection against your ever committing that particular Sin again. That is to say, inoculate yourself forever against that particular Sin. Now what must be the result? Why this--logically and infallibly: that the more crimes you commit (and forever amen) the richer you become, morally; and when you have committed all the trespasses, all the crimes that are known to the calendar of Sin, there you stand, white as an angel, pure as the driven Snow (protected forever from further Sin), the sky-kissing monument of moral perfection.

"Now is this thing difficult? No. There are only 354 Sins possible--that's all you can commit--that all there are; you can't invent any fresh ones--that's all been attended to. Now what is 354 Sins? It's very easy work. It's nothing--anybody can do it. I know; I've done it myself."

SECTION TWO:

In the the section we continue Mark Twain's adventures in India, with special reference to his colorful but depressing days in Banares. Also we herein divulge to our readers how it came to pass that Twain's destiny and that of the staff of your paper intertwined, not once but twice. It would be an unbelievable yarn were it not altogether true. Twain had read over much about the subcontinent and imagined its "Alladin Lamp" atmosphere, but even so he was not prepared for what he encountered between January 18th and March 31st, 1896:

The Most Interesting People

"There is only one India! It is the only country that has a monopoly of grand and imposing specialties. When another country has a remarkable thing, it cannot have it all to itself--some other country has a duplicate. But India--that is different. Its marvels are its own; the patents cannot be infringed; imitations are not possible. And think of the size of them, the majesty of them, the weird and outlandish character of most of them!"

"India had the start of the whole world in the beginning of things. She had the first civilization; she had the first accumulation of material wealth; she was populous with deep thinkers and subtle intellects; she had mines, and woods, and a fruitful soul."

As he traveled through Bombay, Poona, Allahabad, Banares, Calcutta, Darjeeling, Agra, Jaipur, Delhi and other cities, mostly by train (of which he had much to say), the American humorist gathered impressions and crafted them into descriptions. He later wrote about the animals in India, with special reference to the crows and lions and an elephant ride that made him feel quite regal. He gave quaint tales of life in Indian hotels, of fancy parties and horrible long names, of street scenes and fakirs, of the fancy Indian costumes that made him wax poetic and even of long-forgotten historical events. An example:

"In other countries a long wait at a train station is a dull thing and tedious, but one has no right to have that feeling in India. You have the monster crowd of bejeweled natives, the stir, the bustle, the confusion, the shifting splendors of the costumes--dear me, the delight of it, the charm of it are beyond speech."

Diaries and notebooks piled up. Of India's people he wrote, "The bad hearts are there, but I believe that they are in a small, poor minority. One thing is sure: They are much the most interesting people in the world--and the nearest to being incomprehensible. At the very least they are the hardest to account for. Their character and their history, their customs and their religion, confront you with riddles at every

turn--riddles which are a trifle more perplexing after they are explained than they were before. [As for spirituality], it makes our own religious enthusiasm seem pale and cold."

In the eyes of the educated Indian people Mark Twain was not merely a public speaker or a writer, but a man with a serious social purpose and human understanding who cemented the hearts of two mutually unknown people with different background and cultural influences and subjected to colonial and social tyrannies.

Following the Equator is thought by many to be Mark Twain's best travelog, an example of his observations of human dignity and debasement. Travel accounts interested him throughout his life, and he wrote about his trips to Europe and around the American continent. He liked history, biography and travels. He roamed about with an open eye and a receptive mind and told vividly of what he saw. His keen eye detected shams which he exposed with sympathy due to a tolerant attitude about the human condition. His intense interest in social problems and his travel-guide craft reached their height in Following the Equator. Like the others, it is full of digressions, stories, whimsies. It received fine reviews during his life. He personally considered it among his finest efforts.

Mark Twain's humorous comments are characteristically exaggerated in all his works, but most particularly in his travel accounts. In Following the Equator he starts with a fantastic account of a shark that swallowed a man and his London Times in England and delivered the paper in just ten days to a shark hunter in Australia who made some money, since the

shark-delivered wool market news arrived weeks before the steamer officially docked with the same paper.

The Arabian Nights were for him the perfect picture of the beauty of Oriental life, dress and food. He was especially impressed with the brilliant color and uncommonness of the Eastern costume. There were many sights of Oriental beauty in India from "the tender shapely bodies, slim legs and arms and little feet and hands of the Indian woman and the rich and vivid deep colors of the graceful robes they wear--usually silks, soft and flimsy" to the extraordinarily glittering dress of the Maharajahs and Princes. It was "all color, bewitching color--everywhere --all around--all the way around."

