

Telling tales about India

Contributed by James Mutti
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Beyond poverty and spirituality, a student reveals the hidden side of India.

The Saturday market along the main road through tiny Fatehpur Sikri brings the whole town out in search of clothes, toys, supplies for the home, and more.

On the January night when I flew into Delhi, my ride didn't show up at the airport. I flagged down a cabbie who tried to get me as drunk as he was, and who tried to get me to switch accommodations to his choice of hotels. My arrival in Delhi was pretty typical — the stuff of many a travel story set in India. In the end, it wasn't the nightmare it could have been.

My driver was an eager conversationalist despite his slurred, broken English. After assuring him repeatedly that I did not want a swig of the whiskey he'd received from a German tourist, and that I did not want to go to a different hotel, he went out of his way to find the correct address amidst the narrow lanes of Delhi's Paharganj neighborhood. We parted cordially outside my hotel, wishing each other a happy new year. The experience typified what I both love and hate about India — the often threatening unfamiliarity and superficial chaos of the place; that friendliness could be either genuine or concocted to take advantage of me, a gullible foreigner; the allure of new sights, sounds, and smells; the joy that is often found once the inconveniences are overcome.

This was my third visit to India. My first trip had been thirteen years earlier, when I visited Chennai with my family. While Mom and Dad handled the travel arrangements, that brief trip whetted my appetite for all things Indian. After growing up in Washington, D.C. and small Wyoming and Iowa towns, it was my very first trip abroad. Without a doubt, it left a lasting impression. My next trip was five years later, as part of a semester-long college Buddhist Studies program. We spent the duration of our stay in the small town of Bodh Gaya in the northeastern state of Bihar. There, I was able to experience India on a deeper level than many travelers are afforded, although I was still granted the security of belonging to a large group of students and professors.

I could tell that this third trip was going to be different. Graduate school had offered two years of intensive reading, writing, and researching. In pursuit of my M.A. in South Asian Studies, I debated and discussed Indian history, contemporary politics, media, religious beliefs, social movements, literature, and cultural practices. After three years of Hindi language classes and dozens of Bollywood movies, I had set off to India as someone who no longer a tourist. I was newly aware of the preconceptions and ignorance I had carried with me on my earlier trips, and I was finally ready to see a new side of India.

I would also be on my own in a country viewed with awe and wariness even by seasoned globetrotters. Prior to my arrival in India, I had been visiting my brother in Vietnam. On a touristy boat ride in Ha Long Bay, a middle-aged American man who had lived for extended periods in the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam commented, "I've always wanted to go to India, but it seems like it would be so hard!" A Canadian couple told me, "We'd like to do some traveling in other places before we go to India." A twenty-something Australian woman, halfway through a year of solo traveling, said she was impressed that I would be going to India on my own.

Having been there before, however, I felt I knew what to anticipate. I had even half-expected to be stood up at Delhi airport, but I still didn't like it.

It was a warm winter day in Nawalgarh, Rajasthan. On a narrow side street, a group of boys played marbles. When I was asked to join them, I couldn't say no.

The unfamiliar and the familiar

Every traveler to India has an "India-is-so-crazy" story (There were people riding on top of the train!). Just as many have an "India-is-so-enlightening" story (Their way of life is so spiritual and real!). There are numerous "India-is-so-begging" stories (Begging children followed me for 20 minutes!), and "Indian-culture-is-so-old" stories (The temple is the same 1,000 years ago!). Learning about India showed me the flaws and limitations of accepted Western understandings of this country. Perhaps it is no different than China, Russia, Brazil, Nigeria or any other country with a complex, vast or long-

lived civilization. Even so, India stands apart in my mind.

I imagine our knowledge of India has not changed much since the days of European colonialism. The idea that the country is somehow timeless has created equally timeless stereotypes. India calls to mind images of poverty, exotic wild animals, destructive natural disasters, kings and extravagant palaces, religious fanatics, oppressed women, idyllic rural farm life, the horrifying slums of its megalopolises, and superstitious, uneducated masses trapped by the caste system. The failure of the Western imagination to evolve in this regard has resulted in the all-too-common tendency of travelers and writers to present an India that is exotic and alien. At the same time, it is easy to see why countless negative stereotypes of India persist in the Western mind. After all, stereotypes are inherently simplistic and superficial. In general, these things do characterize most foreigners'™ experiences there, mine included.

As I dutifully traveled between the major tourist destinations described in my guidebook " Delhi to Rishikesh to Nainital to Agra to Jaipur " it was difficult to see the deeper aspects of Indian society. Instead, the glaring differences between Indian life and U.S. culture jumped out at me. In India, there were cows and monkeys and piles of garbage on the streets. I was regularly surrounded by noisy crowds unused to the concept of personal space. Shops, cars, trains, temples, and homes often appeared to be in disrepair. Temples and mosques and their openly religious followers were everywhere. Tenacious rickshaw wallahs, shop owners, and begging children confronted me every day.

