# My Trip to India [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Monday, 30 December 2013 - 08:58

Read time: 18 minutes
I find it jolting that it was already six months ago when I found myself in the Indian monsoon. I have not yet written here about my experiences there. I had wanted to and had begun to do so, but found the task too daunting to complete. Now, as the year draws to a close, I want to briefly describe it before it becomes irrelevant.

## The Context of India

India perplexed me. It left me with more questions than answers. But I suppose that is understandable. It is a vast country. It is three times the size of South Africa, and South Africa is already twice the size of the largest western European country, France. India has upwards of a billion people citizens. Looking at the country, you simply deal with numbers an order of magnitude greater than what you are usually use to. While I was there, the government launched a controversial food programme [2] to feed the poorest of the poor in the country. And the number which they intend to reach? Eight hundred million people. Even though India's economy has grown in the past decades and we are aware of the bling that can be found in India (thanks to Bollywood), only a third of the country is considered to be not impoverished; far less so will be living *la dolce vita*.

## Christian Persecution

Thinking on these scales brings me to my first point of dualism. As I read stories about Christian persecution in India [3], it seems completely foreign to me. I spent my seven weeks in India in a comparatively wealthy IT hub and tourist destinations. There you would be unlikely to find any Christian persecution. But in smaller, rural areas, I can believe it to be the case. My friends in Pune we quick to dismiss many of the stereotypes which West has about India (such as arranged marriages1), but admitted that such things might still be found in the rural areas. I think this is very likely and that, just as with South Africa, the *jeunesse doree* are ignorant of the conditions in much of the rest of the country.

When I was exhaustedly waiting to board the aeroplane in Delphi, plonked down on ground for lack of seats, an older—white with a British accent—man came and sat down next to me and began to talk to me. He told me that he was fleeing India for a bit. He was a photo-journalist, if I remember correctly, and had been taking a cycle tour along the coast of India. He completed most of his journey without incident and was enjoying it, until he passed through a small village in Goa. There, some things were said and shouted. He did not know what was happening, but soon rocks were being thrown at him. He tried to get away, but was pulled of his bicycle and was beaten for an hour until some other people chased the crowd away. The man was in high spirits, but clearly shaken up by the incident and was travelling to Bangkok, with which he is more familiar, to go recuperate.

This was not an instance of religious persecution, just senseless violence. While rare (at least if compared to South Africa), it does happen, for various reasons. In Mumbai, in two separate incidents, my friend and I were followed by creepy men, and we were "playfully" assaulted by a group of boys. People are people, and the fallen state of mankind will always become apparent.

# Pluralism in India

India is, as some the traditions claim, the country to which the apostle Thomas travelled to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is also claimed that it is there where he was martyred: impaled by a spear while he was busy praying. But the irony I found is that the area where I was for most of the time, Maharashtra, has a long and proud tradition of religious tolerance. At roughly the same time the Dutch began to settle South Africa, Shivaji [4] was battling the Moguls to drive the Muslims from the land and establish a Hindu empire: the Maratha empire. However while the Moguls were not especially tolerant of other religions, Shivaji founded his empire on the basis of religious tolerance. Today still the streets of the cities are a milieu of the religious. You can recognise people by their religious affiliation with the same ease as judging their age: the Hindus with their tilaka marks (red dots on the forehead), the Muslims wearing taqiyahs and burkahs, the Sikhs with their turbans and beards. And everyone lives side-by-side, no sign of strife or discontent2.

## Hinduism

I went to India expecting to learn more about Hinduism. I did learn more, but ended up more confused with with more questions than with which I went. I think the reason for this is that the religion is so vast and often, I think, interpreted differently. There is no "one story" to be told. What I did pick up is that there are efforts made by the Hindu intellectual elite—perhaps their apologists—to show that Hinduism really is a monotheistic religion, not polytheistic as it is popularly known. I do see the point which they are trying to convey, but personally I think that this is a bit of a hard sell and that they are grasping at straws. The reason is, I think, that polytheism has been exposed, logically, philosophically and intellectually, as not being able to hold water. On the other hand, the monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism have some intellectual and philosophical weight behind them.