There is no doubt that Twain was shattered by the reality he found in India. First in Bombay, then village by village, the immensity of history and of want fell upon his weary eyes. Like a mountain climber he went through ups and downs of illness and robustness, of gaiety and grief, of distress and wonderment. Any modern-day pilgrim could sympathize with such extremes.

But never did his humor fail him. Encountering the firm Indian pillow in a hotel for the first time, he quipped: "In India from the beginning, in time of war breastworks have been built of hotel pillows. It was found that a cannon ball could go thro' earth or sandbag, but when it hit a pillow it hit with a dull thud and dropped to the ground."

Banares and Hinduism

A two-day visit to Banares presented Twain and his party with an opportunity to explore Hinduism and investigate especially its contradictions, orthodoxy and superstition. The filthy waters of the Ganges disgusted him and the fact that pilgrims looked upon it as pure and purifying and drank it eagerly absolutely repelled him.

His enduring fascination with various ways that humankind deal with death and burial was amply filled in Banares. He attended cremation ceremonies for hours on end, watching, stretching his mind to take it all in as he had earlier at the Parsee Towers of Silence. He later wrote, "We are drifting slowly--but hopefully--toward cremation these days. It could not be expected that this progress should be swift, but if it be steady and continuous, even if slow, that will suffice. When cremation becomes the rule we shall cease to shudder at it; we should shudder at burial if we allowed ourselves to imagine that what goes on in the grave."

As to Hinduism itself, it is truly unfortunate that he was taken around Banares by a good Christian, Rev. Parker, who understood little about Hinduism's subtle esoterics and profound ways. Twain became victim to one of his own insights, shared in *A Tramp Abroad*: "Between fools and guidebooks a man could acquire ignorance enough in twenty-four hours in a country like this to last him a year."

His story of Banares is caustic in its criticism of Hindu beliefs. He noted that wherever there was room for one more Linga, a Linga was there. "If Vishnu had foreseen what this town was going to be, he would have called it *Idolville* or *Lingamburg*."

Still, he saw so much that was strange and new to him, experienced so fully, that he was to later say, "I think Banares is one of the most wonderful places I have ever seen. It has struck me that a Westerner feels in Banares very much as an Oriental must feel while he is planted down in the middle of London."

We interrupt our story here, having just recalled our promise, made hastily earlier, to tell you of our own encounters with Mark Twain. Next time we'll pick up the adventurer in Banares.

More decades ago than we dare speak of, the staff of Hinduism Today lived and served in a remote Hindu monastery in the mountain-desert region of Nevada. The wood and brick building stood three stories high and was surrounded on all sides by sage in the summer and snow in the winter. It was just half a mile from Virginia City. As it happens, Samuel Clemens came to Virginia City with his brother in the summer of 1861. He was just 26. He failed at mining and stock speculations, and became a writer for the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise. It was here, on February 3, 1863, that "Mark Twain" was born when young Clemens signed a humorous travelog with the pseudonym.

As it happened, a large brewery served the thirsts of about 70,000 miners (everyone was a miner). Twain visited it often. In case you haven't guessed, a hundred years later the Old Nevada Brewery became a monastic retreat. We also had occasions to set type for our publications with the very sorts used by Mr. Clemens, in his very office.

Years later, we resettled in Hawaii. But even on the remote Garden Island of Kauai we discovered our Rambler had been here first. He noted that our Lumahai Beach (where the movie Bali Hai would later be filmed) was the most beautiful in the world. It is.

And so it was that our destiny and that of the perceptive, comic and often bitter Mark Twain crossed--a hundred years apart.

SECTION THREE

The Oxford of India

Now we conclude Mark Twain's three-month excursion in India, giving our readers more of his trenchant insights and quotable quotes. We also provide the names of two books wherein every step of his experience may be retraced with the aid of hundreds of drawings and illustrations of Twain in India.

When we left Mark Twain last, he was wandering about Banares and not having a very good time. Despite the crowded and often funereal experiences, Banares was not entirely a disappointment to Mark Twain. He called it "the Oxford of India" for its wealth of Hindu and Sanskrit studies. He met the priests who purported to broker salvation for the pious contributor, but he also met a real holy man in whom Hinduism and saintliness became embodied for him--Swami Bhaskaranand Saraswati. He visited the Swami, who had

studied Vedanta philosophy and renounced the world, in a small garden called Anandabag where he lived. This soul impressed Twain as a great spiritual leader and scholar, compelling him to write: "He is no longer a part or feature of this world...he is utterly holy, utterly pure." Their meeting was enthusiastically retold by Twain again and again, "There he is. He is minus the trappings of civilization. He hasn't a rag on his back. But he has perfect manners, a ready wit and a turn for conversation."

