

Chapter 2

The second step down into the river almost sent me sprawling against the hard stone ghat. A woman in a saree to my right slipped on the moss-covered step and landed with her ribs hitting the stairway and her legs awkwardly slipping into the water while her hands were clutching the higher dry step for dear life. I felt my left foot slide a little on the slippery moss, but my right foot was still firmly planted on the dry step. Thus I avoided the plight of the woman in the saree, who was picking herself up and sitting on the dry portion of the ghat, her feet dangling in the water.

Carefully, and slowly, I gripped the mossy surface with my toes and brought my right foot down onto the soft green mat, in the meantime balancing my body by gripping the dry step with my finger tips. One more step and I would be on the firm footing of the riverbed. I had to keep my mind focused on the task at hand.

Ravi the guide watched as I slowly descended into the waters of the sacred Ganga, who for the Hindus was a mother, a goddess, an emanation from the lotus feet of Vishnu, and a purifying stream from the matted hair of Shiva. An hour earlier, Ravi had guided us into the boat in the early morning darkness. He told the boatman to row downstream to the sacrificial fire, the last rites given by the fire of cremation to the dead body as it is liberated from this world and the soul is offered to the heavens. The red dawn sun rose and hovered over the haze of the eastern horizon as we glided southwards in the boat to the blazing fire at the cremation ghat, Harishchandra.



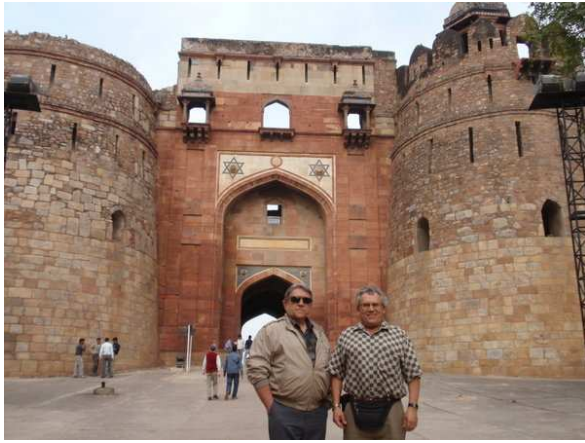
Dozens of men stood to both sides of the funeral pyre and watched the neatly-stacked wooden logs burn the shroud-wrapped corpse into ashes. Ravi told us that after about two to three hours, when the fire had died down, a handful of the ashes of the deceased would be sprinkled on the flowing water to be carried in the arms of mother Ganga to the sea.

Ben gritted his teeth as he watched my slow descent into the river. It was a total surprise for him to see his friend going through a transformation right before his eyes. Ben's past perception of me as a Christian singing and playing the synthesizer with the ensemble in the church was now at odds with the present perception of me as a person partaking in the Hindu ritualistic bathing in the unclean river. His mind could not accept my behavior. One incident especially bothered him. He could not understand why I would want to have a Hindu priest put a tika (red spot) on my forehead at a Hanuman shrine in Gurgaon, where his son worked.



“That’s a mark that represents the third eye, or the spiritual eye, to me,” I tried to explain. “There’s a verse in the Bible that says if your eye is single, your whole body is full of light. That to me signifies the opening of the spiritual eye, in the middle of the forehead, to the divine light within our being.”

Ben had never heard such a strange explanation of that scripture before. Actually, he did not want to hear anything I had to say about spiritual or religious matters. It sounded too heretical for him. He didn’t want to see any more temples, either. So we ended up going to Purana Qila, the “old fort” and ancient site of the sixth city of Delhi, where a mosque of red and white marble and slate was the most preserved structure. I found out that Purana Qila was inhabited as early as 1,000 B.C. and was believed to be the site of Indraprastha, the capital of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata epic.



