

[Editorial--India: Leave Her and Love Her](#)

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the Editor

By the Editor

A bumper sticker you used to see on American highways, and can still sight in the deep South, reads "America: Love her or leave her." It's a classical American challenge, not much different than the "Don't tread on me" phrase Bill Clinton's speechwriters tore from a page of the American Revolution when the US decided recently to send that message to Saddam Hussain, tied in a cowboy's typically understated way to the fins of 27 cruise missiles.

The thought of loving or leaving one's homeland became loving and leaving when a family from India, now living in Tennessee, visited our island yesterday. There were three generations present. Grandma arranged for her daughter and her 14-year-old granddaughter to cook an elaborate South Indian lunch for the swamis here. Together with newly befriended local Hindus, they labored lovingly for five hours in a tiny kitchen which could not be more than twice the size of the desk in front of me.

Grandma's son, a chemical engineer who has lived in the US since 1968, performed a lovely puja and spoke wistfully of India. He feels drawn back, a feeling fashioned into a trenchant urge when his father died in 1988 and now being tempered into an adamant yearning. "In my homeland of Kerala everyone comes to help you at those times, knowing you need support when family members pass on. Without asking, they even cook your meals. Here there was no such support. And when I told my boss that I would have to stay away from work for thirteen days in traditional

observance of my father's passing, he could only stammer in disbelief, 'Thirteen days?'

"I miss India and feel it's time to return. But I also wonder if I'm being selfish, if it would deprive my children, born in America, of opportunities I have had. I can tell you, I have gone through several lives of fulfillment here in my career and intellectual pursuits. But the deeper things are missed."

The deeper things is what India is all about. Just look at this month's center section on pilgrimage. As the staff was researching it, they came to realize that in India travel and sight-seeing are synonymous with pilgrimage. Not so in England, Africa, Malaysia or anywhere else for that matter. When you read travel brochures from any other nation, you find glowing descriptions of national parks, historical monuments and dignified buildings. But India's tourist bureaus put those things in the footnotes, and invite the tourist to visit the temples and shrines, the holy sanctuaries and sacred rivers. Instead of baseball games, visitors join in village celebrations. Instead of Disneyland, they muscle into massive festivals and kumbha melas to engage the senses and fulfill the curious human need to loiter in long lines and be crushed in colossal crowds.

Tourism thus provides a good example of what India is. Africa gives tourists wildlife beyond imagination. North America regales them with natural beauty and unnaturally exhilarating exhibition. China supplies agricultural projects and bicycles beyond belief. Europe offers the search for the perfect croissant and a museum-studded jaunt through high culture.

While all of the above are present on the subcontinent, when a tourist reaches India's shores such sights remain virtually invisible, outshone and overshadowed by the spirituality which, like Limka, flows everywhere in India. There are many entrepreneurs in India who are looking for their first crore of rupees, trying to make it big, yearning for riches. But they are doing it all wrong. They are trying to make better computers than Apple, tastier soft drinks than 7-Up, faster motorcycles than Yamaha. Forget it. I predict some enterprising youth, the Bill Gates of Gujarat, will get rich by understanding that the one product India possesses against which competition does not exist is, and therefore success is assured, the serious business of the human spirit. Forget hardware. Trash software. We're talking soulware.

I know what you're thinking: "India used to have spiritual depth, but now it's gone. People don't want to spend the time, as the rishis of yore once did, to perfect the real yogas. They want to have it all on a 60-minute tape to play in their car on the way to work. They don't want to read the 100,000-verse Ramayana. That takes weeks, months even. They want it all on a video tape, to sit down for 26 dinners and digest the epics in the bargain. People no longer work to learn bhajans, mastering the music and the devotional disciplines. Now it's got to be on a CD, packaged with canned mantras that can be played each morning while the dosai is cooking, instead of sitting alone in the camphor-lit shrine room like grandpa did." A lot of that is true, of course. And lamentable. Just yesterday we had to turn away an advertiser who was hoping to hawk mail-order initiation as an "ordained swami." Sending us that ad was like asking the AMA to run a promotion for mail-order brain surgeons!

Did you hear about the Bhajan Gangs in Bombay? Ostensibly normal train commuters take over entire compartments where they belt out religious ditties to their captive audience. For all its oddity, I like that one. Just think of it: while subway gangs terrorize New Yorkers with Magnum 357s the Bombay homeboys bombard folks with Mantra 108. That's Dharmabhoomi! Sure, there are strange goings-on in India. But no stranger than in other lands. The real yogis are still there. The real bhajan masters can still lift crowds high enough to touch God's Feet. The real spiritual tirthas remain, if a bit dilapidated. And most significantly, the real sense of spirituality's importance to human existence is everywhere, in every village. That's not something you can find in Germany, Argentina or Japan. It's uniquely India, where magic still happens to visitors and villagers alike. Where else can you get on the wrong train and end up at the rite place?

India's special place in the universe has been pondered by great minds. Here's what a few have concluded:

"In religion and culture, India is the only millionaire! There is only one India! The land of dreams and romance. The one land all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for the shows of all rest of the globe combined." Mark Twain.

"India is the mother of our race and Sanskrit the mother of Europe's languages. She was the mother of our philosophy, mother through the Arabs of our mathematics, mother through Buddha of the ideals embodied in Christianity, mother through the

village community of self government and democracy. Mother India is, in many ways, the mother of us all." Will Durant.

"It is already becoming clear that a chapter which had a Western beginning will have an Indian ending, if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is the Indian way." Arnold Toynbee.

"Whenever I have read any part of the Vedas, I have felt that some unearthly and unknown light illuminated me. In the greatest teachings of Vedas, there is no touch of the sectarianism. It is of all ages, climes, and nationalities and the royal road for the attainment of the Great Knowledge. When I am at it, I feel that I am under the spangled heavens of a summer night." Henry David Thoreau.

"To many, Indian thought, Indian manners, Indian customs, Indian philosophy, Indian literature, are repulsive at the first sight; but let them persevere, let them read, let them become familiar with the great principles underlying the ideas, and it is ninety-nine to one that the charm will come over them, and fascination will be the result we have yet something to teach to the world. This is the very reason, the *raison d'etre*, that this nation has lived on, in spite of nearly a thousand years of foreign rule and foreign oppression. The debt which the world owes to our Motherland is immense. Taking country with country, there is no one race on this earth to which the world owes so much as to the patient Hindu, the mild Hindu." Swami Vivekananda.

One hopes that the Kerala family we met yesterday does return to India, and that their children's culture shock will soon subside and they will see deep into the heart of her great culture. One hopes that many such families, swept away to the West in the brain-drain of the 60s and 70s, will be drawn back to their roots, returning their newfound talents and resources to the nation that raised them, released them and now, perhaps more than at any time since Independence, relies on their strengths. One hopes.