

PILGRIMAGE IN THE HOLYLAND OF INDIA  
by  
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Epigraph:

“The waters of Mother Ganga, holy river of the Hindus, have their origin in an icy cave of the Himalayas amidst the eternal snows and silences. Down the centuries thousands of saints have delighted in remaining near the Ganges; they have left along its banks an aura of blessing.

An extraordinary, perhaps unique, feature of the Ganges River is its unpollutability. No bacteria live in its changeless sterility. Millions of Hindus, without harm, use its waters for bathing and drinking.

Dr. John H. Northrop said: ‘Perhaps bacteriophage (the virus that destroys bacteria) renders the river sterile.’”

Autobiography of a Yogi, Paramahansa Yogananda, p. 343-344n.

## Chapter 1

For the life of me, I don't know what possessed me to take off my shirt and pants and step out of the boat in my swimming trunks to take the plunge into the Ganges River. The boatman steadied the bow of the boat alongside the bottom step of the famous ghat where Brahma had sacrificed ten mythic horses to establish the sacred spot on the river that flowed from the head of Shiva.

"Be careful," cautioned Ravi the guide. "The steps are slippery."

Ravi stood on the bow and watched the foreigner descend into the sacred Ganga. This was the first time in his twenty-seven years as a tourist guide that he was witnessing one of his clients attempt the liberating bath in what most non-Hindus considered to be the filthiest river in the world. Ravi's light blue pants and sky-blue shirt matched the colors of the natural surroundings of water and heaven, which were witnesses of the performance and participants in its eventual outcome.



With my left hand I held the secured front of the boat and placed both of my feet firmly on the first dry stone step above the water line. As I looked intently past the ripples on the surface of the water into its contents, my mind raced back to the day when I decided to travel with my musician friend Ben to India. It was during the season of Advent. Ben told me that he wanted to visit his son, who worked in a tech company designing clothes; half of the time he worked in the United States, and the other half in India. The company had its feet planted on both continents, in both worlds.

I told Ben that I would first consult with my wife, and then ask my Hindu friends when would be a good time to travel. My wife gave me her blessing to travel abroad; this would give her more free time to be with her sisters.

She was now at the stage in her retired life where the company of her six sisters was more cherished than the daily routine with her husband.

My Hindu friend Girjesh told me that February or March would be a good time to travel. The weather would be warm and pleasant. And if I was there in the middle of March, I would be able to witness and participate in the colorful spring festival of Holi. That sounded like fun to me, especially when I looked it up on the internet. However, he warned me that I should bring old clothes to wear on festival day, clothes I could throw away because the colored powder would not wash away.

Ben was happy to hear I would be traveling with him. He did not want to travel to a foreign country like India alone, and he had been looking for a traveling companion for many years. And now he would not only be able to see where his son worked, but he also would see and experience another country. We both shared something in common – we loved to travel to other countries.

Something in the water caught my eye. Was I seeing things clearly, or was it just my imagination? When I at first told my wife of my desire to bathe in the sacred Ganges like all the Hindus did, she remarked, “Why would you want to go into a polluted river where they throw dead corpses in?” Her friend had visited India twenty years before, and she had seen a corpse floating in the river. My wife made me go to the doctor and get a hepatitis A vaccine; otherwise she didn’t want me coming back into contact with her. I would become an “untouchable” in her eyes.

Now, as I peered with focused eyes – and with the mind of concentration – into the contents of the river, I did not see any particles of polluted matter, nor did I see any ashes of dead bodies. I saw pure water. There is nothing to fear, I thought to myself.

I glanced at Ben, who snapped a picture of me with my Olympus digital camera. He was wondering if I was actually going to undergo what he considered to be a heathen ritual. Only baptism in the Jordan River or in a Christian setting was considered sacred to him, not this false belief in coming to the Ganges River to wash one’s sins away. My mind was set. Not even the scowl on Ben’s face could keep me from going with the flow of inspired action that was moving my consciousness in the direction of the Ganga.

The crystal-clear water reflected my surroundings, just like the mirror of my mind reflected the events that transpired during the past two weeks. A tapestry of wondrous sights unfolded before me: There was the first day in New Delhi, when Ben’s son Jason took us to the most popular tourist attractions. A small Jain shrine, devoted to the master of non-violence Bhagwan Manavir, stood on a hill overlooking the outskirts of the city. The

13.6 foot-high pink-toned granite statue of Manavir sitting in the lotus position looked out over a peaceful garden.



I remembered having to take off my shoes, and even removing my leather belt, before entering the “Ahinsa Sthal” (place of peace). I even washed my hands at the marble sink and rang the bell which hung over a marble relief of a lion and cow drinking the water of life from the same lotus-shaped bowl.



The view from the hill allowed me to catch a glimpse of the distant 12<sup>th</sup> century Qutab Minar, the world heritage site of the first of Delhi’s seven cities.



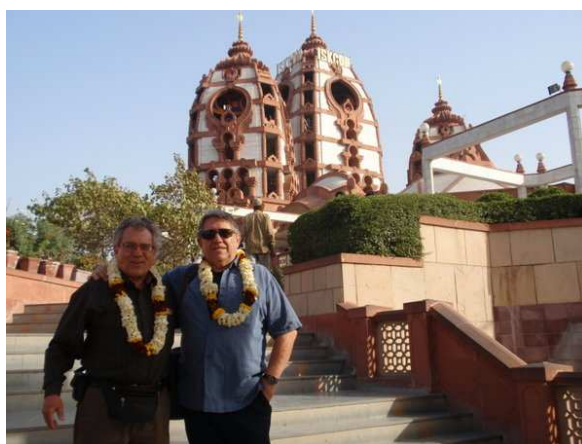
Next the driver Umesh, who worked with Jason, drove us to the modern marvel of architectural engineering – the Lotus Temple. Even from the entrance, which was a couple hundred meters from the Bahai house of worship, the twenty-seven white marble petals looked spectacular as its lotus shape unfurled before the eye of the beholder. I remembered the awe I felt as I walked barefoot past the turquoise pool of water surrounding the temple and entered the simple circular sanctuary devoted to the grand idea of the oneness of humanity, religion, and God.



