

### Chapter 3

I was now standing on solid ground. I cupped my hands and drew out a handful of river water to investigate with my eyes. I used to do that when I was backpacking in the wilderness and wanted to check if there were any unfavorable particles in the water I was about to drink from a flowing stream. This time, though, I only wanted to see what the water from the river looked like up close. It was pure, as if all unpropitious particles had been filtered out. I repeated the scientific experiment, and the results were the same. The water looked pure. An axiom flowed through my mind: “To the pure, all things are pure.” In short, to the pure-minded, everything is part of God.



I took another two steps forward into the depths of the warm water, wading up to my waist. I stopped to contemplate the heart-warming sensation I was experiencing; a current of energy was flowing through my spine. I felt as if I was being connected to a higher mind, a vast consciousness that encompassed the entire universe. And the center of that universal consciousness was right where I was standing in the Ganges River – within the heart of India – at its most holy city of Benares.

I took the holy water from the Ganges into my cupped hands and poured it on the crown of my head. I closed my eyes and felt the water streaming down my head and face. As I entered a meditative state of mind, I visualized a gateway to a divine realm, a heaven on earth. It was a tirtha (ford), a crossing from the physical world to the world of the spirit that was perceived by the eye of the soul. In this world India became a land where the gods descended to earth as avatars and men ascended to the heavens as gods.

A book of memories opened up in my mind's eye, and I saw myself on the field of Kurukshetra in the epic battle of the Mahabharata. It was a story that came to life when I encountered the birthplace of Krishna – the divine hero of the epic – in Mathura. On top of the gateway to the sacred Krishna Janmasthan Complex (where I visited the Garbha Griha – the sanctum sanctorum, resembling the cranial chamber

– the place where the avatar of Vishnu was born), I saw the chariot that was the focal point of the epic battle. Within the chariot sat the personality of Arjuna and the personification of the divine soul, Krishna. The soul (charioteer) was instructing the personality (ego) about the battle of life, how to conquer and be the master by means of the divine Self. Those teachings on the immortality of the soul (divine Self) were embodied in the sacred scripture – the Bhagavad Gita.



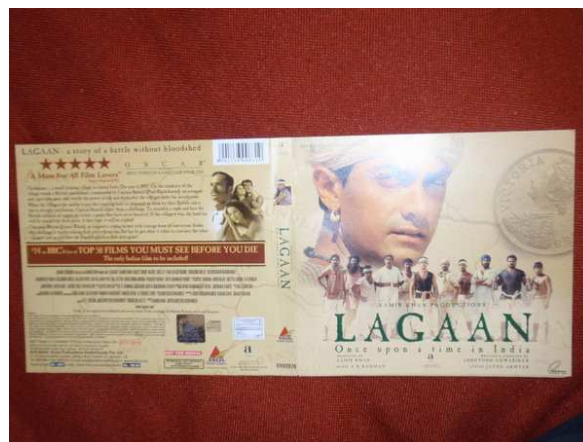
I took some more of the refreshing water into my cupped hands and poured it a second time on my crown chakra. Another book of memories opened up and I saw the mahatma (great soul) overcome the great British Empire on the road to independence by the powerful force of non-violence. This chapter of India culminated at the Gandhi Smriti in the hallowed Birla House, where the national memorial to the life of Mahatma Gandhi honored the virtues of truth, non-violence, unity and equality that his epic journey displayed. Here was a martyr who was remembered for leading India's march to freedom (from Kranti to Gandhi) in its pursuit of independence (from Raj to Swaraj) from 1857 to 1947.



I recalled watching the movie Gandhi and reflecting on the opening scene – which depicted the assassination of the heroic leader on January 30, 1948 – as I walked beside the footprints that led from the house where he spent his last days to the martyr’s column.



Another movie came to mind, Lagaan, which I had seen at Jason’s apartment; it portrayed the story of a battle between the villagers who fought against the unjust land tax imposed on them by their British rulers. That battle with the British Empire in 1893 was also waged in a non-violent manner – this time in the form of a cricket match.