He Needed Money

Tolerance was essential to him. It had to be. He was raised amid its opposite and had seen too much of hatred and self-righteousness in the slave-master relationship in the American South. So he tried again and again to teach others the foolishness of it. After his meeting with the Indian holy man he reflected at length on the matter: "He has my reverence. And I don't offer it as a common thing and poor, but as an unusual thing and of value. The ordinary reverence, the reverence defined and explained by the dictionary costs nothing. Reverence for one's own sacred things--parents, religion, flag, laws, and respect for one's own beliefs--these are feelings which we cannot even help. They come natural to us; they are involuntary, like breathing. There is no personal merit in breathing. But the reverence which is difficult, and which has personal merit in it, is the respect which you pay, without compulsion, to the political or religious attitude of a man whose beliefs are not yours. You can't revere his gods or his politics, and no one expects you to do that, but you could respect his belief in them if you tried hard enough. But it is very, very difficult; it is next to impossible, and so we hardly

ever try. If the man doesn't believe as we do, we say he is a crank and that settles it. I mean it does nowadays, because now we can't burn him."

Mark Twain eschewed prejudice most of the time, and those that remained with him did not sully seriously his basic conception of man and the world, for he could laugh through them at the stupidities of individuals both at home and abroad.

Nonetheless, Mark Twain never truly comprehended Hinduism. Through Rev. Parker's eyes he saw the darker side--the unfortunate practices of making religion a business and the immense poverty (which he rightly blamed on India's invaders). Only in one visit to a Jain temple did a knowledgeable man present the deeper views and correct a handful of Twain's misconceptions. But considering himself "a representative-at-large for the human race" more than an American, Twain also saw through the exterior and recognized a serene and self-possessed culture with high principles. In Banares he evinced an inner pleasure at the many men and women kneeling prayerfully for hours "while we in America are robbing and murdering."

The poverty nearly suffocated him. He blamed the white man who, in the name of civilization and "the white man's burden," impoverished many peoples in the world. In his book *Mark Twain in India*, Keshav Mustalik noted of Twain's observations: "The white man's tools were whisky and wine and tobacco offered with the fetters and hanging pole and noose; the white man's world was death and murder coupled with the commandment Thou shalt not kill. Mark Twain angrily said, 'We

are obliged to believe that a nation could look on, unmoved, and see starving or freezing women hanged for stealing twenty-six cents' worth of food or rags and boys snatched from their mothers and men from their families and sent to the other side of the world for long terms of years for similar trifling offenses, was a nation to whom the term 'civilized' could not in any large way be applied.' The result of 'civilization' was the extermination of the savages: 'There are many humorous things in the world, among them the white man's notion that he is less savage than the savages.'"

Being such a avid critic of society, any society, right from the beginning of his literary career, Twain moved forward to a sort of personal study of human life. In India he had anticipated a world of beauty and peace. Indeed, when he landed in Colombo, Sri Lanka, enroute to Bombay his first impression was "Dear me, it is beautiful! A sumptuous tropical, as to character of foliage and opulence of it." But praise all too soon turned to cynicism when he saw a group of school girls, Sinhalese Christians, "Europeanly dressed" and coming out of a missionary school. He thought their clothes ugly, "destitute of taste, destitute of grace, repulsive as a shroud" and preferred aloud the simple, colorful and more natural native garb.

In all, his cynicism of Western society and piety grew deeper as he traveled around the world. He returned to America noticeably disenchanted, a man who wrote his most stinging observations in *What is Man?* and *The Mysterious Stranger*. It is all the more remarkable that he wrote cheerfully and with great humor about India and her peoples, that he was able to watch dhobys laundering their master's clothes at the river

and inquire: "Are they trying to break those stones with clothes?"

Of India itself he eloquently summed up his three months of exploration: "Nothing has been left undone, either by man or nature, to make India the most extraordinary country that the Sun visits on his round. Nothing seems to have been forgotten, nothing overlooked."

Toward the end of his journey, tired and full, he wrote a friend, "I have been sick a good deal; the rest not so much. We have had a good time in India--we couldn't ask for better. There are lovely people here...they made us feel at home."

Readers who would like to enjoy the entire account of Twain's Indian experience can do no better than search out the two books below. One is his final product, rich with illustrations, the very book that made it possible to pay off the debtors who inspired the trip in the first place. It is full of stories, wonderful stories, and of observations that are as true today as they were ninety years back.

The second is a short analysis of Twain's tour, a look behind the scenes. The more ambitious may wish to contact the world's greatest collection of the man's life and works: The Mark Twain Papers, which is a full department within the library of the University of California at Berkeley.

Following the Equator, 1971, AMS Press, Inc., New York, N.Y.

10003, ISBN Number 0-404-01577-8, 712 pages.

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