

Lessons from India

Dusty Sandals on the Ganges: Experiences along India's Most Holy River

by Rob Sinclair



The following account is based on the experiences the author has had exploring the villages and peoples along the Ganges River. As you will find, his journey is far from complete. He will be undertaking this endeavor in numerous segments spaced out over the rest of his life. The following record is a snapshot of his adventure as recorded from his journal.

The Ganges

The Ganges is the river of India, a symbol of her culture and civilization flowing 2,500 km from its source in the Himalayan mountains to the sea at the Bay of Bengal. The river originates at Gaumukh (mouth of the cow), an ice cave at the foot of the Gangotri glacier, 14,000 feet high in the Himalayas.

For millions of Hindus, the Ganges is the most holy river on earth, revered both as a goddess and as a mother. Hindus are drawn to her banks to bathe for purification, to pray for boons to be granted, to drink its holy water and to immerse the ashes of their dead.

Background

My wife Carol and I walked to the source of the Ganges River in 1988. While there we visited a sadhu (holy man) living on top of the glacier in a rock cave dwarfed by the surrounding peaks 24,000 feet in height. This man had taken a vow of silence but motioned us to sit as we made eye contact. He proceeded to prepare a meal of rice and lentils. We were overwhelmed by the stark reality of the creation around us and the unassuming hospitality provided for us.

Some years later an article in National Geographic magazine inspired me to consider walking the entire length of the Ganges River. Here was a way I could combine adventure with a time of personal reflection, a prayer walk for the nation of India and an opportunity to meet and speak with scores of people living in the villages of India along the great Gangetic Plain. I would also seek in some way to identify with India's peoples in their simplicity of life.

The walk would be undertaken in segments spaced over a number of years. This is an account of two segments of my journey along the Ganges!

Rob spent 15 years living and working in North India. Currently, he travels to the sub-continent twice a year to foster and establish relationships and complete his journey along the Ganges. He is a member of a society which provides ministry tools for grass-roots Indian Christians working in church planting and evangelism in North India.

A Walk Along The Ganges

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The daytime temperatures are reaching 42° C. I am thankful for the light, loose, cotton kurta (Indian shirt) I am wearing. The sun reflecting off the sand hurts the eyes. Following the Ganges has become increasingly difficult. The plain that holds the river at full flood

The sun begins to dip. I see a village along the bank of the river. Earlier in the day a herder who had brought his cows and buffalo to the Ganges had informed me of this place with a temple dedicated to Vidhur, one of the Hindu deities.

An ashram or spiritual retreat center has been constructed on the banks of

and to sit quietly enjoying the cool evening air. We both sleep outside on the verandah on cots underneath mosquito nets. It is too hot inside the rooms.

I hear him rolling up his mosquito net and straightening out his bedding. I check my clock. 3:00 am. I hear him rousing the other ashramites in their quarters, singing and chanting softly.

*He tells me that the focus of my meditation should be on “love and to serve.”
He says that I should focus my thoughts on Christ on the cross.*

during the monsoon is at least two kilometers wide. At the moment the river is a narrow band of water snaking back and forth to either side of the flood plain. Sometimes I am right beside the river and other times I am just following a sandy plain.

Fragile yet obstinate flowers occasionally grace the sandy surface. At times there are tributaries to cross, the last one was chest deep. I strip to a loin cloth and carry my backpack and clothes above my head to the other side. The red gumcha (thin towel) I wear as a loin cloth dries in three minutes in the hot wind. The gumcha goes back on my head.

Along the flood plain farmers are growing vegetables. None of these farmers has permanent structures here, just simple A-frames made of straw standing about four feet high at the peak under which they rest in the heat of the day and sleep at night. I follow a line as best I can, from one A-frame to another. They are my only hope for drinking water.

Sometimes a hand pump is sunk into the sand to get water to irrigate vegetables. A farmer calls me to come for some water. I thankfully fill my half-liter water bottle. He gives me three cucumbers. The water has a strong rusty taste and the iodine I add does little to improve the flavor. The cucumber however is great relief to a parched throat.

Around noon that day a stand of Eucalyptus trees rises from the flood plain. I rest in the shade while the sun reaches its climax. Another cucumber becomes lunch.

the river next to the temple. I enter the ashram grounds and inquire about a place to stay. Two young men assure me of accommodation but first I should meet the swami. He is conducting satsang (singing and prayers) so I am given a seat on his veranda.

A kindly old gentleman wearing a white dhoti (loin cloth), a white sacred thread and a thin white cotton towel draped around his neck greets me with folded hands. He tells me that I will be staying in the room next to his. He arranges for tea to be served in his room. He sits crossed legged on the bed and I sit on a chair. We talk. He explains that his whole focus in life is to be conscious that “I am not this, I am that.” A long discourse follows. “My body changes with age. I am not that. I remember things that happened to me in childhood. I am not that little boy, but I am that consciousness.” It is the essential teaching of Advaita (non-dualistic) Hinduism.

