

INDIA, a Mysterious Complexity

Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa are not the heroes I thought they were. At least that is the perspective of several Indian friends with whom I visited in India. Though my contacts were limited, to be sure, I was surprised to hear a comment made by one of the officials of the American Institute for Indian Studies, namely that “Mahatma Gandhi has done more harm to India than help.” Without exception, the other Indians I asked about this comment expressed agreement. None of them questioned Mr. Gandhi’s sincerity nor his commitment to non-violence and concern for the poor, but each one believed that Gandhi’s “passive resistance” influence on Mr. Nehru and other government leaders over the years has contributed to the escalation of volatile national issues and debate and to conflicts with neighboring countries, more specifically Pakistan.

Sentiment is also strong that India’s Mother Theresa, though deeply committed to serving the poor and faithful to her “calling” of ministry to India’s “untouchables,” has given the world beyond South Asia an unbalanced/unfair view of Indian society and culture. The views of many people from India’s middle class and upper middle class suggest that the non-Indian world has a grossly flawed view of India as tragically and hopelessly poverty-ridden; and this at a time when many government and educational officials believe India has, in recent years, begun making significant strides in addressing basic needs and issues related to infrastructure. Still, a three-week overview of several Indian cities and their surrounding areas reflects overwhelming need and meager resources available to address these needs.

Upon further reflection, this visitor/student of India has begun to wonder if India’s high poverty rate, the low rate of literacy (58%), and the caste system ruled

unconstitutional but still operative are now somehow deeply imbedded in the Indian psyche and sense of self. Is it possible that these issues are interrelated with India's indigenous religions which seem to reflect a strand of fatalism that runs through religious thought and a shadow of determinism over which the individual has little or no control, no deep sense of individual worth and perhaps no sense of being able to shape one's own destiny? Where is the focus on human potential and human dignity?

The truth is that every aspect of Indian life and culture has been influenced by religion either directly or indirectly and religious ideas have permeated Indian philosophy, literature, music, art and architecture. They have profoundly conditioned the life of the Indian people. One, therefore, must know something of India's religions before one can begin to understand the mysterious complexity that is India. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are the major religious movements that originated in the subcontinent of India.

At every turn and at many site-visits in India, the visibility and power of **Hinduism** was evident. This major religion of India is practiced by some 82% of the population (of 950 million). Hinduism is the largest religion in Asia and one of the world's oldest extant faiths (5000 years of development) with a vast pantheon of gods and a significant number of holy books. Hinduism has no founder, no creed, no prophet and no ecclesiastical or institutional structure but emphasizes a way of living rather than ways of thought. Hinduism does not seem to be troubled by the fact that each village may have its own divinity or divinities and these gods are simply ways/means of approaching the Ultimate, the Absolute, the Unknowable One--Brahman. The Hindu

Religion has three basic practices. They are *puja* or worship, the cremation of the dead, and the rules and regulations of the caste system.

One of the most moving and memorable experiences of this journey to India was drifting quietly one dark night down the Ganges River and witnessing at shore the ritual of several cremations at once. Family members standing near a stretcher with a loved one's body strapped to it, watching a body being washed in the Ganges prior to cremation, and seeing the fires that reduced these bodies to ashes is an incredible, unforgettable experience--one that is likely to bring any witness to direct confrontation with his/her own mortality and a serious re-evaluation of one's belief in immortality. With regard to the caste system, it is common knowledge that the caste system has been ruled unconstitutional but reality suggests that caste rules and regulations are still applicable for large numbers of Hindu Indians. One Indian host shared with some of us that her son fell in love with and married a woman whose parents did not approve because she was marrying beneath her class (and of course, this does not sound all that different from what we hear and see in the Western world).

Buddhism is the religion that has risen out of the life and teachings of Siddharta Gautama (560-480 BCE) who became the Buddha and who came out of the religious world of Hinduism. He rejected the sacrificial cults and the caste system of Hinduism and taught a new way to personal salvation--referred to as a "quenching." *Nirvana* is the quenching of desire. The word "Buddha" simply means the "Enlightened One" and can be experienced by anyone when the veil of conditioned consciousness is cast aside and the mind is supremely awakened. Buddhism adheres to the Four Noble Truths: 1) The

universal human experience of suffering; 2) this suffering is caused by desire (craving, grasping); 3) this suffering can cease (there is cure); and 4) that the solution is the Eightfold Path.

The practical disciplines, called the *Eightfold Path*, are right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Running like golden threads through the fabric of Buddhist belief is compassion and spiritual activism--a theme which seemed to characterize the Indians with whom we visited and shared stories.

Jainism, a third religion indigenous to India, was founded in 6th century BCE by a Hindu reformer as a revolt against the caste system and the vague world spirit of Hinduism. The Jains most distinctive doctrine is called *ahimsa* which teaches a high reverence for life and non-violence to all living things, that all life is interdependent and mutually supportive. Interestingly, this teaching was adopted by Buddhism and in more modern times has also become a fundamental element in Hinduism. Scholars suggest today that Jainism, embraced by only 7 to 10 million people, wields influence in India out of all proportion to its size. This seems to have developed through the influence of Jains in banking and commercial life and also, perhaps primarily, through the life and work of Gandhi who grew up among the Jains and adopted the teaching of non-violence (*ahimsa*), the guiding principle of Gandhi's civil disobedience in the cause of freedom and social justice.

