

ADDING VALUE

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When Mark Twain visited India at the end of the nineteenth century, he wrote of the delirium he hoped would never leave him when he saw:

“the land of dreams and romance, of 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. 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 the rest of the globe combined.”

ADDING VALUE is mailed and posted on our website quarterly to our clients and friends. The intent of this publication is to share some of our more interesting views and research with our clients.

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INDIA

Our 2015 journey took us to the ancient land of India. We were determined after exploring Southeast Asia in 2014 that we would visit the two land masses on either side of this region, both India and China. It was intimidating to plan this trip. India is a vast country with diffuse boundaries (over mountains and through deserts and across rivers) which constantly interacted with other cultures, creating a civilization of staggering diversity. It gave birth to, or took in, most of the world's great religions. Hinduism, the country's dominant religion observed by 82% of the population, is itself the general name for a collection of highly pluralistic practices and beliefs. Thus, the myths of India are endless, its art manifold, and its life inexhaustible. Here are our humble observations of this rich and vibrant land....

It takes two days to reach New Delhi from North America with only two short plane changes to disembark and to breathe fresh air. The majority of the time is spent flying over oceans and other continents. We arrived in the bustling metropolis of Delhi, which has been inhabited since before the second millennium B.C., a day early to acclimate to the time change. (It is very, very different from my first visit to Delhi in 2008.) Cows have been taken to cow shelters and no longer wander the streets; tuk-tuks now run on LNG thus eliminating some of the pollution. The third largest subway system in the world is opening in 2016 (rivaling that of NYC and London). Flowers have been planted down the wide boulevards designed by British landscape architect Edwin Lutyens. To some extent, the real soul of India has departed to the countryside and after our initial sightseeing in the national capital we were anxious to get on the road.

We concentrated our trip in Rajasthan, a state in northwest India. Rajasthan is divided in two by the ancient Aravali range which contains the world's oldest mountains. It runs northeasterly for 350 miles across the entire state with high peaks, isolated hills, rocky ridges, arid deserts and lush villages. This range of mountains provided most of the sandstone and marble that was the building material of the palaces, forts and temples throughout Rajasthan's long history.

MUGHAL DYNASTY (1526-1707)

Within the vast Indian subcontinent, Rajasthan is called “the abode of kings”. In the old days (500-1550 A.D.), this vast land consisted of more than twenty-two princely states. Each state was ruled by a Rajput, an upper caste Hindu warrior prince, primarily of one of three clans – those descended from the sun, those descended from the moon, and those purified by ritual fire. For about a thousand years (the time frames are mind boggling!), the Hindu Rajputs resisted invasion from the Muslim Mughals.

This dominance ended with the arrival of the Mughal Emperor Babur, a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, in 1526. From the middle of the 16th century onward the Mughal's took control. At the height of their power, they controlled the whole

of Hindustan from Kabul to Bengal. (It seemed as though every other generation achieved greatness - - Babur, his grandson, Akbar, and Akbar's grandson Shah Jahan were the standouts.) Babur's grandson Akbar is considered the most innovative and energetic of the Mughal imperial patrons and he opened the flood gates to the Mughal's distinct culture and craftsmanship during his 44 year rule. (Think the Medici's of Renaissance Italy.) It was Akbar's grandson that achieved the epitome of architectural brilliance with the completion of the Taj Mahal. The bloodline continued for another 200 years at the death of Shah Jahan, but no other Emperor achieved the greatness of these three.

ART & ARCHITECTURE

The art and architecture created by the Mughal Dynasty is magnificent. There is no other way to describe it. Perhaps its attraction was that it was continually underpinned by a strict geometric structure.

The sense of mathematics was always present. In addition, certain geometrical figures were used advantageously and continuously. The circle is the dome of heaven; the octagon is the Eight Paradises; the chevron is the flowing waters of the streams of paradise. In the midst of all the chaos that is modern India, walking into the mosques, tombs, palaces, and pleasure pavilions erected by the Mughal Emperors imparted an oasis of calm. No matter how many architectural monuments we visited, the results were always the same: the works of man had a transcendent quality and the fact that geometric patterns are capable of endless extension was a constant reminder of the infinity of the universe. Although most Islamic art has this characteristic, the unmistakable Indian personality comes from the use of indigenous material - - white marble set into red sandstone to achieve patterns of startlingly coloristic and textural boldness.

