



FOREWORD

Varanasi, the holy city of the Ganges, is India in microcosm. “There is liberation for all creatures here,” chortled the near-naked *sadhu*, delighted by the notion of donkeys reaching Heaven. “Not only people; but birds and animals—even mosquitoes—attain *moksha* here, too!”

“How about Christians? Or Moslems?” I asked, mischievously.

“Of course! They are worth more than the donkeys!”

“But not cows,” I mused silently as a sacred white bovine pushed past with leisurely sovereignty.

Below, flames crackled eerily in the pre-dawn light and smoke rose ethereally from the cremation pyres, while lepers and limbless beggars filled the air with their murmurings.

The *sadhu* assured me that Shiva was here, whispering words of immortality into the ear of the dying that crowd into Varanasi in hopes of reaching Nirvana directly; and in incarnate form as a newly arrived corpse, bound in white cloth, that to my side was being dipped into the Ganges before being hoisted onto a pyre. Far off, a vulture pecked at a human body floating in the midst of the river.

The Ganges flowed silver-gray like olive oil, its banks shrouded in ghostly mist. Then the sun rose and burned through the veil, splashing the city with vermilion fire and revealing a gilded crescent of temples, spires, minarets, and palaces suspended high above the river and extending to the misty horizon. It was an incredible sight, the whole riverfront infused with an atmosphere of devotion that spread like the rays of the rising sun.

The steep, looming *ghats*—stairways—that lead down to the Ganges were flooded with surreal scenes and motion. Forests of bamboo umbrellas rose upon the *ghats* like giant mushrooms. Beneath each sat an orange-clad Brahmin, daubed with sectarian marks: Oracles of the esoteric, like the hookah-

smoking caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland*. There were *sadhu* ascetics aplenty, smeared in ashes from the funeral pyres and dressed in loin-cloths or naked as the day they were born, performing their yoga exercises or sitting cross-legged, inert as reptiles, in the lotus position.

And color! Women gorgeously costumed in silk saris as red as bright lipstick and blue as the morning sky streamed in rainbows up and down the vast stairways. “[A] stunning, vivid, brilliant... storm of sweetpea blossoms passing on the winds of a hurricane,” wrote Mark Twain. Their garments clung to their bodies as they waded breast-deep into the soupy river and muttered invocations while ladling the holy liquid up with cupped hands before forming tiny steeples with their palms in gestures of benediction. Ablutions complete, they streamed back up the stairs carrying brass pots of Ganges water to pour on holy shrines.

The entirety of my experience was macabre, mesmerizing, and transcendent in equal measure.

Perusing *India: West Meets East/East Meets West*, by Jeremy Woodhouse and Abhishek Hajela, unleashed my own psychotropic memories and kaleidoscopic emotions like a mind-bending Bollywood movie. Curated thematically, the paired images of this stupendous coffee-table book offer a breathtaking visual panegyric to a nation as stimulating and hallucinogenic as an LSD/opiate high.

Whenever I’m asked, “What’s your favorite place you’ve been?” I answer without equivocation: “India!” The place is a full-on sensory assault almost orgasmic in its intensity.

Most cities in this jam-packed country are a kind of benign Bedlam. A cacophonous calliope of sights, sounds, and smells that are like catnip to all six senses. The incessant honking of chaotic traffic. The competing cries of peddlers and merchants. The blaring loudspeakers of mosques and temples. The clacking of looms. The tinny beating of hammers on metal. The deafening

musical ensembles of weddings and festivals. And the hypnotic resonance of the *sitar* floating on air heavy with spices and incense, sweet-smelling oils, diesel fumes and, alas, the noxious smell of cow dung and sewage unnervingly underfoot.

I recall how once, while awaiting a train at Agra station, a burlap bundle suddenly stirred, rolled over, and turned into a person. He rose, waddled like a duck on his haunches, then squatted with his rump over the platform edge and leisurely defecated in *flagrante delicto*. A mangy dog hovered warily in the wings, waiting to hungrily lick at the excrement.

India is not for the faint-hearted. It's a love-it-or-hate-it pandemonic perplexity that transports you out of your comfort zone. And thank goodness! The very minimum that can be said is that it's never boring. Not least because it's an entire microcontinent unto itself. From the coconut palm fringed beaches of Kerala to the snow-girt Himalayas, its terrains—and cultures—are kaleidoscopic.

“For a photographer, India is without question the most photo rich place on the planet,” says Woodhouse, who was raised the first eight years of his life across the border in Pakistan yet, ironically, first visited India only in 2005. That two-month sojourn kindled a natal passion. Hooked, he's returned more than a dozen times to explore and photograph India tip to toe... from Tamil Nadu to Kerala, Sikkim to Calcutta, and Kashmir to Ladakh, even Dharamshala for the Dalai Lama's birthday.