Though our journey did not put us in contact with adherents of Jainism (to my knowledge), their focus on nonattachment toward material things, abstinence from over-

indulgence, voluntary curtailment of one's needs and elimination of the aggressive urge are characteristics clearly evident in Indian society. This Jain prayer captures the heart of the Jain people and reflects the spirit of the Indians I did meet:

May my thoughts and feelings be such that I may always act in a simple and straightforward manner. May I ever, so far as I can, do good in this life to others.

May I always have a friendly feeling toward all living beings of the world and may the stream of compassion always flow from my heart toward distressed and afflicted living beings.

May I ever have the good company of learned ascetics and may I ever keep them in mind. May my heart be always engrossed and inclined to adopt the rules of conduct that they observe.

The fourth and youngest religion of India is the **Sikh** (means disciple) **Religion** which was a movement begun in the late 15th century in northwest India (the Punjab) gathering around Guru Nanak (1409-1539) for the purpose of seeking union with God. The Sikh religion provides guides (or Gurus) for all those people who seek the truth, who believe in the love of God, and in salvation and service for all believers. One of the great ideals of the gurus was to have Sikhs of all castes eat together which was a bold rejection of the caste system and a declaration of the principle of equality of all persons. The Sikhs promote an egalitarian attitude and seek to practice this in their relationships with women and men of all races, religions and social classes.

Although the Sikhs constitute just 2% of India's population, they exercise much power and influence in Indian society because they are well represented in civil service and the armed forces.

Sikhs also believe that Nature is not only the source of life, beauty, and power but also a source of strength in the formulation of human character. Humans are composed of five elements. These five elements of nature teach humans valuable lessons: *Earth* teaches us patience and love; *Air* teaches us mobility and liberty; *Fire* speaks of warmth and courage; *Sky* teaches equality and broadmindedness; and *Water* reflects purity and cleanliness. Humans must inculcate these fine traits of Nature in their personalities for fuller, happier and nobler lives.

We in the study abroad trip to India had the privilege of visiting a Sikh temple in New Delhi. We were graciously received and participated in the rituals of this holy gathering. I was especially struck by the energy I felt upon entering the temple and by the mingling of male and female, young and old, lame and whole from all divisions of Indian society. The reverence and humility the worshipers exhibited was strongly evident and the hospitality and acceptance of us was heartwarming. Upon leaving the temple, we witnessed the feeding of hundreds of Indian citizens in a well-organized process of serving. The Sikh temple in Delhi feeds 10,000 people a day and, in so doing, continues the long established practice of bringing people together from all levels of society to share a common meal on common ground. This is one more piece of evidence that the Indian people have a deep concern for people in need and express their compassion in tangible, meaningful ways. For this they deserve emulation and high praise! The question remains, however. What role might India's religions play in tapping or releasing the incredible resource of human potential and ingenuity in this "sleeping giant" of a country?

The journey to India was, for this seeker and student, a pilgrimage of faith and new understanding to a people and a culture and to religious traditions that have shaped hundreds of millions of people, religious traditions that have contributed significantly to the religious landscape of this planet. Fortunately, Indian officials, academics and religious leaders have participated in promoting interfaith dialogue and demonstrating respect for and freedom of religious expression to peoples of other faith traditions though pockets of intolerance clearly exist. The Hindus' faith in God (though God for them is represented by many deities) and their focus on the way one lives, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, the reverence for life and non-violence to all living things in Jainism, and the rejection of the caste system and the principle of human equality in the Sikh religion have all permeated the Indian culture and seem to have shaped the Indian psyche. The popular, broad reach of Hinduism, however, remains the dominant religious force. Within its fold are persons who subscribe to teachings that are diametrically opposed; theism and polytheism on the one hand and atheism on the other. The grossest superstitions and the profoundest philosophical insights exist side by side in this complex and commodious religion called Hinduism. Nevertheless, there is one characteristic that seems to reflect the heart of the Hindu people and also the adherents of Buddhism, Jainism and the Sikh religion. It is compassion for fellow humans that results in doing good to others, serving others selflessly. This is the noble life. My sincere hope is that in the coming century the religions of India will not only instruct us in the West and enhance our own faith journeys but that their dynamic, pervasive faith experiences will translate into hope and health and a new vision for the Indian people to discover their

potential as a resourceful, creative force on the world stage. And further, perhaps the critical issue of human dignity will become a central focus of India's religious leaders. India is indeed a mysterious complexity!

Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa are still my heroes but exposure to different perspectives, new friends and another rich culture awaken one to fresh, surprising perspectives that instruct and broaden one's world view. I resonate with Bettina Gray's words in *A Parliament of Souls* (p. 16):

Spiritual awareness is something so simple and so direct but so challenging that we often attempt to obscure it in elaborate theologies, incarcerate it in institutions or argue it rather than accept the challenge and live it. In these people, I saw the reality that truth knows no boundary—that the Transcendent is alive and well with or without us and above and beyond our attempts to control it, and it continues to manifest itself throughout our world with surprise, joy, renewed hope, creative freedom and, above all, compassion.

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