Mark Twain's Little-Known Travels in India
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Part Three; The Final Installment

When we left Mark Twain last, he was wandering about Benares and not having a very good time. Despite the crowded and often funereal experiences, Benares was not entirely a disappointment to mark Twain. He called it "the Oxford of India" for its wealth of Hindu and Sanskrit studies. He met the priests who purported to broker salvation for the pious contributor, but he also met a real holy man in whom Hinduism and saintliness became embodied for him - Swami Bhaskaranand Saraswati. He visited the Swami, who had studied Vedanta philosophy and renounced the world, in a small garden called Anandaag where he lived. This soul impressed Twain as a great spiritual leader and scholar, compelling him to write: "he is no longer a part or feature of this world...he is utterly holy, utterly pure." Their meeting was enthusiastically retold by Twain again and again, "There he is. He is minus the trappings of civilization. He hasn't a rag on his back. But he has perfect manners, a ready wit and a turn for conversation."

Uncommon Reverence: Tolerance was essential to him. It had to be. He was raised amid its opposite and had seen too much of hatred and self-righteousness in the slave-master relationship in the American South. So he tried again and again to teach others the foolishness of it. After his meeting with the Indian holy man he reflected at length on the matter. "He has my reverence. And I don't offer it as a common thing and poor, but as an unusual thing and of value. The ordinary reverence, the reverence defined and explained by the dictionary costs nothing. Reverence for one's own sacred things - parents, religion, flag, laws, and respect for one's own beliefs - these are feelings which we cannot even help. They come natural to us; they are involuntary, like breathing. There is no personal merit in breathing. But the reverence which is difficult, and which has personal merit in it, is the respect which you pay, without compulsion, to the political or religious attitude of a man whose beliefs are not yours. You can't revere his gods or his politics, and no one expects you to do that, but you could respect his beliefs in them if you tried hard enough. But it is very, very difficult; it is next to impossible, and so we hardly every try. If the man doesn't believe as we do, we say he is a crank and that settles it. I mean it does nowadays, because now we can't burn him."

Mark Twain eschewed prejudice most of the time, and those that remained with him did not sully seriously his basic conception of man and the world, for he could laugh through them at the stupidities of individuals both at home and abroad. Mr. Badaranaike, the late Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, appreciated Twain's "mixture of humorous sympathy for the underdog and moral indignation about the cruelties and hypocracies of mankind," adding, "How could I be hostile to a country that produced Mark Twain?"

Nonetheless, Mark Twain never truly comprehended Hinduism. Through Rev. Parker's eyes he saw the darker side - the unfortunate practices of making religion a business and the immense poverty (which he rightly blamed on India's invaders). Only in one visit to a Jain temple did a knowledgeable man present the deeper views and correct a handful of Twain's mis-conceptions. But considering himself "a representative-at-large for the human race" more than an American, Twain also saw through the exterior and recognized a serene and self-possessed culture with high principles. In Benares he evinced an inner pleasure at the many men and women kneeling prayerfully for hours "while we in America are robbing and murdering."

The poverty nearly suffocated him. He blamed the white man who, in the name of civilization and "the white man's burden, impoverished many peoples in the world. In his book Mark Twain in India, Keshav Mustalik noted of wain's observations: "The white man's tools were whisky and wine and tobacco offered with the fetters and hanging pole and noose; the white man's world wad death and murder coupled with the commandment Thou shall not kill. Mark Twain angrily said, "We are obliged to believe that a nation could look on, unmoved, and see starving or freezing women hanged for stealing twenty-six cents' worth of food or rags and boys snatched from their mothers and men from their families and sent to the other side of the world for long terms of years for similar trifling offences, was a nation to whom the term 'civilized' could not in any large way be applied.' The result of 'civilization' was the extermination of the savages: 'There are many humorous things in the world, among them the white man's notion that he is less savage than the savages.'"

Being such a avid critic of society, any society, right from the beginning of his literary career, Twain moved forward to a sort of personal study of human life. In India he had anticipated a world of beauty and peace. Indeed, when he landed in Colombo, Sri Lanka, enroute to Bombay his first impression was "Dear me, it is beautiful! A sumptuous tropical, as to character of foliage and opulence of it." But praise all too soon turned to cynicism when he saw a group of school girls,

Sinhalese Christians "Europeanly dressed" and coming out of a missionary school. He thought their clothes ugly, "destitute of taste, destitute of grace, repulsive as a shroud" and preferred aloud the simple, colorful and more natural native garb.

In all, his cynicism of Western society and piety grew deeper as he traveled around the world. He returned to America noticeably disenchanted, a man who wrote his most stinging observations in What is Man? and The Mysterious Stranger. It is all the more remarkable that he wrote cheerfully and with great humor about India and her peoples, that he was able to watch dhobys laundering their master's clothes at the river and inquire: "Are they trying to break those stones with clothes?"

Of India itself he eloquently summed up his three months of exploration: "Nothing has been left undone, either by man or nature, to make India the most extraordinary country that the Sun visits on his round. Nothing seems to have been forgotten, nothing overlooked."

Toward the end of his journey, tired and full, he wrote a friend, "I have been sick a good deal; the rest not so much. We have had a good time in India - we couldn't ask for better. There are lovely people here...they made us feel at home."

Readers who would like to enjoy the entire account of Twain's Indian experience can do no better than search out the two books below. One is his final product, rich with illustrations, the very book that made it possible to pay off the debtors who inspired the trip in the first place. It is full of stories, wonderful stories, and of observations that are as true today as they were ninety years back. The second is a short analysis of Twain's tour, a look behind the scenes. The more ambitious may wish to contact the world's greatest collection of the man's life and works: The Mark Twain Papers, which is a full department within the library of the University of California at Berkeley.

Following the Equator, 171, AMS Press Inc., New York, N.Y. 10003, ISBN Number 0-404-01577-8, 712 pages.

Mark Twain in India, by Keshav Mutalik, 1978, Noble Publishing House, 273 V.P. Road, Bombay 400004, India, 154 pages.