

INDIA

# Wandering spirit

The rites and rituals of ancient India are still shaping Southeast Asian culture

Text & Photos by **Tate Zandstra**

"Come on sir, we must hurry now," came an impassioned voice from the other side of my door. The time was nearly midnight, but I was awake in my misery, choking on the thick smoke of a mosquito coil, fending off legions of the vicious beasts. My caller had a cycle rickshaw waiting outside the hotel, certainly the cheapest hovel in Haridwar. In any case, it was the only place left to stay during the Kumbh Mela, the largest religious gathering in India and – as the Indians like to boast – the world.

I came to India hoping to trace the Ganges from source to terminus a quest doomed to failure from the outset. Intent on meeting ash-smearing naked Sadhus, India's radical ascetics, I set off for the Himalayan caves in Gaumukh glacier, the source of the Ganges. Yet an impassable wall of snow stopped me in my tracks. Not to worry, I still had around 1,900km or so of wonders to wander downstream. Here I would trace the origins of Buddhism, Hinduism and Asian Islam, three religions that have played a profound role in shaping the Southeast Asia of today.

I climbed into the rickshaw and headed to the river. Haridwar is one of four spots where Garuda, the winged steed of Hindu god Vishnu, is said to have rested during a battle with demons over a pitcher of divine nectar of immortality. Now tens of millions of people flock to this city every three years to bathe in the blue-green water of the holy Ganges river, believing it will cleanse them of their sins and free them from the cycle of life and rebirth. So we set off my chariot powered not by Garuda, but by a feeble-looking old man.

The cold river flowed swiftly, meandering through the massive bridges and ghats of Haridwar. My guide took an anchor chain in hand and lowered himself into the current. Even late at night there were hundreds of Indians hanging around the river. When I

balked at entering the water, the same hundreds stopped me; implored me to jump in. There was no point resisting, so I stripped before the tittering mob, posed for hundreds of cell phone photos, then jumped into the icy current, dunked three times and got out – quickly. I had a train to Delhi and it was leaving soon.

New Delhi, I reflected, is as important to new India as Haridwar is to old spiritual India. With the arrival of the Timurids in the 16th century, Delhi became the seat of Islamic power within the Mughal Empire. A descendant of Genghis Khan, Timurid ruler Zahir-uddin Mohammad Babur channelled the ferocity of his forefather to take the Indian subcontinent, drastically influencing the region's art, architecture and literature.

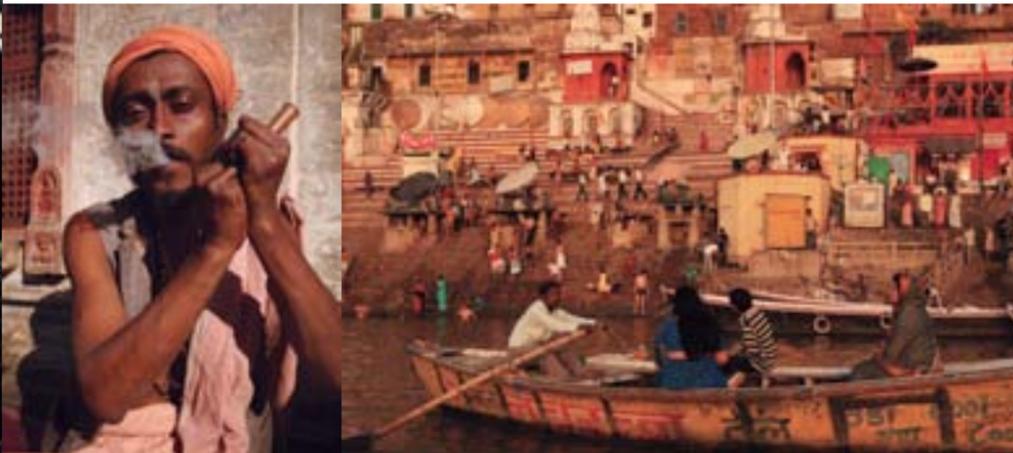
The spice trade had been firmly established since before Caesar crossed the Rubicon, but with an Islamic India, Arab traders were able to ply the waters of the Far East more fervently. Once Islam spread to Aceh, at the northwestern tip of Sumatra, there was no going back. Soon such far-flung places as Ternate, Tidore and the Bandas – the original Spice Islands – became Sultanates.

This action in oceanic Southeast Asia humbled and dispersed the Hindu empires, which had flourished for more than 1,000 years, pushing Hinduism in the region to its final refuge in Bali.