He makes arrangements for me to get settled in the next room, to take a bath and to have an evening meal with him. The swami asks me what time I normally get up in the morning. I tell him, with a sense of pride and the feeling that I can easily accommodate his schedule, “5:30 am.” It is customary in rural India to regulate your retiring and rising by the sun. I see the swami’s face fall a little. He says “We rise at 4:00 am and have satsang in my room at 5:30.” This early rising time is long before the sun gets up but I hurriedly assure him that I can make it for the satsang. After the meal I go into the town to get my sandals repaired and return to wander the tree filled grounds of the ashram

I check my clock, 4:00 am. At 4:30 the mosque in the village begins its broadcast of the Muslim call to prayer. I concede defeat and get up. The swami is pleased and asks me to come to his room for tea and further conversation. He is eager to show respect to me, a follower of Christ. He tells me that the focus of my meditation should be on “love and to serve.” He says that I should focus my thoughts on Christ on the cross. I should think about Christ taking the nails in his body. I should think about how many nails he bore. I should think about his words “Father forgive them because they do not know what they are doing.” I should remember that he did not think of his own pain. He did not think of his own life. “This is love, this is to serve.”

I am moved as I think of Christ, in this place, with this old man. He continues “Then you too will know that you are not this, but that.” To him the Christ event is just a technique in his search for supreme consciousness. How I long for him to know Christ in a true way.

The next day on the river is grueling, few farmers with their A-frame huts and hand pumps. Not a single tree under which to rest in the heat of the day. I walk all day. Long dry spells. Increasingly sore feet. I cover forty kilometers. My thoughts are not focused on prayer any more, just survival. “Where will I find the next fill for my water bottle?” “Is anyone going to provide shelter for me tonight?” “Why am I doing this anyway?” In the late afternoon I pull away from the river and head back to the distant embankment. I walk to a town and find a dharamsala (rest house next to a temple) where I am given shelter for the night.

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Several months later, in Lucknow, capital of India's largest state Uttar Pradesh, Moses Parmar, a young Indian friend of mine approaches me. "Rob, I have always wanted to come with you on your walk along the Ganges River. Can I join you on the next leg of your journey?" I assure him that I will be thrilled to have his companionship.

I scribble out a list of things for him to bring in a backpack and we arrange a time and location to meet and begin the walk at the end of the month.

The day arrives. I wait at the station for Moses' incoming train. To my delight he has 'recruited' two more colleagues to join us. They are Augustine Kamble from Maharashtra in central India and J.S. Raja from Tamilnadu in south India.

We reach the Ganges river at Garhmukteswar where I ended my previous leg of the walk, adjust the shoulder straps on our backpacks and start the trek out onto the sandy bank of the Ganges flood plain.

Moses: "Rob, the list of things you gave me to bring on this walk made no mention of food."

Rob: "No."

Moses: "So what are we going to eat?"

Rob: "I don't know. We'll find out."

We trudge on in silence.

Moses: "Rob, where are we going to stay tonight?"

Rob: "I don't know. We'll find out."

We come across some bushes with smooth, round, red and green berries. Moses calls them 'bor' in his native Gujarati language and tells me that they are 'ber' in Hindi. He reminds me about seeing these on the railway stations in remote parts of southern Bihar where we both used to work. They were being sold by simple village folk eking out a living.

The berry is dry and tasteless, not a gourmet meal, but in this wilderness a sign of hope in the face of impending starvation. An abandoned bird's nest lies on the pathway. Moses picks it up and explains that the male bird of this species builds the main section of the nest from straw. If a female likes it she inhabits the nest and builds a narrow entrance hanging down from the bottom about one foot long. This entrance provides protection from snakes and all other would be invaders. A few minutes later we come upon a tree from which a number of these nests are hanging. We watch for some time to see if the birds will appear but are disappointed.

In the late afternoon we come to a tributary of the Ganges. It looks as though we will have to strip down and wade across.

As we contemplate this a rough wooden-plank boat ferrying people from a sand bar in the middle of the river comes into view. The boatmen

catch sight of us and motion for us to wait. They discharge their passengers and then, with a bamboo twenty feet long, pole the boat up river to where we are standing. They take us down river to the landing point.

The boatmen wonder who we are, what we are doing and where we are going. They are impressed when we tell them of our walk along the Ganges. "Where will you spend the night?" they ask. We don't know.

"Continue along the river to a village called Shakara Tila. At this village ask for Mahipal. Tell him your story and he will arrange everything." We follow this advice. Mahipal is not at home but in his name the villagers take us to the village guesthouse, give us tea and assure us that we can stay here for the night.