Unlike what I had imagined, Hinduism does not have many grand temples in a small area. Taking Pune as an example, there is one big temple to the main deity [5] of which I am aware. While a large, intricate structure, it was still just the size of a small church in the West. It is not meant for prolonged communal worship. Rather, you enter, file past the idol, say your prayer, then you exit again. There is a small area where people can worship for longer, but most people are really just in-and-out. However they do not lack for places to worship. Nearly every street corner has a shrine to at least one god. There it is possible to have more intimate prayer time, as there often is not a crowd, but it is still exposed, for everyone to see. That said, most houses have an idol on the inside. Even in the cars there are idols on the dashboards, as well as at the workplace: whether idols on the desk at the office or a tiny shrine by a booth or in a shop. The people really are devout. In Udaipur, in a jewellery shop, when a customer bought jewellery, the shop keeper would take the money and not place it in a safe, but lays it by the idol. I do not know what the exact purpose or intention is, but clearly it is either a sacrifice or, more probably, seeking a blessing.

While walking around the city, I definitely had an Acts 17:16 experience. It breaks one's heart.

The idea of karma is strong and perhaps fuels people more than I would have imagined. In Agra I fell ill with food poisoning. We were supposed to take a bus to Delhi that day, but we missed it. We then decided to go back to the guest house and try again the next day. When we arrived back, we were well looked after by the family running the business (of course I was sick, but my friend was in a bit of a state over all that was going on, so they attended to her as well). They provided us with meals and encouragement when need. When we left the next day, they stubbornly refused payment. We were extremely grateful for this hospitality and generosity. However at some point we caught wind that they were doing this for karmic reasons: us coming to their home, with me being sick, was a bad thing to happen, karmically. To counter it, and perhaps to be able to gain good karma, they needed to provide us with hospitality. While I am very grateful for what they did for us, did they do it because they were good people who were genuinely concerned for us, or because they were acting out of fear for the bad karma? I do not know the answer; all I know is that, one way or the other, God had used them to help us at the most difficult time of our journey.

## Sikhism

I was completely ignorant about Sikhism when I arrived in India. It had not even crossed my mind that I would encounter it. And lo, the manager of the team which I would be training was a Sikh! According to him he has not always been very devout, but his father is and as he is growing older, he is trying to take it more seriously. I read up on the religion and was very impressed. About the time that Shivaji was establishing the Maratha empire, Guru Nanak was looking around him and was disillusioned by what he saw. The folly of the polytheism of Hinduism was apparent to him: there can only be one God (Waheguru). But looking at the monotheistic Islam, he saw oppression and inequality. So Guru Nanak began his own religion, teaching one God, and equality. To me, it seemed like he was looking for Christ, but just could not find Him.

I asked my friend there if he could take me to a Gurdwara, which is where the Sikhs worship. When we arrived, I had to cover my head and take off my shoes. Our shoes were taken by a group of volunteers, who polished them while we were inside. The inside of the Gurdwara is fairly plain, with white sheets covering the floor. Everyone sits on the floor. While the men and women do sit on opposite sides, it is intended to show the equality of all people. Even if, say, the prime minister of India were to enter, he would be expected to sit on the floor (exceptions would be made for the sick and the elderly, though). In the front, there is the holy book of Sikhism, the object of their worship[3]. The service was short, but felt very reminiscent of a church service, with singing and a reading from the holy book. After the service there was an optional, communal meal. No-one, even non-Sikhs, would be turned away. I found Sikhs in general to be friendly, polite and kind, despite their imposing appearance.

Despite its impressiveness, Sikhism is still a religion of works: do what is right and you will be pleasing Waheguru. I do not know much of the teachings of Sikhism, but I do not think that there is grace as it is found in the gospels, and certainly no atoning sacrifice for our sins as we have in Jesus.

