

[Mark Twain's Little-Known Travels in India](#)

Category : [December 1986](#)

Published by Anonymous on Dec. 01, 1986

Mark Twain's Little-Known Travels in India

In religion, all other countries are paupers. India is the only millionaire." So quipped the American humorist Mark Twain in his diary as he traveled through India and Sri Lanka from January to April, 1896.

Twain's tales of his encounter with India and Hinduism are typical of the curmudgeonly essayist - witty, sagacious, exaggerated and cynical. Yet few people know he ever went to Dharma's homeland or wrote so extensively about what he saw there. Herewith we correct that flaw.

The journey was not a pilgrimage, though in many ways it became exactly that. Samuel Clemens, 60, had fallen on hard times. The literary genius who gave the world Huckleberry Finn, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and The Innocents Abroad had become a pauper. It happened when he undertook two large business enterprises with Charles Webster Publishing and Paige Type-setting Machine; they both failed miserably. Twain had borrowed heavily for the ventures, and felt personally responsible to investors who had trusted in him. So he set sail for the East. It was to Twain's credit that he refused to let those who had trusted in him suffer. He fussed for weeks and finally crafted a plan to recoup their losses doing what he did best - lecturing and writing books. The debt was vast, around \$100,000, and so the plan had to be equally ambitious. He chose to circle the globe. It would be a long, arduous journey and he was sick much of the time, mostly from a cold and a carbuncle. The itinerary took him to Hawaii, Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, India, Mauritius, South Africa and England.

Though he traveled far and experienced much, Twain's three months in India were the highlight of his year-long trek and the intriguing centerpiece of his revealing 712-page book, *Following the Equator*.

So it was that the self-proclaimed vagabond and literary gadfly set out on July 15, 1895 to pay his debts; but what he really gave the world was a sage, a romance and a human adventure. Ironically, it was poverty that took him to India & it was poverty-stricken India that made him solvent again - an observation he might have made himself were he not so close to the facts of the matter.

Twain traveled with his wife Olivia and daughter and with a colleague, Mr. Smythe who made all of the India travel and lecture arrangements. Landing in Bombay from Colombo, he was overwhelmed by the color, the ancientness of the land. He wrote: "This is India! the land of dreams and romance, of fabulous wealth and fabulous poverty, of splendor and rags, of palaces and hovels, of famine and pestilence, of genii and giants and Aladdin lamps, of tigers and elephants, the cobra and the jungle, the country of a hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand religions and two million gods, cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of tradition, whose yesterdays bear date with the mouldering antiquities of the rest of the nations - the one sole country under the sun that is endowed with an imperishable interest for alien priat, for lettered and ignorant, wise and fool, rich and poor, bond and free, the one land that all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for all the shows of all the rest of the globe combined. Even now, after a lapse of a year, the delirium of those days in Bombay has not left me and I hope it never will."

At Home in India: A trained mind could infer that Mark Twain was impressed with India. But worked called. He had chosen an conversational style for his presentations and called them "At Home." He though lectures too formal, too stiff, for his manner and purpose. They were to him "speech" and the preferred "talk." That is not to say that Twain's informal talks, with their long and detailed stories, their tearful pathos and side-hugging fun, were either careless or totally spontaneous. Rather they were crafted, rehearsed, improved, refined and changed according to each audience. Such a studied approach paid off.

With his white suit, curly hair, shaggy eyebrows and magnetic smile, Clemen's appearance was compelling. "The prominent points about Mark Twain's personal appearance are his long untidy hair, the ferocious moustache and the gray eyes that are not ferocious but kind and gentle and pathetic; and the deep furrows falling outwards from the thin beaked nose to the sides of his mouth, which are the external and bidible signs of the nasal drawl that characterizes the very thoughts of the man before he had given utterance to them."

His face did not suggest his latent humor but recalled the appearance of a stern and serious man as he paced up and down on the stage, a slender but well-built man in a spotless white suit. Said a Bombay paper, "With his feet planted some distance apart and a hand sometimes in his trousers pockets, elbow sometimes placed against his cheek and supported by the other arm whilst his eyes oftener than not gazed as he would in the presence of a group of familiar friends and never once raised his voice above a conversational pitch."