The crowning achievement of Indian Islamic architecture is in Agra. Viewed in the soft light of early morning, the Taj Mahal appears ethereal, luminescent white marble cloaked in mist rising from the Ganges. It really is impressive to see, no matter how many postcards or tourism commercials you have been subjected to. The irony for a nation that is overwhelmingly Hindu is that its most instantly recognisable building is a structure inspired by classical Arab architecture. The irony for the Taj Mahal, a monument to love, is that Agra's acidic, polluted air is attacking the edifice. >

*"We set off, my chariot powered not by Garuda, but by an old feeble man"*

*Ascetic virtue: estimates suggest there are up to 5 million Sadhus in India. They are widely respected for their renunciation of material and sexual attachments*



Religious stamp: the Mahayana Buddhist monument was abandoned in the 14th century with the decline of Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms in Java (left); Sahdus smoke charas, hand-made cannabis hashish (middle); Varanasi is one of the most important Hindu pilgrimage destinations

On the very edge of Rajasthan – the very dry, hot edge – lays Orccha. An old Hindu temple complex, its rising fluting domes immediately call Angkor Wat to mind. Of all the towns that line the Ganges, Orccha is a place worth resting your head – especially as a night in an old Raja's palace only costs a few dollars.

While in Orccha, I found it easier to imagine the progression of Hinduism across Southeast Asia. With the arrival of Tamil traders to the region, Hinduism slowly but surely left its mark. The Cham, now an extinct Kingdom that covered parts of Vietnam and Cambodia, adopted Hinduism; employed Sanskrit as a sacred language and borrowed heavily from Indian art and architecture. Like many Khmer temples, Angkor Wat was built as an architectural allegory of the Hindu religion. In fact, the history of other Hindu empires in Southeast Asia can be traced through the trail of temples that scatter the region: Majapahit in Java; Srivijaya in Sumatra; Bagan in Myanmar; and, perhaps the best known, Angkor in Cambodia.

I left Orccha feeling mellow, blissfully unaware of the contrast that lay ahead in Varanasi. Barefoot pilgrims picked their way through filthy alleys; serene sadhus begged for rupees beside a tea stand; yogis led prayer with a loudspeaker; foreign tourists revelled in or reviled the dirty chaos; faithful Hindus waded

waist-deep into the polluted Ganges; some people stood with open arms to salute the sun while others waited for death; un-touchables tended to charred bones. Photographs or words rarely capture the intensity of Varanasi, Hindu's holiest city, where to die releases you from the birth-death cycle of suffering.

The following morning, I went by rowing boat to see the pandemonium on the ghats from a safer, more impersonal distance. The boatman quickly informed me that he planned to go to the bridge later to dive for coins wealthy pilgrims dropped into the fetid holy river. A body floated by.

I quickly reached my saturation point with India. Some travellers spend months, years even, wandering the republic, letting their hair go matted; their bodyweight drop off and their intestinal parasites accumulate. I realised I was not one such hearty adventurer. Sun, sand, the ocean blue and vibrant green jungles were OK, but I now had a serious skin infection working its way up my leg as I boarded yet another train for Kolkata.

I had gained something of the veteran Indian traveller's Hindu cow-like composure, the true test of which is navigating a train station. Swirling hordes of thousands engulf you, screaming, chattering, jostling, rushing the doors and spitting betel-tobacco-coconut mixtures called pang.

The long stretch between Varanasi and Kolkata is really where Buddhism originated. Although Lumbini, Buddha's birthplace, is in what is now Nepal, several of the specific Buddhist sites of pilgrimage are in India; though its reach extended to Southeast Asia.

Fleeing some unknown threat, the Tai-kedai linguistic groups (Shan, Thai and Lao), who had trickled southward, found themselves squeezed in a no-man's land disputed by the powerful Khmer and the tribal Burmese. Beset initially on all sides, the early Thai competed with indigenous groups such as Mon and Hmong (today largely marginalised), but never gained much footing until Theravada Buddhism found its way in along overland trade routes.

The religion-philosophy offered the Thai an identity; what would become the foundation of their Kingdom. India's science, governance and mythological traditions seeped in to Thai society to the extent Thailand's national epic, *The Ramakian*, is derived from the Indian *Ramayana* epic. Hindu gods often appear on Bangkok street corner shrines and the Thai alphabet, as well as monastic text and chant, has Sanskrit roots.

Cultural exchange still occurs today, but its form has changed. With more than a billion citizens, poverty defines much of life in one of the world's fastest-growing economies. Financial desperation pushes many to seek work overseas, taking with them a little bit of India. Just as classical Southeast Asian culture is based upon a foundation partly built by India, so too is the quickly modernising Southeast Asia cityscape. ■

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