



Travelogue

India: Beyond Expectations

Ian Niblock*

India has long been on my mind as a destination in which to travel to and this summer I was fortunate enough to spend a month there.

Admittedly, I went during the months of June and July which is not the most favourable season for travelling (when I was in Agra the temperature reached 47 degrees!). Despite having always eaten meat, I realized that it is relatively easy to become vegetarian in India and as a result I have altered my diet since returning. Like many Westerners who travel to the subcontinent we do fear about incurring the dreaded 'Delhi Belly'. I am pleased to say that I never experienced this in Delhi and our tour guide would advise the group that; '90 percent of Delhi Belly comes from the water. If you get "Delhi Belly" make sure to drink a *lassi* (a yogurt-based drink) and you will feel better'. One of the best meals I ate in India was at the Bamboo Cafe, a delightful family-run business which is a perfect way to round-off a day viewing the Taj. If you would like to sample some traditional spices and teas I highly recommend that you venture to Mehar Chand & Sons, namely the 'Golden Horse' in the spice market of Dehli¹ which has recently celebrated their 100th years of trading.

Tourism does indeed seem like a popular route for states to diversify away being reliant on heavy industry. Gulf states such as Saudi and Bahrain, for instance, have a 'vision 2030' which incorporates elements of tourism to boost their economies. Interestingly, Saudi aims to develop tourism along the Red Sea, and in so doing will need to liberalize its economy in order to achieve this. One thing which I had noticed about India is the way it always seems to consistently host a flow of international tourists. I mention this because earlier this year I was on holiday in Egypt which appeared as quite a contrast to India. Both India and Egypt possess some alluring wonders of the world, yet from what I experienced,

* Associate Research Fellow, Foundation for Evidence-based Development in India (FEDI)

¹ The family business offers an array of teas and spices and has played host to famous visitors such as Christine Lagarde.

tourists in Egypt were rather sparse in should have been the peak season. Political unrest, of course, has played a part in affecting tourist numbers, but I hope anyone reading this will get the opportunity (if you haven't already) to gaze in awe at the Pyramids of Giza. On returning from Egypt an American man did ask me at the airport if I had any Indian rupees because all bureaus would not exchange his cash. Acquiring Indian currency had thus played on my mind ever since as I did not want to turn into the American asking other travellers for rupees. Luckily, the Modi government had mostly curtailed the circulation of 'black money' before I arrived in the country.

What I find fascinating about the world is that the more I travel, the more I have noticed the underlying issues facing regions. When in Beijing, I saw the effects of smog in how the local residents would crackle in their throats and spit out the accumulated phlegm. In Egypt, there is a major issue with garbage - indeed, this can be seen upon approaching the great pyramids. Myself and my friends passed through Mokattam Village which is the 'aptly-named' garbage city in order to reach the remarkable 'cave Church'. Despite it taking nearly two hours and two different taxi drivers to find the Church it was well worth the trip. There were actually two churches, an indoor winter church and an outdoor amphitheatre as a summer church. So long as relations between the Coptic community and Cairo remain cordial, then the capital's street will enjoy a garbage free environment. Admittedly, before I went to Egypt, I had been made aware of the issue over litter in Giza. In a similar vein, I had always thought that the Yamuna River surrounding the Taj Mahal faced environmental degradation. Upon visiting the Taj, I was pleasantly surprised that the local authorities were taking efforts to conserve the riverside. Nowadays, the area remains clean and only locals are permitted to graze their livestock along the river free from tourist interference. The view which I was subsequently able to capture of the Taj Mahal over river from the gardens, Mehtab Bagh, was breathtaking.

India is home to the quintessential backpacker and I definitely met some interesting characters on my journey. Madpackers and Zostel appeared to be main hostels for those travelling the Golden Triangle. As a result, I would bump into travellers I had seen before such as 'India' who was ironically celebrating her birthday in India, and Charlie who was a professional chef gathering recipes on route. Many backpackers talked of Rishikesh² as 'must' on the to-do-list especially if you want to immerse yourself in yoga, an intrinsic part of Indian culture. I never made it to Rishikesh on this trip, but I am glad that I was able to partake in a yoga workshop at Aligarh University. Depending on perspective, some consider yoga in connection to Hinduism while other regard it more in a philosophical light. As of 2016, yoga joined UNESCO's list of intangible world heritage as a mechanism to recognize ancient organic culture from the subcontinent. I did question whether should have booked three nights in Agra, as many people would say 'What is there to see apart from the Taj?'. Well, I did do a lot of reading in the hostel during the day (from 10am until 4.30pm) as the outside temperature was nearing 50 degrees. That is not to say, however, that I couldn't entertain myself in the city. If you visit Agra, I suggest that you meander your way to the Agra Fort, go to Mehtab Bagh for the views of the Taj Mahal, try the Bamboo Cafe for some authentic dishes and go on a walking tour of the city. I chose to try out the 'Mughal Heritage Walk' which was an incredible insight into the living culture of the city - discovering the workshops where the marble crafts are produced and meeting a man who races pigeons from his rooftop.

One aspect of India which I find so striking is how multi-faceted it is. Underlying

² Rishikesh came to notoriety when the Beatles stayed there. Perhaps, for this reason, so many visitors flock there while that is not to say there aren't plenty of other places to practice yoga.

disputes between faiths are apparent, most notably Hindus and Muslims, but from my own experience, India, by and large, has a rich history of embracing different groups. I learned that a Mughal ruler, for instance, at Red Fort took a wife from different nationalities and faiths. If you go to Delhi I definitely recommend that you take a tour of the stunning Lotus Temple which is a house of worship for the Baha'i faith. I thought it was interesting that this faith reflected on other faiths with a sense of unity. Moreover, I understood from my visit to the prestigious Aligarh Muslim University that the founder Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's mission was to bring students together under the purpose of learning³. Something which I will always treasure from my time in Aligarh was an invitation to visit the museum at Ibn Sina Academy of Medieval Medicine and Science. The museum hosts some marvelous Mughal writings, extensive medical literature and artifacts from the colonial period⁴.

After travelling in India, I can surely appreciate the lure of the country and why people want to return. I understand why my friend from university who I met in Delhi, as well as, my friends in Aligarh loves their country with a passion. India is the largest democracy in the world and for it to function its undoubtedly needs to embrace diversity. There is something about the essence of India which draws in foreigners. I remember being at the Taj Mahal and a young American woman asked for photos of herself spinning in traditional Indian dress - this was great to see - if you were going to visit somewhere so iconic in India, why not fully immerse yourself in the experience? While in Delhi, I got the chance to see the Akshardham temple complex. Although only opened in 2005, the Akshardham embodies a very ancient feel constructed from Rajastani pink sandstone. The evening light show is exquisite and told an interesting and colourful story of the gods. I was practically one of only a handful of foreigners there, but that made the experience all the more authentic. This article is merely a flavour of what I felt India had to offer and for the most part the country has surpassed my expectations. Because there is so much to see and do, I now realize why so many travellers view a trip to India as a right of passage.

³ You may like to know that Aligarh University was visited by Queen Victoria and the first graduate was Hindu

⁴ Many thanks to Syed Ziaur Rahman for providing me a tour of his family's collection.