Gandhi’s battle was immortalized at the Rajghat, where a black granite platform marked the spot of his cremation near the west bank of the Yamuna River, which flowed further downstream into the Ganges River. By now I had learned enough Hindi to be able to read the words “He Ram” (O, God) inscribed on the front side of the platform. On the eastern end of the square-shaped platform was a glass-enclosed eternal flame that burned perpetually in honor of the great soul who defied the injustice of the empire and brought India to Swaraj (self-rule). When the world bowed in homage as Gandhi’s body was laid on a sandalwood pyre, they (and I) bowed to the message that came from the pyre:

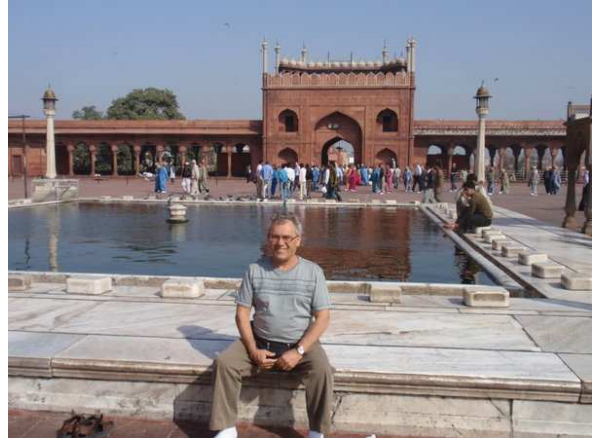
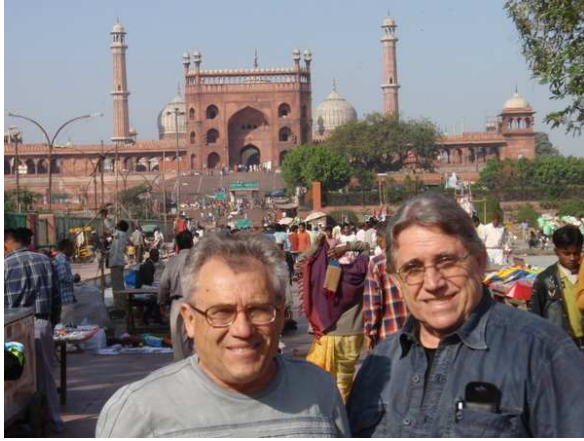


“Lead me from the unreal to the Real  
From darkness to Light  
From death to Immortality.”



I took the liberating water from the Ganges a third time into my cupped hands and poured it on the top of my head. This time tears of joy mingled with the river water that flowed down my face. I was overwhelmed by the intuitive wisdom that led me to this place and possessed me to re-enact an age-old ritual of salvific benefit. I was on the threshold of Moksha – the goal of the tirtha yatra (journey to the sacred center).

This time a book of remembrances opened up to my inner vision, and I saw that I had lived in India many times before. My soul took flight to the not-so-distant time of the Mughal Empire. Shiv Narayan, Jason’s driver, took us this time to Jami Masjid, India’s largest mosque. On the car’s visor was a saying of Sai Baba of Shirdi: “If you look to me, I look to you.” Ben and I walked up the magnificent flight of sandstone steps to the huge square courtyard, built by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in 1656 on a natural mound. We took off our shoes and sandals before setting foot onto the holy ground. Ben had no idea he was going to another holy site until he had to bend down and take off his shoes; this time the holy site wasn’t called a temple, but a mosque. The three black and white domes drew our attention as we approached the central dukka (water tank) that was set up for ritual ablutions. We entered through the central arch to see groups of Muslims seated on the ground, discussing the virtues of submission to the will of Allah and reciting suras (chapters) from their holy book, the Quran (Koran). Along the outer wall of the courtyard surrounding the mosque was a tower. I found out that I could go to the top by paying a guide 100 rupees. Ben’s injured right knee didn’t allow him to climb, so I climbed the 130 steps by myself.



A guide led the way through the dark narrow passageway of the spiral staircase by lighting up the steps with his flashlight. The view at the top of the tower was amazing – a 360 degree view of the world of Delhi, as far as the eye could see through the hazy atmosphere. To the east was the nearby Red Fort, an imperial citadel built by Shah Jahan in 1639; it was the seat of the Mughal Empire, whose 330-year rule in India ended in 1857.