My eyes automatically were drawn to the high dome ceiling in the central portion of the inner lotus. A small inscription within a nine-pointed star caught my attention: three horizontal lines connected by a single vertical line, with the top and bottom lines having a circle at each end; two five-pointed stars stood to the left and right of the inscription. My curiosity got the best of me, and I had to keep asking until I found out what the symbolic inscription meant. A lady at the book counter in the gift shop told me it was a symbol of the “Greatest Name” – the three horizontal lines represented the three worlds: the world of God, the world of manifestations, and the world of man, which were all connected by the vertical line symbolizing all the

manifestations of God. And the two stars represented Baha'u'llah and Bab ("the Gate"), the manifestations of God for the age we were in.

After a break for lunch at an Indian restaurant, where we sampled the best of southern and northern dishes, we continued on our sight-seeing tour of Delhi. A large sign with the letters ISKCON was placed high on one of the three ochre and maroon shikharas (spires) that came into view at our next stop. The letters looked familiar. Something struck a chord in my heart as I bought two marigold garlands at the entrance, placing one of them around my neck and giving the other three-colored garland for Ben to put around his neck.



The sound of a conch shell inside the temple at the top of a flight of steps – and a familiar chant – beckoned us to enter. Now I knew where I was. The words of the chant “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama” brought back memories of a bygone era. Images of the flower children and the hippie culture of San Francisco came up to the surface of my consciousness like bubbles floating up to the surface of the water. The rhythmic chant suddenly came flowing out of the depths of my heart and out through my mouth. “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama,” I sang as the devotion in my heart prompted me to join the group of worshippers at the central altar-shrine of Krishna. Ben was surprised to see me respond with such religious fervor; he stayed at the back of the small seat-less circular temple and watched. I placed my garland of pale yellow, orange, and red marigolds on the altar to be blessed by the priest.

It's funny, and amazing, how the present flows out of the past, and sometimes it's even more astounding how the past flows out of the present. That's how I felt when I confronted the murti (“living divine likeness”) of Swami Prabhupada in one area of the Krishna temple. A darshan (holy sighting) of the swami in his present image as a deity (or idol, as some would say), sitting life-like in a lotus position on a throne, brought a past experience in a flash of lightning to the forefront of my mind.

“Oh, my God! What a trip! This is incredible!” I exclaimed. Jason was standing next to me. “I saw him in the flesh forty years ago at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. I can see it all like it was only yesterday. He was riding in a tall wooden juggernaut (chariot) with huge wheels, just like the kind they use sometimes during special festivals in India. There were hundreds of Krishna devotees in the procession, wearing their saffron-colored robes, dancing and chanting, ‘Hare Krishna, Hare Rama.’ Then they set up a place for him on a slope so he could expound on the sacred scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita, to the people sitting on the green grass below. And there I was, on the main drive through the park, standing and listening to him quote the Gita in Sanskrit, and then recite a commentary on it in English.”

“What’s happening?” asked Ben as he approached us to see what we were looking at.

“Paul says he saw this swami in Golden Gate Park forty years ago,” answered Jason.

Ben did not show any enthusiasm at the announcement of such news. It’s almost as if he wanted to blurt out, ‘So what,’ but he kept the negative sentiment to himself. He was beginning to form a new opinion of his singing partner, and it wasn’t a favorable one. The interest that I displayed in what were to him heathen idols simply shocked him. A real Christian is repulsed by idol-worshipping. He was starting to wonder what kind of Christian I was.

As we concluded our tour of the Krishna temple and after I had paid homage to a shrine of the heroes of the epic Ramayana – Lord Rama, his wife Sita, his brother Laksman, and his faithful servant Hanuman – we walked down the same flight of stairs that we had walked up. I looked back at the same letters ISKCON, and now I knew what they meant: International Society of Krishna Consciousness.



It did not get any better for Ben at the last tourist attraction we visited that day. It seemed like all of India was at the newest attraction that had just opened up in 2005. Long lines formed at the high security entrance.





creation (Brahma), preservation (Vishnu), and dissolution (Shiva) of the five elements of fire, air, water, earth, and ether vibrated through the loud speakers. I looked over at Ben and softly intoned the melody of the theme song of our ensemble:

“You are the song and the music,  
You are the song that I sing,  
You are the melody,  
You are the harmony,  
Praises you make my heart sing.”

Ben looked back at me with a smile that turned into a frown when he realized that I was combining our sacred theme song with the profane spectacle that he was witnessing.

In my eyes, the musical fountain was mesmerizing, and the display of colors suddenly matched the splendid fiery colors of the sun’s morning rays reflecting in the waters of the Ganges River. I was seeing both scenes at-one-moment. My whole being cried out within me: I want to be immersed in India – in her history, culture, tradition, religion, language, and spiritual life.

I was ready to take the next step into the sacred river at the most holy city in India – Benares. Little did I know what this next step entailed.