## Jainism

I met a Jain, but she does not take the religion seriously. This minority religion, which seems to have a common ancestry with Hinduism, was once dominant. Evidence of the religion goes back, by my estimation, to at least the time of Abraham. It is, therefore, extremely old.

Jainism has a very interesting take on epistemology. Basically, if I may be anachronistic, it is post-modern in the sense that no single truth should be taken as an absolute. I saw this in the way my friend thought about the world. It seems as if it may be from Jainism that the old "blind men feeling an elephant" parable comes from. The other prominent characteristic of Jainism is their strict ~~veganism~~ vegetarianism so that no violence will be done to any animal. It therefore seems ultra-pacifist.

More than this I did not take away from my trip.

## Other

I did not encounter any Buddhists while I was in India. They are there, but I only saw sites, such as the impressive Bhaja caves [6], which they left behind thousands of years ago.

The city of Pune has a famous cult, Osho [7]. The locals do not take it seriously. Foreigners are enticed by the lure of mystical eastern teaching, and the teaching of sexual liberation. The movement clearly has much money and their main compound (ashram) is well adorned and protected.

## Christianity

In my experience, most people in India equated Christianity with Roman Catholicism. Where I was it was relatively easy to find Roman Catholic churches. A friend of mine, a Hindu, even attended a Roman Catholic school. But despite this, there was a large degree of ignorance on his part about Christianity. In Mumbai, we stayed in a district that clearly had a sizeable Muslim population (this was apparent because we were there over Eid), but as we walked to the promenade we passed what was clearly the "Christian district". There were churches, and the only cemetery which I saw in India (Hindus are cremated). Sadly, however, it blended in seamlessly with the surroundings: walking past and peering into the houses it looked the same as the other houses, except that instead of where the idols should have been was a figurine Maria and the baby Jesus. While I found it encouraging that they were Christian at least on some level, I do wonder how Christianity is seen being different and true if it can be made to look so similar to the idol worship that happens around it.

This was the first time that I had been in a country that did not even pretend to be Christian and it was obvious. In the bookshops, in the religious section, there are books on Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, even Osho, but not a single Bible. Many people do not have the faintest idea of Christianity. There is certainly much work to be done.

Something else that I noticed is that it appears as if charismatic churches are popular there. I wanted to attend a church service in India, but struggled to find one where I would be comfortable. Eventually I found one which looked like a prime candidate: Christ Church Pune, founded about 100 years ago by a Scottish missionary. The liturgy was familiar, but I did not know that the service was going to be conducted in Marathi! Even though all I could understand was the odd "hallelujah", "praise God" and "amen", I still found it edifying: that in such a faraway place God's word was found and taught in a way that I know.

Looking at a map of Pune, there are plenty of churches to be found. The figures of people who profess to be Christian are also fairly impressive, all things considered, if you look at the absolute amount. But relatively, compared to the billion-odd people who do not know Jesus, it is tiny. it is a heartbreaking situation. There is much work which needs to be done in India, and much prayer is needed.

### Prediction

My interaction was mostly with young working professionals, certainly for my first six weeks there. Even though there is still a large degree of outward religiosity, tradition and perhaps even devotees, scepticism and atheism is creeping in. As I have said earlier, Hinduism (at least not in its traditional form) is not standing up against intellectual criticism and interrogation. It will take many more decades before it reaches levels which we see in the West, but apostasy will continue to rise in India. Along with it will be an increase in self-satisfaction and self-indulgence, which was already obvious to me when I was there from the kinds of advertising which I saw. But I believe there will still be a thirst for the spiritual. It would be a good place to enter with Christian apologetics, in kindness and respect.

