

I ndia: Poverty and Flowers

Edited by Lisa Roche and Joe Roche

I ndia is the burning plains of Bengal that have the distance of seas to them. It's the heart stopping moment when you are mesmerized by heat and dust and are walking in an altered state of fatigue, when across an endless field of wheat, a woman in a red sari with a great bundle of sheaves on her head breaks the hypnotic immensity with her sensuous movement and striking color. In the poverty, in the crowds of people like rivers in flood, there are places of such beauty and serenity.

—Dan Turner

I am hot, tired, and dusty with the sandy, sooty air that is so pervasive here in India. Between the exhaust from the motor rickshaws, buses, trucks, and the dusty sand that one hundred people kick up, we can get quite coated. Washing the last few days has been a difficult rarity as the bucket system for a hundred pilgrims means that you have to wait a while, and the places we have stayed have been anything but private.



Photo: Bill Ledger

Such a long walk, and so many things remembered: having to walk with wet shawls over our heads to avoid heatstroke, cobras in the only available well water, entire villages bringing garlands out to greet us.

I have been finding the crowds, our own and local, the nonstop noise and the pollution challenging. But just as I'm feeling depleted, coated in dirt, fatigue and bombarded by car horns, sure that I cannot take another step, I see a mother begging for rupees or fruit for the ragged little ones clinging to her, and I am reminded of my privilege to walk this Pilgrimage and reminded of my freedom. I can fantasize about a bath or a quiet meal of steamed vegetables and know that it is, in a matter of time, a reality.

—Debbie Habib

Such a long walk, and so many things remembered: having to walk with wet shawls over our heads to avoid heatstroke, cobras in the only available well water, entire villages bringing garlands out to greet us, staying at sacred temples and places made holy by Indian saints such as Vinoba Bhave, being at the shrine where Gandhi was shot, and always the daily lessons in patience and peace the monks taught by example.

From the beginning, we walked primarily through small villages. Everywhere we saw crippling disease, poverty and filth and villagers who were strong, patient and generous. Most had few possessions. Those who had almost nothing shared the small amount they did have with other villagers and with us. By contrast, those educated in the big cities of

India wanted only things “American.” Western soft drinks, jeans, computers, cigarettes, were all perceived as “better” than comparable Indian products. Many wanted to come to America, “the land of opportunity.” As an American, I questioned their infatuation with the country which gave the world the A-bomb, but my questions were met with

incomprehension and angry looks and sometimes were not even translated.

Each day I became more conscious of how we in the United States are consuming huge amounts of the planet's resources, while most people in third world countries have almost none. My heart ached both for Indians who had no heat in the winter mountains and Indians who warmed their hands in the pollution of old tires filled with gasoline and set ablaze



Photo: Bill Ledger

against the chill.

Yet in all the months we walked through monsoon, deserts, mountains, heat, I gave thanks daily for the privilege of walking with the monks. I had gone to India arrogantly hoping to “give” something to the country. Instead, every day I received more than I gave, learned so much more than I taught. I do not know how much peace we brought to India but I do know the India Walk brought deep peace to our walkers.

—Ruth Allison

Once again lunch was served with us pilgrims lined up in rows, sitting on mats on the freshly swept ground. We were given bowls made of two or three layers of leaves held together with slivers of wood, earthen bowls and cups, rice, curried vegetables, curd, water, chapati (a bread which doubles as utensils) and sometimes a flat wooden spoon. Some, both locals and pilgrims, eat with their fingers anyway. After the meal, the cows nearby eat the leafy plates and bowls and the leftovers.

—Greg Mott

As we drum across the plains, water buffalo lift their massive heads, languidly curious at the passing tableau and go on chewing. And later, with the westering sun striking the dust motes to sparks of silver, the buffalo move slowly into a pond sided by tall reeds. A nearly naked boy with a long switch walks the bank...

—Dan Turner

A ninety year old patriarch welcomes us at Smirti, the place of Gandhi's assassination. We see Gandhi's room, stark in its simplicity. Other than a few items such as his glasses and spoon displayed in a glass case, there is only his simple spinning wheel, his slant top desk with the three small monkeys statue—see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil—and his two simple sandals by the door. I spend a long time alone in his room kneeling by his sandals. They say so much! The elder Gandhian addresses our gathering. He speaks quietly

with great clarity and grace. Afterwards, speechless with gratitude, I express my appreciation with only a thank you and a kiss on his hand.

Our final day of the Pilgrimage, over one hundred strong and following four gendaikis (long, flowing purple banners with a flaming red sun and the words Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo in Japanese calligraphy) we arrive at Gandhi's memorial. About thirty young students of the Gandhian Harijan movement are spinning and chanting Hindu prayers. Each of us passes by the eternal flame to pay our respects while the others continue chanting. We recite chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra and offer incense.

—Hattie Nestel

We are traveling with Buddhist monks who respect and honor the divine (whom they refer to as Buddha) in every person and every living thing.



Photo: Bill Ledger



Spinning silk

If I were asked where you find poverty in India, my first response would be: Everywhere. My second would be: Look first at your feet. That is where you see the squatting beggars, skeletal arms stretched out, the twisted bodies and disfigured faces, the small, dirty children. You will see the old people sleeping (or is it dying?) on the sidewalk. You feel hands tugging at your clothes, grasping your fingers. Turn away from these outstretched arms and tortured beings and you turn away from God. This is why we are on pilgrimage: to see the face of God and to embrace the terrible beauty that it brings.

—Dan Turner

We are traveling with Buddhist monks who respect and honor the divine (whom they refer to as Buddha) in every person and every living thing. We attend Catholic Mass when we can and see what a strong message Jesus gave for world peace. All the world's religions teach peace among people but the practice is something else. The world is too small and the instruments of killing too disastrous for this method of solving differences and satisfying greed to continue. Such a change is our prayer as we walk, chant and beat the drums.

—Elizabeth Turner