Mark Twain in India
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Part 2

Samuel Clemens Visits Banares, Encounters Cremation and Discovers Firm Hotel Pillows

In part one of this series we began the remarkable year-long adventure which took Mark Twain around the world and to India. 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:

"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. Wrote he: "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 spenders 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 observed, "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 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 and 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.

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. He detected shams which he exposed with sympathy. Twain's 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 most exaggerated 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 Asian life, dress and food. He was especially impressed with the brilliant color and uncommonness of the Eastern costume. There were many sights of 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 elaborate, glittering dress of the maharajahs and princes. It was "all color, bewitching color - everywhere - all around - all the way around."

Twain was personally shattered by cultural shock, by the earthy 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 gaity 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 human cultures 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, where Zoroastrians allow vultures to dispose of their dead. 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 know what goes on in the grave."

It is truly unfortunate that Mark Twain was taken around Banares by "a good Christian," Rev. Parker, who understood little and cared less about Hinduism's subtle 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 lingam, a lingam 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 in the final paragraph of Part One, to tell you of our own encounters with Mark Twain. Next month 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 our remote Hindu monastery in the mountain-desert region of Nevada. The large wood and brick building stood three stories high and was surrounded on all sides by sage in the summer and deep 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, the local newspaper. It was here, on February 3, 1863, that "Mark Twain" was born when young Clemens signed a humorous travelog with the pseudonym.

The town's Wild West brewery served the thirsts of about 70,000 miners. The paper's offices were a short walk down the valley to the congenial pub and Twain visited it often, mingling with the self-reliant gold-diggers. In case you haven't guessed, a hundred years later, in 1965, the Old Nevada Brewery became a Hindu monastic retreat. Even in those days, we were deeply involved in publishing. On

several occasions we worked with the Territorial Enterprise (which had become a museum) setting type for our books with the same hand-set wooden letters that had once been used by editor Clemens.

Years later, we settled in Hawaii. Mark Twain had been here first (on his way to India). He declared Kauai's Lumahai Beach the most beautiful one in the world. It is.

And so it was that our destiny and that of the inimitable Mark Twain crossed - almost exactly a hundred years apart.

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