Even after my previous visits and all my studying, and despite my love for the country, it was hard to feel fully at ease. I was acutely aware that my white face and red cheeks, brown hair, and blue eyes made me stand out in a sea of brown skin and black hair. I knew that I was ridiculously privileged, and that no matter what I did it would be impossible to see "the real India" " that tantalizing myth of the extreme travelogue. Street kids called me *tomater*, Hindi for tomato. I was cursed out for the United States'™ treatment of Cuba. I was forever being overcharged for anything I bought. Sometimes I thought I might be better off ignorant of India'™s history, languages, politics, cultural beliefs, and religious practices. My knowledge did not prevent me from enjoying myself, but it did make me realize that seeing India through the filter of stereotypes provides some comfort and assurance about the world, and one'™s place in the world, that I was sorely missing.

New ways of seeing

A conversation with an amiable rickshaw driver towards the end of my trip proved to be a wake-up call. I was walking through the fabled Pink City of Jaipur in the northwestern state of Rajasthan, in search of lunch on a sunny and pleasantly warm day. Outside the magnificent City Palace, standing by his black and yellow rickshaw, was a stocky young man wearing a dark green button-down shirt. He watched me approach and we made eye contact.

"Excuse me," he said in English. "Maybe you can tell me. Why are foreigners always so rude to Indians?"

Now, that was a good question.

I don'™t know why I had a hard time answering him. Some foreigners feel like they're often taken advantage of when they get into conversations with Indians during their travels, that something unpleasant " usually a sacrifice of their time or money " will be required. Did I feel some need to feign ignorance to avoid offending him, or was I thrown by his assumption that all foreigners (myself included) were rude? Before I could stammer an answer, he went on to tell me that one day, in a coffee shop, he had seen a foreign traveler sitting at a table with a thick guidebook. He approached the foreigner and offered his advice about where to go in the city. He was a native of Jaipur, had driven a rickshaw for years, knew all the sights, and was eager to speak with pride about his city. He had no intention to coerce the man into his rickshaw, he told me. It was his day off, after all.

Instead of thanking him for his suggestions, the foreigner flew into a rage. "Leave me the fuck alone!" he shouted at the rickshaw driver. "I don'™t need your help! Get away from me!"

The rickshaw driver went on to describe many other occasions when his offers were rudely rebuffed by foreign travelers. "How would that make you feel," he asked me. As I thought back to the times I had snapped at rickshaw drivers or pushy street vendors, I answered, truthfully, that it made me feel terrible. "Yes, it is terrible," he agreed, insisting that rejecting a rickshaw ride could be done politely, with a smile and a bit of humanity.

And he was right. I had been consciously taking an even-handed approach with rickshaw wallahs, shop owners, pesky kids. They were all fellow human beings who didn'™t deserve to be treated like servants or pets. But this conversation got me thinking seriously about how I appeared through the eyes of these people. I saw them every day. Even if I thought I was treating them respectfully, was I seen as just another bossy, tightfisted, standoffish, white foreigner with pockets full of money?

When I was the one bearing the brunt of a negative stereotype, it became easy to see the folly in thinking in terms of over-generalizations, no matter how convenient it might seem. People, and certainly entire countries, cannot be explained in such simplistic terms.

Everyday life in everyday stories

Now that I've returned home, I've changed the way I view and understand India, as well as the way I talk about it. I am much more conscious that the experiences I've had are minute tiles in a vast and ever-changing mosaic that India is more than my shallow experience there. I make an effort to address the inevitable questions about its poverty, the caste system, and Hinduism, while also telling them something new about India that they've probably never heard before. Instead, I tell them something that is more familiar to their American lives. During my visit, I sat in a coffee shop in Lucknow with a crowd of locals watching India-Pakistan cricket matches the biggest sports event in the country, and the equivalent of Superbowl Sunday in the States. I talk about going to the movies at Jaipur's Raj Mandir Cinema, packed with locals for the opening weekend of the latest Bollywood hit Rang de Basanti. I relate how I spent many a morning in parks and restaurants reading the newspaper alongside Indian men, discussing the latest political news or sports scores. I talk about staying in a small town in the deserts of Rajasthan with a welcoming family whose 10-year-old son taught me to fly the small paper kites I saw over towns all across northern India. I reminisce about sitting around evening fires all along my journey, late into the cold night, discussing religion, friendship, marriage, family, and the mundane aspects of everyday life.

Such familiar activities are part of many travelers' experiences, but they seem to fall through the cracks in favor of wowing friends and family with stories of wild adventures and foreign drama. Their stories further the myth that life abroad is utterly alien. Instead, the tall tales I tell are about how normal India can be.