"What caste do you belong to?"

A common question. So much depends upon what caste you come from.

The villagers explain that everyone in this village is of the Khevat caste. Most villages are made up of a variety of castes, each caste living in their own section of the village. It seems that here everyone is of the same community. We don't know much about the Khevat caste but as our discussion continues it becomes evident it is a caste of boatmen.

We are unsure how to answer their question. As followers of Christ we do not adhere to the caste system, especially the hierarchical aspects which place one caste above another. However there is a social dimension to the caste system, which provides order and balance in society.

After a moment's hesitation Moses says "Isai jati" (followers of Christ caste). Although this is not an official caste designation it does identify who we are and meets with acceptance by the community. We are offered their full hospitality.

Cots are brought from different corners of the village and furnish the room in which we will sleep. An evening meal is prepared. We sit on the string cots in the darkness broken only by a single oil lamp with a small wick. The meal is "chat pati" (very spicy), so spicy I am glad for the dim light so that no one sees the tears streaming down my face.



My companions also comment on the intensity of the chili in the food but it is delicious and we eat our fill.

That night as we lie on these string cots in the cozy mud walled room covered by warm quilts and with full stomachs we marvel aloud at this provision and my companions ask “Is this how it is in Canada?”

The next morning at 6:00 am as we pack to leave the villagers insist on making us breakfast. We decline. They have already cared for us magnificently and we need to be on our way to take advantage of the cooler part of the day.

A heavy mist hugs the river and its banks. We thrill to this walk in the early morning. It is silent except for the plodding of our sandals on the footpath. Ancient shrines and industrious fishermen materialize out of the fog. Three hours later we are ready for a break and a cup of tea. We inquire about a teashop. “This is a village!” a woman says but immediately offers to make us tea.

We sit in her courtyard and she calls the older women. We are given a full inspection and then tea is prepared. Some men arrive from the fields to join us and to engage in conversation. We begin with the topic of caste. This is a Rajput village. Rajputs are considered ‘high caste,’ second only to the Brahmin or priestly caste. Our description of ourselves as ‘Isai jati’ is accepted and the conversation turns to village matters.

We learn the things that are of concern to the villagers. Unfulfilled promises of electricity from the state government. The distance children have to go to further their education after they complete class five at the local school. Erosion of their land by the fickle encroachments of the Ganges River. The price of fertilizers. The lack of medical treatment.

We also hear of their preference for village life, the administration of village affairs through a council of elected elders called a Panchayat, and their own method of handling disputes by sitting down together, all night if necessary, to come to a compromise. As we talk more men arrive.

One of them is the Brahmin priest who has been called to meet the strangers walking along the Ganges River. This priest performs the religious rituals for several villages in the area. He speaks eloquently using many Sanskrit words and phrases. Addressing me he says something to the effect “I can see by your calling card that it is of a different variety.” We are momentarily puzzled until Raja recognizes this as a polite way of asking me where I am from. We introduce ourselves. The priest says “These introductions are not really necessary because they may only be partial. God may come to us in disguise, as a stranger. You may be Ram walking among us.” We are moved by this comment of respect.

We are not Ram walking among them but we are the representatives of Christ. We want to be the “sweet fragrance of Christ” among them. We also realize that we carry this perfume, this treasure, in vessels of clay. The greatest blessing that we impart to those we meet along the river are the gospels in Hindi that we have carried in our backpacks for this purpose.

We have been looking for the optimum location along the Ganges at which to bathe and wash our clothes. There have been many sections where we would not want to do this. Around noon we come to a spot where the river is flowing rapidly close to the bank. A perfect place. One by one we muster our courage, enter the water and plunge beneath the surface.

“Don’t drop the soap!” Wonderful refreshment.

On the last evening of the walk we are given shelter in the home of a farmer of the Gurjar caste. Once again the hospitality is bounteous and we go to sleep with full stomachs under warm quilts. During the night foxes howl in the moonlight.

A ‘short-cut’ back to the river next morning leaves us groping our way through tall grasses reaching fifteen feet into the air. This area is the ancient habitation of tigers and crocodiles. The crocodiles have been hunted to extinction and the tigers are now protected in Corbett National Park on the other side of the river. Our only concern is for the cobra and his cousins but we meet none of them.

The journey concludes at the town of Ahar. The square mud houses are terraced up an ancient embankment of the river. At the bus stand we celebrate with a cup of tea. The tea is served in a traditional Indian teacup, a disposable clay vessel. It reminds us of the words of Sadhu Sundar Singh to present “the living water in an Indian cup.”

The past three days have taken us about sixty kilometers from where we started. I have now walked over 500 km along the river. There are still over 2000 kilometers left to go. We are tired and limping from blisters on the feet. My three companions say to me “Rob, we are coming with you all the way to the end of the river.” **IJFM**



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