For the next three days I would see remnants of the Mughal rule throughout the golden triangle of Delhi-Jaipur-Agra. It was a journey into a world of the royal path – a caparisoned elephant ride up the cobbled narrow pathway through Surya Pol (Sun Gate) to the royal city on a hill, Amber Fort, in Rajasthan (abode of the rajas, kings).



And down below – the colorful pink city (terracotta) Jaipur, with its relics of the golden past (City Palace), was a feast to the eyes; its observatory (Jantar Mantar) a feast for the mind; and its Chohki Dahni (“a fine hamlet” of Rajasthani culture) a feast for the stomach – Ram Ram Sa!



The blending of Hindu and Muslim (Mughal) architecture and life throughout the region demonstrated that the diverse cultures could co-exist. The religion of the One God (Allah) and the religion of the many gods (multiform manifestations of the One Reality) both flourished on Mughal territory. The 13<sup>th</sup> century Temple Shri Rama Hari Har at Fort Jaigarh pre-dated the Mughal reign and was preserved in recognition of the Hindu deities Vishnu-Shiva and Vishnu’s reincarnation as Lord Rama. The façade of the three-storied Jama Masjid (congregational mosque) at the Johari Bazaar section of the main road through Jaipur blended in with the hub of activity.





The Shila Devi Temple at Amber Fort, dedicated to the awe-inspiring goddess Kali, was where I received another vermilion mark on my forehead. The Lakshmi Narayan Temple in Jaipur reminded me of the similarly-named temple in Delhi, which I had visited to see the paintings and quotes from the Indian epic Mahabharata: “He who desires to cross the painful ocean of worldly life, which is full of the crocodiles of lust, anger, greed and infatuation, should catch hold of the Bhagavad Gita which has the disciplines of action, devotion and wisdom as its oars. It will easily take him to the land of liberation (Nirvana).”



The Jaipur temple, dedicated to Vishnu (Narayan) and his consort (Lakshmi), was an equally impressive creation of the Birla family, for the white marble temple had

carvings of great masters throughout history: Socrates, Zarathustra, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus Christ, and others.



I stood in the river, covering my tearful face with my hands. My humbled spirit was ready for the next step – immersion. I took three deep breaths, inhaling the warm current of etheric energy slowly up my spine and exhaling the cool current of etheric energy down my spine. As I took my last breath, inhaling it deeply into my lungs and etheric body, I submerged myself into the dark depths of the Ganges River.



I recalled awakening several mornings ago at the Dera Rawatsar (Heritage Guest House) and hearing the Muslim call to prayer: “Allahu Akbar” (God is great). That was the morning I sat up and meditated in my bed as I listened to the enchanting call in the distance. My mind submitted to the flow of images coming from the Muslim (and Mughal) world: I walked again through Fatehpur Sikri (City of Victory), an ancient capital built near a lake by Emperor Akbar (“the Great”) in the last quarter of the sixteenth century.





The spiritual center around which the city was built was the camp (cavern) of the Sufi mystic, Sheikh Salim Chisti. The purity-loving saint had blessed Akbar with the auspicious prediction of an heir to the throne. Now pilgrims, and supplicant childless women, came to the square white marble mausoleum within the grand open mosque in search of a miracle and to honor the Muslim mystic who inspired Akbar to build a grand capital city of red sandstone to preserve the memory of Salim Chisti, who embraced the wisdom of the inner divine presence.



I took off my sandals and walked up the five steps in my bare feet past the thin pillars with serpentine struts that curved upwards to the roof. Inside the sacred shrine was the cenotaph of the Sufi saint, covered with orange, red, green, purple, and other colored cloth laid on top of the tomb. On the walls were floral designs with inlaid stones of many colors. One of the designs caught my eye. It was the tree of life, a universal symbol of the human cerebrospinal system and the kundalini energy that flowed through the spine to bring knowledge and wisdom. The Sufi saint was a practitioner of that wisdom. The Sufi teacher says, "The roads to God are many; and you can approach the top of the mountain from the river, highway, village, or sea, but the top of the mountain is One."

