

## **THE WONDER THAT WAS—AND STILL IS—INDIA**

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho

In 1967 A. L. Basham published *The Wonder That Was India*, which has now become a classic in Indian studies. The meaning of “wonder” is obviously the awe that we experience standing before the Taj Mahal, our amazement at the exquisite marble filigree of a Jain temple, or the finely chiseled sculpture right up to the top of nine-storey South Indian temple towers.

There is another meaning of “wonder” of which I will speak. This is the wonder not of awe and delight, but the wonder of puzzlement and despair. It is the wonder “why” there is smog on Elephanta Island, where I was able to breathe fresh air at the great Shiva cave temple there in 1992. In November 2005, I could only shake my head at the 30-mile-long cloud of pollution hanging over Bombay 8 miles away. It is also the wonder of “why oh why” the people in front of me got their train tickets at the tourist window but I somehow could not, no matter how much I pleaded.

There is the wonder *how* could they have done all these incredible things, but also the wonder *why* do they make it so difficult for themselves and fail to make the progress of which they are so fully capable. Even Indians agree that the wonders of India are both positive and negative, which I will now describe in alternating accounts.

There is the wonder of India’s democracy, the largest and most dynamic in the world. There are dozens of political parties that, after the demise of the once dominant Congress Party, are forced to form shaky coalitions. Some of the alliances make for strange bedfellows, such as the Dalit dominated BSP and Hindu nationalist BJP. I was also amazed to learn that many Muslims vote for the BJP, even though some BJP members want all Muslims to leave India.

Regardless of the bumps on the road, the major one being Indira Gandhi’s state of emergency of 1975-77, it is still amazing that in 1948 more than 500 princely states came together under the inspiration of the Gandhi-led Congress Party and enlightened Britishers such as Lord Mountbatten.

Some have said that India would never have been united had it not been for European built railways and British administration, which the Indians continue

in their own lumbering and inimitable way. But Gandhi proved that India was united spiritually long before it was brought together politically. For centuries Indian pilgrims went from sacred place to sacred place all over the subcontinent.

These pilgrims are wonders in themselves. Indians save all of their lives to make a pilgrimage to Varanasi, the holy city on the Ganges, or all the way south to the goddess temple at Cape Comorin, or all the way north to the cave temple of Vaishno Devi in Kashmir. American men save their money to go big game hunting in Alaska, but I met dozens of Hindu men from Calcutta, all dressed in black, who traveled a 1,000 miles to seek the blessings of the goddess Parvati at Cape Comorin.

There is the wonder why of Indian corruption. Every time I travel to India I am impressed with the individual initiative I see in street vendors and family stores, but corruption at every level has prevented this entrepreneurial spirit from translating into a prosperous national economy that benefits all Indians.

There is also the wonder of India's booming economy, one that unfortunately has exacerbated the divide between the rich and the poor. When I arrived for the first time in 1992, Prime Minister Narasima Rao had just begun liberalizing the economy, one that had been locked into disastrous Soviet-style five-year plans that limited foreign investment. Since 1992 the Indian economy has been growing on average 7 percent per year, and by 2040 it is predicted that it will stand third after the U.S. and China.

In 1992 I sat in awe as a seven-year boy from Chandigarh recited all the American states and their capitals from memory. I was also embarrassed by the realization that most Americans could not get through half the list, or fewer still could locate my state, let alone India, on a map.

This ignorance extends to the American president himself, who once called the Greeks "Greecians" and the Hindus "Hindis." On his first trip to India Bush did not endear himself to his audience when he claimed that Pakistan "was a force for freedom and moderation in the Arab world." As it is forced to on a regular basis, the White House had to correct that as "Muslim world."

There should be no surprise at the wonder of India's elite graduate schools, which recently have been ranked just behind Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. These graduates have made their presence felt in Silicone Valley, where 35 percent of the companies are Indian led; in NASA, where 36 percent of the scientists are Indian; and at the top of American medical practice and research.

There is still the disgrace of the Indian caste system. When I was at Panjab University in 1992, there were student protests on campus, but I was surprised to learn that it was high caste students who were objecting to new quotas for Dalit enrollment in medicine and law. I was devastated to learn that even some Indian Christians divide their churches down the middle with a curtain so that the ministers can preach to their Dalits without offending high caste Christians. This is supremely ironic, because over the centuries Dalits have converted to Christianity in order avoid this discrimination.

But it is still a great wonder that Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians visit each other's altars and shrines. Until the rise of Hindu fundamentalism, all Indian children were taught to respect any sage, seer, prophet, savior, or saint. In November 1999, some Hindus friends in Chandigarh invited me to attend the birthday celebration of the Sikh's first guru. I was amazed at the great number of Hindus mixed in amongst the thousands of Sikhs.

Returning to the negative, we wonder why it has to be that 40 percent of the world's poor people live in India, and why 25 percent of the world's women who die in childbirth are Indian. Indian women also give birth to low weight infants at an alarming rate, and because of traditional preference for males (men and boys usually eat first), Indian girls between the ages of 1-5 are 50 percent more likely to die than boys. It is estimated that with aid of prenatal sex selection 10 million Indian female fetuses have been aborted over last 20 years.

There is the puzzling why of HIV in India, which has the second largest number of AIDS cases in the world. Most tourists perceive the Indians as the most puritanical Asians. I was surprised that I could not take my daughter to a men's dormitory at Panjab University to meet a student friend. Hindu fathers

swear before their priests that the daughters they are giving in marriage are virgins.

The lack of AIDS awareness in India struck me quite directly one morning in 1992 when I was reading *The Deccan Herald*. Under the heading “Prospective Grooms,” I found the following entry: “Fair brahmin boy, 26 years-old, BS in engineering, HIV Positive.” I later read that the many families with comparable daughters eagerly fell for this spoof assuming that “HIV Positive” was a new prestigious degree.

India’s conservative views on sex, primarily the result of European influence, are also changing. (The *Kama Sutra* is after all an Indian creation.) One night in my New Delhi hostel I was listening to a new talk radio program, and a young woman called in to talk openly about her fears of being pregnant. Divorces are still rare compared to American rates, but in Bombay one in three marriages now break up because of infidelity, dramatically up from one in seven in 1995.

My most moving experience in India was one that I had in a poor Muslim village in Harayana state. A Hindu Goddess temple at which my hosts—six Hindus and two Sikh students—paid their respects dominated the village. After the temple visit the students offered English or Hindi lessons to the village children, whose only good meal of the day, I was told, came from the temple’s curry kitchen.

I was also told that this religious harmony is the rule rather than a rare exception. But as I was experiencing Gandhi’s vision of India, on that same day, December 6, 1992, Hindu fundamentalists tore down the Barbri Mosque in the Northern Indian city of Ayodhya.

One can understand the utter despair that many Hindus feel about the reign of destruction that some Medieval Muslim rulers brought to India, but Hindu nationalists have broken a long tradition of nonviolence and nonretaliation, one that Gandhi tried to continue and strengthen.

In 2004 Indian voters turned the BJP from office and their fundamentalist supporters are now in disarray. It is my fervent hope that the Indians continue the

religious harmony I experienced in that Harayana village rather than demean themselves in frequent religious strife.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. He has spent a year in India during four research stays, primarily in Bangalore, New Delhi, and Chandigarh. Parts of his book on Gandhi *The Virtue of Non-Violence* can be read at <http://users.adelphia.net/~nickgier/vnv.htm>. Parts of a book in progress on the origins of religious violence can be read at <http://users.adelphia.net/~nickgier/orv.htm>.