We spent a day at the National Museum, where I stopped to look at the statues of Vishnu, Buddha, Ganga and Yamuna, Kaliya-Krishna, and other religious artifacts, while Ben raced past them to the maritime section, the Mughal coins, and the musical instruments on display.



We seemed to hit a neutral place when we visited the Mughal Gardens, although by then an illness was tormenting him and his feet were too tired to walk, so he sat down to rest. I walked briskly by myself through the musical garden with the water fountain, the herb garden with ayurvedic uses, the rose garden and the beautiful circular garden, and finally the intriguing spiritual garden with plants and trees mentioned in religious texts. Some of the names were familiar to me, like grape, hibiscus, date palm, mango, pomegranate, jasmine, olive, fig, lotus, and mustard tree; others were unfamiliar, like enphorbia, henna, bael, amla, neem, kalpvriksh, reetha, cork tree, udumber, silk cotton tree, arjun, bodh tree, shami, ber, and kaner. I

finished my visit to the Mughal Gardens by writing down the words from the Song of Mughal Garden:

“Dear friends,
Delighted you visited us, Mughal Garden today.
We trees lovely, salute you for you gave us happiness;
We flowers, beauty and fragrance experienced bliss;
Thank you.
When you go home, remember us.
Plant a sapling or tree or flower.
God bless you.”

I have to admit that I have a propensity for spiritual and religious things. Ben keyed in on that characteristic of mine when he blurted out one evening: “I didn’t know you were so spiritual.” He said that in a critical tone, almost sarcastic, as if he had discovered a flaw that irritated him.

“Ben, I try to appreciate every aspect of a culture, including the spiritual,” I said, defending my position.

“But why do you have to go inside every temple?” he asked. “It looks like you love their idols more than you love Jesus.”

“Ben, you go to a temple to worship God, don’t you?”

“I go to a church.”

“It’s called the Russian Gospel Temple. It’s a temple.”

“It’s a Christian church.”

“Every person going inside a temple is seeking a personal relationship with God,” I continued to reason with Ben. “Some visualize that relationship through the image of Krishna, some through Buddha, and some through Jesus. Each religion has their teacher or savior who teaches and shows the devotee or worshipper the way to God.”

“You cannot serve two masters,” said Ben, quoting part of a verse to justify his condemnation of my acceptance of other masters or religious teachers.

“That verse has to do with spiritual riches of the soul in contrast to material riches of the world,” I countered.

“You cannot worship both Jesus and those idols in the temples that you go inside,” reaffirmed Ben sternly. “If you worship those idols, you’re not a Christian.”

“I can learn from each one of those teachers who points the way to God,” I explained.

“Only Jesus is the Son of God, and the rest of those you call teachers are false gods,” stated Ben in a judgmental manner.

“You’re being very self-righteous, Ben,” I cautioned him. I walked away. I thought the wisest course of action was to avoid religious arguments.

How could I teach him to appreciate the wisdom of the Bhagavad-Gita and the knowledge of the soul that Krishna imparts? He looked only at his Bible as the exclusive guide.

It was then that I realized I was on slippery ground with Ben. I considered myself broad-minded and tolerant of other religious beliefs; Ben, on the other hand, was narrow-minded and did not accept any other religion besides the Christian one. I categorized myself as a student of comparative religions and tried to see each religion as a path to God; Ben was convinced there was only one path to God – his.

I now knew what I needed to do as I stood looking at the river and contemplated the grandeur of the next step that I would take. I would be the example to Ben and to others. I would be the way shower. Some day, when Ben looked back at his pilgrimage with me to India, hopefully he would see my actions as righteous and exemplary. And perhaps he might even come to know what I already knew as I stepped from the slippery moss-covered step onto the secure riverbed: I was following in the footsteps of the great masters who had come to bathe in the pure and liberating waters, whose divine grace flowed from the heavens to the earth in the form of Mother Ganga. I was following in the footsteps of Jesus, who had come to India and to Benares, which was at that time named Kashi, the city of Light.