“I've never had a calling to go and do yoga up at Rishikesh,” adds Woodhouse. “But I'll relax for hours in a goat pen watching nomads combing out the fine Pashmina wool from the necks of their flock.” And, indeed, we see in this magnificent collection of spellbinding images the Gujjar goat herders against snowy peaks. There, too, are the Kashmiris selling produce from their canoes on Srinigar's Dal Lake... And the muscular, sweating Kushti wrestlers... The chai wallahs with their tin kettles... The tinkers and

tailors and millers and porters... The *sadhus* and Ladhaki monks... And an entire spectrum of captivating portraits spanning the Pantone chart of blazing color. Of his 110 images, it's notable that all but 19 are of people—the variegated living embodiment of a pulsating nation of 1.35 billion souls.

Every image displays an intensity that is one of the hallmarks of India. And in a nation steeped in religiosity, no small number speak to its spiritual reverence.

“I'm amazed by the faith that fires the country,” says Woodhouse. “The fact that millions will travel to an auspicious spot just to take a dip in a holy river. It's this faith that brings me back to India time after time, whether it be to Varanasi, or the Kumbh Mela—the big Daddy of all festivals—or to Chhat Puja, Holi, Dasher, Durga Puja, Pushkar Camel Fair, Hemis Festival... the list goes on.”

The flip side—quite literally—to Woodhouse's *India: West Meets East* is Abhishek Hajela's *India: East Meets West*. The beautifully curated coffee-table book is a twofer. Born, raised, and still resident in New Delhi, Hajela—a Nikon Photo Contest award-winner—offers his own insider's vision.

“Photography comes with human connections. I don't just take a photo and walk away. One must take the time to talk, wait and observe this great game of life,” Hajela says of a portfolio bursting with passion and energy. In particular, he has made a study of India's *naga sadhus* (naked devotees) an intensive photographic project driven by a passion to understand their ascetic lifestyle. His work is informed by a goal to capture people in their environment and to tell their unique life-stories through visual imagery. Whether it's a naga *sadhu* swinging upside down on a rope vine... A bearded old Rajasthani wrapping his head with a 10-meter-long blood-red turban... Or women in saris and *ghoongat* headscarves as colorful as Crayola crayons... Every image is profoundly compelling.

Both photographers focus almost exclusively on India's tumultuous social context. Further depth is added by a few Himalayan and Rajasthan landscapes, painted elephants, Royal Bengal tigers in Bandhavgarh and Ranthambore National Parks, and a sprinkling of artistic cityscapes or others depicting traffic mayhem. Noticeably absent are the touristic clichés. No Palace on Wheels or Red Fort or Ajanta and Ellora Caves. Even the Taj Mahal—undisputably the most beautiful building on Earth—appears solely as a blurry background to Hajela's statements on Indian life. (“I think I've almost achieved putting together a book without the classics pics of the Taj!” Woodhouse jokes.) Far more appealing and challenging to the psyche is Hajela's image of rats scampering in Deshnoke's Karni Mata temple. And, juxtaposed, a telephoto full-face close-up of an ash-dusted *sadhu* bedecked in nut-and-berry necklaces and marigold garlands being nibbled by a white rat on his shoulder.

It's this surreal, other-worldly, double-take quality that makes India such a draw.

India: West Meets East/East Meets West masterfully captures this unrepentable quality of exotic drama. The result is a tribute to an astoundingly rich and varied land whose seething mass of humanity is, in the popular mind-view, often reduced to a well-known trope of penury and pathos and pain. And yet the duo's seductive photography portrays, above all, the warm, tender side of India's quixotic and endearing humanity. “The people are some of the kindest I have met,” notes Woodhouse, who fondly recalls innumerable random acts of kindness. “I love the simplicity and free-flowing nature of village life. The tribes of Rajasthan are especially close to my heart,” adds Hajela.

That the duo have handsomely attained this ambition with sensitivity and compassion is the greatest compliment of all.

Christopher P. Baker, May 2020

Christopher P. Baker – the Lowell Thomas Award 2008 ‘Travel Journalist of the Year’ – has been a leading travel writer and photographer for more than three decades.

A former contributing editor for *Far East Traveler*, *International Travel News*, and Taj Hotels magazine, he has written and photographed for more than 200 of the world's leading publications, from BBC, CNN and *Elle* to *National Geographic*, *Newsweek* and *Playboy*. His self-illustrated stories on India have appeared in dozens of publications and earned Baker three Gold Awards from the Pacific Asia Travel Association.

Baker has also written and photographed more than 30 travel books for such publishers as Dorling Kindersley, Lonely Planet, and National Geographic, including his large-format coffee-table book, *Cuba Classics: A Celebration of Vintage American Automobiles*. Plus, his photography has appeared in scores of calendars, catalogs, coffee-table books, and magazines. His image of a man with horse in Cuba, published in *National Geographic*, won the North American Travel Journalist Association Awards ‘Gold Prize.’

He has led photo tours worldwide for Lindblad Expeditions, National Geographic Expeditions, and Santa Fe Photographic Workshops, and he currently leads tours for Jim Cline Tours and Lumaria Workshops. His website is www.christopherpbaker.com.