## Conclusion

In the first couple of weeks into my stay in India, I was having breakfast at the hotel. The music in general was of an inoffensive loungey/jazzy type, but sometimes they played something more distinguishable. That morning was one of them and as the oldies were playing in the background, my ears suddenly piqued when I heard a very distinctive strain [8] on a guitar: straining under the weight of difficult and controversial questions. And experiencing India for the first time, it seemed completely appropriate:

```
If God had a name, what would it be?
And would you call it to His face,
If you were faced with Him in all His glory?
What would you ask if you had just one question?
```

Twenty years ago people in the West still had the courage to ask these questions. The song as a whole might seem a bit silly to a learned Christian theist, but at least the questions were honest. People back then were at least asking and wrestling with big questions. Today's young people have largely shut such thoughts out. Religion is taboo and often only for the feeble minded.

What struck me about my interactions with people in India was how easily they sometimes would ask about my beliefs and religion, or bring up religious topics. Religion is not taboo there. It was refreshing. I do hope that my interactions with my friends there made a positive impact on them. I loved India: I would go back in a heartbeat. I loved the people I met and interacted with and the friends I made. I hope to one day see them in glory: having broken out of the wearisome cycle reincarnation upon reincarnation and being acquainted with the Person who was incarnated once4, and finished His unparalleled work well, once and for all.

```
Would you want to see,
If seeing meant that you would have to believe
In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the saints
And all the prophets?
Yeah, God is good.
Yeah, God is great.
Yeah, yeah, yeah...
```

- 1. Contemporary marriages amongst young adults in the city are "arranged" in the sense that the parents act like a kind of dating agency, finding potential partners from which the person then makes a selection. Arranged marriages where set of parents X have previously arranged that their child will marry the child of set of parents Y are apparently very uncommon and "probably only still happens in some of the villages".
- 2. I speak of the daily street sights. Over course there is religious violence. I was unsettled by the amount of security that was there. For nearly every building that you want to enter you need to pass through a metal detector and are patted down. While I was there, there was a bombing in the north of the country [9]. Even in small, peaceful Pune there were bombings in 2010 [10] and 2012 [11]. Locals never failed to point out to me the site of the former whenever we drove past it.
- 3. Again, this seemed familiar to me, except that Christians worship the living *logos*, the Word incarnate.
- 4. Ignoring the issue of Christophanies for the moment.

## Categories:

- Updates [12]

## Tags:

- india [13]
- travelling [14]
- islam [15]
- muslims [16]
- hindus [17]
- hinduism [18]
- sikhs [19]
- sikhism [20]
- buddhism [21]
- apostasy [22]
- persecution [23]
- jainism [24]

- jains [25]
- osho [26]
- moguls [27]
- maharashtra [28]
- marathi [29]
- shivaji [30]
- guru nanak [31]
- waheguru [32]
- logos [33]
- pune [34]
- mumbai [35]
- agra [36]
- udaipur [37]
- roman catholicism [38]
- charismatism [39]

**Source URL:** https://siyach.org/node/1050

**Links**
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1050
[2] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-biggest-welfare-programme-in-history-indian-government-gives-800-million-citizens-a-legal-right-to-cheap-food-in-new-bill-8796961.html
[3] http://www.persecution.org/category/countries/asia/india/
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shivaji
[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dagadusheth_Halwai_Ganapati_Temple
[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhaja_Caves
[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rajneesh
[8] http://grooveshark.com/#!/s/One+Of+Us/40KLyr?src=5
[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodh_Gaya_bombings
[10] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Pune_bombing
[11] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Pune_bombings
[12] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/4
[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/160
[14] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/224
[15] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/225
[16] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/226
[17] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/227
[18] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/228
[19] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/229
[20] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/230
[21] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/231
[22] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/553
[23] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/551
[24] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/233
[25] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/234
[26] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/235
[27] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/236
[28] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/237
[29] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/238
[30] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/239
[31] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/240
[32] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/241
[33] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/92
[34] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/242

[35] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/243
[36] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/244
[37] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/245
[38] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/75
[39] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/246