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS & QUIRKY ANECDOTES

In between the times we were visiting the architectural marvels, we were walking the streets and interacting with the people. In short, India is an assault to every sense - - the smells, the sounds, the tastes, the sights. It just never stops. We have spent a lot of time trying to relate our impressions of the journey to some concrete observation. Here are some perspectives:

- The modern country of India today is three-quarters as large in landmass as the modern region of Europe (including Russia), but with double Europe's population. India is one-third the land mass of the USA.
- Europe is made up of 47 different independent countries. India today is a single country governed by a mixed parliamentary and presidential system and divided into 29 states. India celebrated 50 years as a democracy in 1999, but still practices the caste system.
- India, like Europe and the USA, is held together by a shared set of basic religious and cultural beliefs and practices.
- Population growth is exploding in India. From 1961 to 2011 the population has tripled from 450 million to approximately 1.3 billion (2011 Census). India supports 15% of the globe's population.
- India's literacy rate is 74% (2011 Census). In a country where illiteracy is so widespread, the capacity to read is treated with respect bordering on awe.
- India's urbanization remains at about 30% (2011 Census). It has the largest rural population in the world today. It was a surprise to find empty, wide-open spaces.
- While India is a burgeoning economic super power, for all the people that live in the rural areas, only 43% have electricity, 24% have tap water and 23% have indoor plumbing.
- India's five largest cities are in the top 40 most populous cities in the world.
- 90% of Indian marriages are arranged. When a boy and a girl get engaged, their horoscopes are read by the family priest to see if they are compatible. The most common questions to be addressed of the horoscope reading is: "When this girl marries into our family will she bring us luck? Will she increase our wealth or will she cast a shadow over our house?" If there is a hint of such negative possibilities, she is called a "manglik". Happily, for the manglik girl, she is not doomed by a fate over which she has no control. There is a solution: she must first marry someone else, transferring her ill fortune to another husband. Then, purified, she can finally marry her original bridegroom!

- The spinning wheel in the center of the Indian flag acknowledges that textiles are a living Indian art form still producing masterpieces equal to those of the past. We heard one tale from Indian mythology that illustrates what the weaver means to India. The Mother Goddess of the subcontinent one day took the form of a cosmic spider and began spinning a web of cotton thread. The web grew until it covered India, and still she spun. Finally, her immense web reached beyond the boundaries of the Himalaya to enmesh the god of the Aryans binding him to India. Today, eighteen million Indians feed themselves from the profits of their handlooms and a further five million earn their livelihood as craftsmen. The dyes used in the woven fragments that survive from the Indus Valley civilization are still the color spectrum that defines India - - ocher, red, black and indigo. Experiments in extracting color from plants led to the creation of the first dyes. 5000 years later that same experimentation led to the growth of India's pharmaceutical industries. In the struggle to achieve independence from the British, Gandhi seized upon the idea of using the domestic weaving industry as a symbol of "home-spun" independence and self-sufficiency of the village unit. These traditions of cloth manufacture continue to develop. Truly, India remains the most original, creative, and prolific source of textile production in the world.



- India is home to the world's oldest religions. There are a bewildering array of deities and demons in the modern Hindu pantheon whose origins are lost in time. Even texts from the 1100's state: "The pot is a god. The winnowing fan is a god. The stone in the street is a god..." Throughout the trip we read comic books provided by our tour leader describing the antics of these heroes. (Think Hanuman, the Elephant King, as Batman!) One of the more peculiar Temples we visited was to the god "Karni Mata". This beautiful temple with an intricately carved marble façade has about 20,000 rats inside that roam freely. Legend has it that they serve the local deity Karni Mata, who as a penance for a local army that deserted a nearby battle, converted them all into rats! Daily processions of pilgrims arrive to feed the rats and look for the "white" one, who the pilgrims believe exudes special karma. Seriously? All I can say is only in India.



- A turban is a ubiquitous head accessory in Rajasthan, more of a tradition than a religious symbol. They are vibrant and colorful. It is estimated that there are over 1,000 styles and types. They can be as long as 83 feet and as wide as 8 inches. They are used as a pillow, a cover during a nap, and even to draw water from a well. They are re-tied after every wearing which is also an art that requires significant practice.

- Holi is a major Hindu festival which is celebrated on the day after the last full moon of the Vernal Equinox. It marks the happy transition from harsh, dark winter to a brighter, warmer springtime. Holi celebrates the Hindu story of Prahlada. Prahlada was a prince dedicated to the worship of Vishnu, a major Hindu god. Prahlada's father and aunt opposed his religious faith, and as punishment made him sit in the middle of a raging bonfire. Vishnu protected Prahlada, and the prince did not burn. Bonfires remain a part of Holi today. However, the most striking aspect of the festival is the spraying of brightly colored powders and water in an enormous public celebration. We played "Holi" in the village elder's camp for one whole day!



India is usually described by analysts around the world as a "Caged Tiger", a country that has yet to exploit its enormous potential. India has described herself as the "Land of Experience" where everything has happened so often before that even "history is reduced to troublesome echoes in an empty cave". In 1945, writer Alex Aronson noted that India was a civilization, and "civilization is always a process: not a being but a becoming." Somehow India has managed to stay a civilization; still unpredictable, still surprising, still defying definition, still compelling us to return (after a rest to re-group our thoughts) for more explorations.

Additional pictures of this trip are posted on our website:
www.kswrightassociates.com under "musings".

Sincerely,

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