

A Letter from India II

My dear friends,

Greetings from the City of Shiva. I trust you are well and that the winds of good fortune blow in your favour. Since my last letter, which I wrote to you when staying on Mount Abu, I have covered a little more ground. From Mount Abu I journeyed to Udaipur then onto Pushkar. These places are very pleasant, especially Pushkar. It was from Pushkar that I took a camel trek into one of the desert areas of Rajasthan, a silent and fascinating place; I should have liked to spend more time there exploring the sands and mountains and seeing the life of the desert people. From Pushkar I took a bus to the Pink City of Jaipur to see the few sights that it offered and take an elephant ride up to the Amber Fort. The elephant ride was so memorable; elephant's name was Raja and he left me with the impression that the elephant is indeed one of the most noble and majestic creatures that will ever walk upon the earth. From Jaipur it was onto Agra to see the Red Fort (it is built of red stone) and the Taj Mahal. The Taj is one the most magnificent buildings that one could ever hope to see. I paid the Taj several visits; morning being a favourite time, for it is then that it takes upon itself a most ethereal quality. From Agra I took a train to Delhi and after a few days made the journey to my current place of residence Varanasi (otherwise known as Benares).

Varanasi's main attraction for travellers and pilgrims alike are the Ghats, these are the steps down to the river Ganges and the temples and which run alongside Mother Ganga for what seems like the length of the City. There can be no other place on earth of all its likes. When I arrived here two days ago I took a room in a hotel that affords views onto a street with a life of

enthraling richness and variety. Yesterday I woke well before dawn and after morning ablutions with the usual cold water dousing I breakfasted in my room on toast and honey, copious amounts of hot coffee and Indian cigarettes. While it was still dark I left the hotel and made my way away across the street and down to the Ghats of Mother Ganga and started the day with a boat trip on the sacred river just as dawn was breaking.

Dawn breaks and Surya appears upon the horizon far beyond the other side of the river, rising over the forests and plains and shedding his light over sacred Varansi. He paints the sky and the vanishing clouds of morning time with grey, silver, red, gold, yellow and hues of purple. With His appearance the sound of drums and chants fill the air and the many devotees of the myriad of Hindu gods descend the Ghats to bathe in the waters of sacred Mother Ganga and wash away their sins; many stand in the purifying waters lost in supplication to whatever god they worship.

By 8.00am many of the morning bathers have left to go to their day and the life of the Ghats changes. Pilgrims linger by the temples or by the sacred river; a few are dressed in the orange robes of renunciation. Then come the flute sellers, hashish dealers and people pedalling all sorts of wares and the atmosphere of a market place begins to emerge from the crowds. By the steps, children play cricket or fly kites. A few Sadhus can be seen wandering by the river or sitting in quiet contemplation. By the side of Mother Ganga funeral pyres burn, always several at once and always in various stages of completion. Here, the stench of burning flesh fills the air and charred limbs can be seen protruding from the blazing piles of wood; a sight which drives home the salient points concerning the body's mortality. Brahmin priests preside over the cremations with funereal rites and instructions for the low caste

workers (Doms), who collect into baskets the bones of the cremated and cast the bones into the sacred waters of Mother Ganga. One may be even fortunate enough to see a black robed Aghori on his way to the cremation grounds. Aghori's are ascetics who belong to a cult of Shiva and eat the flesh of the dead. There can be doubt that Aghori's wield certain powers of the unseen kind. With the arrival of evening come the faithful to their gods, the curious and all manner of persons, down to one of the main Ghats where a Puja is made in the form of a fire ceremony as the sun sets behind the city. Night falls and with the darkening, the Ghats become silent lonely places, save for the odd sleeping Sadhu and the diseased dogs that always seem to be present here; and now over Mother Ganga the stars shine brightly in the black sky.

The beauty and craftsmanship invested in some of the buildings and temples is undeniably remarkable and sometimes breathtaking. The temples here however do not evoke in me the sublime warmth that our own, churches and sanctuaries do. I attribute this in part to familiarity, but more significantly to the living reality and reciprocating dynamics within the deeper recesses of the soul. In short the archetypal world. If we give consideration to the metaphysical idea that everything that comes into being in our material world is preceded by a numerous combination of archetypes, we may conclude that the fundamental archetypes for each race of people differ. The difference between the races are obvious and can be seen in that which emerges out of them; physical features, language, customs, traditions, art, sciences and the like and of course religion, which express very well the mysteries appertaining to the spiritual life. The perennial philosophy can be, as we have seen, compatible from one faith to another in comparative study. However, an individual who sets a foot upon the path

attempting to use language, divine names, a sanctuary, vestments, instruments and images that do not relate directly to archetypes existing within their own soul will eventually find themselves involved in insurmountable complexities. We may liken this as attempting to turn the lock to the inner sanctum with the wrong key. Comparative study of scripture can lead one to a point where they may have something eclectic and of value, but to attempt to blend various east-west practices and disciplines may leave nothing but a harmful syncretism. We have as you will recall, discussed this matter on many occasions so I know you will appreciate this is not a matter that can be understood purely by intellection, but can be intuited after the value of a little experience in the overall picture. The Occidental who is attracted by the mystique and quaintness of the religions of the east usually fails to see beyond the façade of their own making, mostly created out of their own misconceptions. The reality, (as with any bona fide path), is that there are some very austere precepts which are evident in the teachings, disciplines, temple design and so forth. I also make the observation that much in the religions of the east are shaped by the propensities of Saturn; having said this I must add then, that I perceive our own faith and approach to be somewhat of a Mercurial nature. I wonder if you will agree with this.

Upon those thoughts, I shall for now bid you a fond farewell. The time is coming when I shall be compelled to leave this vast country of colour, variety and paradoxes. In a day or two, I will be leaving Varanasi and somewhere along the way picking up the Grand Trunk Road of Kipling's Kim, as I head for Shimla in Himachal Pradesh before returning to Dehli to fly back to England. I wish you every goodness, love and God's blessing.

Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh - February 1998