Mark Twain's Remarkable, And Profitable, Travels in India
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"East is East and West is West

And finally they both met Twain."

- Pudd'nhead Wilson's Long Lost Cousin

"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 (let alone for three full months) or wrote so extensively about what he saw there. In fact, he and his critics agreed that the resulting book, Following the Equator, was one of his finest

The Little-Known but Entirely True Tale of Samuel Clemons' Encounter with the East works, coming as it did in the last and mature years of his life.

The journey was not easy for the aging American, nor was it a pilgrimage, though in many ways it became exactly that. Writer 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 business enterprises with Charles Webster Publishing and Paige Typesetting Machine; they both failed miserably. Twain had borrowed heavily for the ventures, and felt responsible to investors who had trusted in him. He refused to let them suffer.

He fussed for weeks and finally emerged from his musings with 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 trek, and he was sick much of the time, mostly from a cold and a carbuncle. The itinerary took him to Hawaii, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, Sri Lanka, India, Mauritius, South Africa and lastly to 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 did was enrich the world with a saga, a romance and a human adventure. Ironically, it was poverty that took him to India and it was a poverty - stricken India that made him solvent again - an observation he might have made himself were he not so close to the facts.

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 spirit, 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:

He had chosen a conversational style for his presentations and called them "At Home." He thought lectures too formal, too stiff, for his manner and purpose. They were to him "speech" and he 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 neither careless or totally spontaneous. Rather they were crafted, rehearsed, improved, refined and changed according to each audience. Such a studied approach paid off.

A contemporary journalist described him this way: "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 India's stages, 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 formality, found in his American accent a certain intimate charm. 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 just three years earlier had 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. He collected money enough to pay off a large part of his debt. Much of the revenues came in India where his once-in-a-lifetime presence and Smythe's media hype drew large crowds. Most of the theaters where he appeared held about 1,000. Bombay's Novelty Theatre accommodated 1,400. Prices were rupees 1, 2, 3 and 4. The celebrity collected about Rs. 2,600 (a respectable $650 in 1896) each evening. Stories, anecdotes, excerpts from Huck Finn, sketches and homilies filled each three-hour evening. His wife said the audience must get its money's worth, so 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. Personally, he detested the Christian idea of sin and must have been advised that karma replaces sin in the Indian scheme of things. He devised a preposterous plan which he presented to Indian audiences whose uncontrollable mirth 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" as offered to India.

"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. 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, diphtheria and so on, the doctor gives him those very diseases - in 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 1,644 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 that child will never die at all. In that great day there won't be any doctors any more - nothing but inoculators - and 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's 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."

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