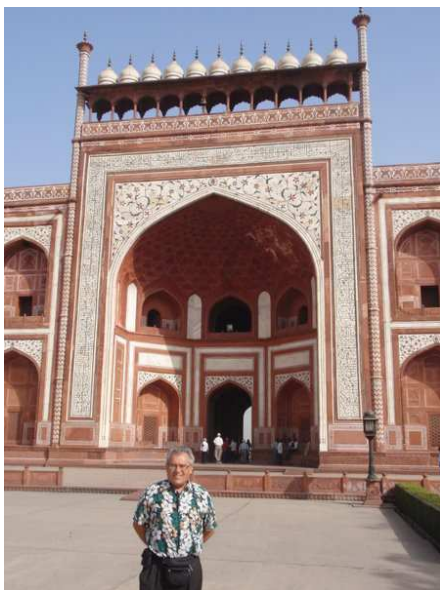


In the dark waters I also saw the cruelty of the conqueror as he expanded the Mughal Empire throughout India. And yet, there was something noble about him as he tried to establish an empire on the principle of peaceful co-existence with the non-Muslim subjects. It was said that amongst his many wives, he deliberately chose three main wives (a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Christian) to be his paragons of the equality of religions. They were allowed to worship and practice their religion freely. Thus, Akbar established his empire on the foundation of respect and tolerance of every religion. That was my goal, also.

My last memory of Akbar was his tomb in Sikandara that we visited on our way to Agra. This was a memorial planned by the great emperor himself, a tomb in the center of a vast garden enclosed by high walls on all sides. We approached the well-preserved site from the south side. The ornate gateway led to the dignified square tomb structure, which was finished by Jahangir, the son of Akbar, several years after his father's death in 1605. The entire site at one time was named Bihishtabad (The Heavenly Abode).



I leaped out of the water as my lungs called out for air. My hands were raised over my head as I seemed to be taking flight in the momentary weightlessness. In the twinkling of an eye, I felt as if I was transformed into pure consciousness – a bubble on the ocean of eternity. An image of the newly-established seventh wonder of the world formed in my mind's eye in that pure moment. I was on the seventh floor of a revolving restaurant. In the distance was the Taj Mahal. Then instantaneously my guide Raju led me through the Gate Way decorated with red lotus flowers – a Hindu motif representing Brahma the Creator – and eleven white marble cupolas on top. And then behold – the sublime garden-tomb opened up like a vision of Paradise.



The walk through the garden along the water channel and a row of cypress trees seemed to be a slow-motion stroll in an enchanted wonderland, and the eyes never once left the vision of the dream-like white marble abode of the mortal remains of the beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal and her husband, Emperor Shah Jahan. I looked at the reflected image of the Taj in the Lotus Pool, and I noticed the four symmetrical minarets positioned at the four corners of the platform. The guide Raju remarked that the four towers were built at a ninety-three degree tilt, so that in case of an earthquake they would fall away from the marble structure. Ben was not there to see the vision of beauty that I beheld. He said he did not want to pay the 750 rupees (\$15 US) for the entrance fee. I could not understand how he would give up the opportunity to see the grandest man-made wonder of the Mughal period for a measly few dollars.

When I finally arrived at the steps that led to the actual mausoleum, I put on the covering that was provided for my sandals and I ascended the stairway. My soul seemed to ascend up through the majestic octagon-shaped building straight to the central dome, which appeared to represent the throne of God. I was enraptured by



the story of love (kama) that was immortalized inside the tomb chamber as I looked at the cenotaphs erected in honor of the inseparable lovers.

Before I turned to leave the vision of paradise on earth, I visited the adjacent mosque and took a look at the Yamuna River that flowed below the west bank on which the Taj Mahal stood. It was the same Yamuna River that flowed past the Akshardham in New Delhi, past the birthplace of Krishna in Mathura, and past the seventh wonder of the world, the Taj Mahal. It was the same river – the largest tributary of the sacred Ganga – that flowed into the Ganges River at Allahabad, about 80 miles above Varanasi.



I contemplated all that as I soared with hands raised in flight above the waters of the Ganges River, which contained the sacred water from the Yamuna River. The pale yellow waters of the Ganges blended with the emerald waters of the Yamuna, and the confluence of those waters was conjoined by the invisible (and mythical) Saraswati River. It was in the pure, creative, and nourishing Saraswati – the consort of Brahma – that my spirit soared.