Many members of Indian audiences, accustomed to British speech and pronunciation and formality, found in his American accent a certain piquancy. They liked it. America was something of a mystery for most people he encountered. They knew about George Washington, about Chicago and its World's Fair that made Swami Vivekananda a world figure. That was about the extent of general knowledge in those days.

The main purpose for which Clemens traveled around the world was fulfilled satisfactorily, for he collected money enough to pay off a large part of his debt. Much of the success came in India where his once-in-a-lifetime presence and Smythe's sizeable media hype drew large crowds. Most of the theaters where he appeared accommodated about 1000 people and in some extra seats had been provided. In Bombay the Novelty Theatre held 1400 Prices in India were Rs. 1, 2, 3 and 4, depending on how close one wished to be to the celebrity. He collected about Rs 2600 (or \$650 in those days) for each evening. Stories, anecdotes, human sketches, and homilies, excerpts from Huck Finn and such filled the 3-hour evenings. His wife always felt the audience should get its money's worth and urged him to not end after just an hour or two.

One man wrote: "So, Mark Twain came to India and conquered the people. What the British with nearly a hundred and fifty years of strong rule could not achieve, he could work wonders in one day by being At Home to the people. They had read Mark Twain and were greatly responsive to his subtle humor and highly exaggerated stories."

A Tall, Tall Tale: Twain knew from extensive reading that India was a place where moral and philosophical subjects were welcome. Since it was his penchant to ponder these matters, he devised a preposterous plan which he presented to Indian audiences whose uncontrollable myrrh contrasted with but never shattered the serious demeanor of the man. We share in brief Twain's Moral Regeneration of

the Whole Human Race Scheme.

"I've got a scheme for the moral regeneration of the human race, which I hope I can make effective, but I can't tell yet. But I know it is planned out upon strictly scientific lines and is up to date in that particular. I propose to do for the moral fabric just what advanced medical art is doing for the physical body. To protect a healthy person forever from smallpox, hydrophobia, dyptheria and so on, the doctor gives him those very diseases - in a harmless form - inoculates him with them - and he's safe then a harmless form - inoculates him with them - and he's safe then from ever catching them again. That great idea is going to be carried further and further. Fifty years from now the doctors will be inoculating for every conceivable disease. They will take the healthy baby out of the cradle and punch it and slash it and scarify it and load it up with the whole of the 1644 diseases (those known to be fearful) that constitute their stock in trade - and that child will be a spectacle to look at. But no matter; it will be sick a couple of weeks, and after that, though it live to be a hundred, it can never be sick again. The chances are that child will never die at all. In that great day there won't be any doctors any more - nothing but inoculators - & here and there a perishing undertaker.

"Now then, I propose to inoculate for Sin. Suppose that every time you commit a transgression, a crime of any kind, you lay up in your heart a memory of the shame you felt when your Sin found you out, and so make it a perpetual reminder and perpetual protection against your ever committing that particular Sin again. That is to say, inoculate yourself forever against that particular Sin. Now what must be the result? Why this - logically and infallibly: that the more crimes you commit (and forever amen) the richer you become, morally; and when you have committed all the trespasses, all the crimes that are known to the calendar of Sin, there you stand, white as an angel, pure as the driven Snow (protected forever from further Sin), the sky-kissing monument of moral perfection.

"Now is this thing difficult? No. There are only 354 Sins possible - that's all you can commit - that all there are; you can't invent any fresh ones - that's all been attended to. Now what is 354 Sins? It's very easy work. It's nothing - anybody can do it. I know; I've done it myself."

In the next issue we continue Mark Twain's adventures in India, with special reference to his colorful but depressing days in Benares. Also we shall therein divulge to our readers how it came to pass that Twain's destiny and that of the

staff of your paper intertwined, not once but twice. It would be an unbelievable yarn were it not altogether true.