

Next Stop – Benares

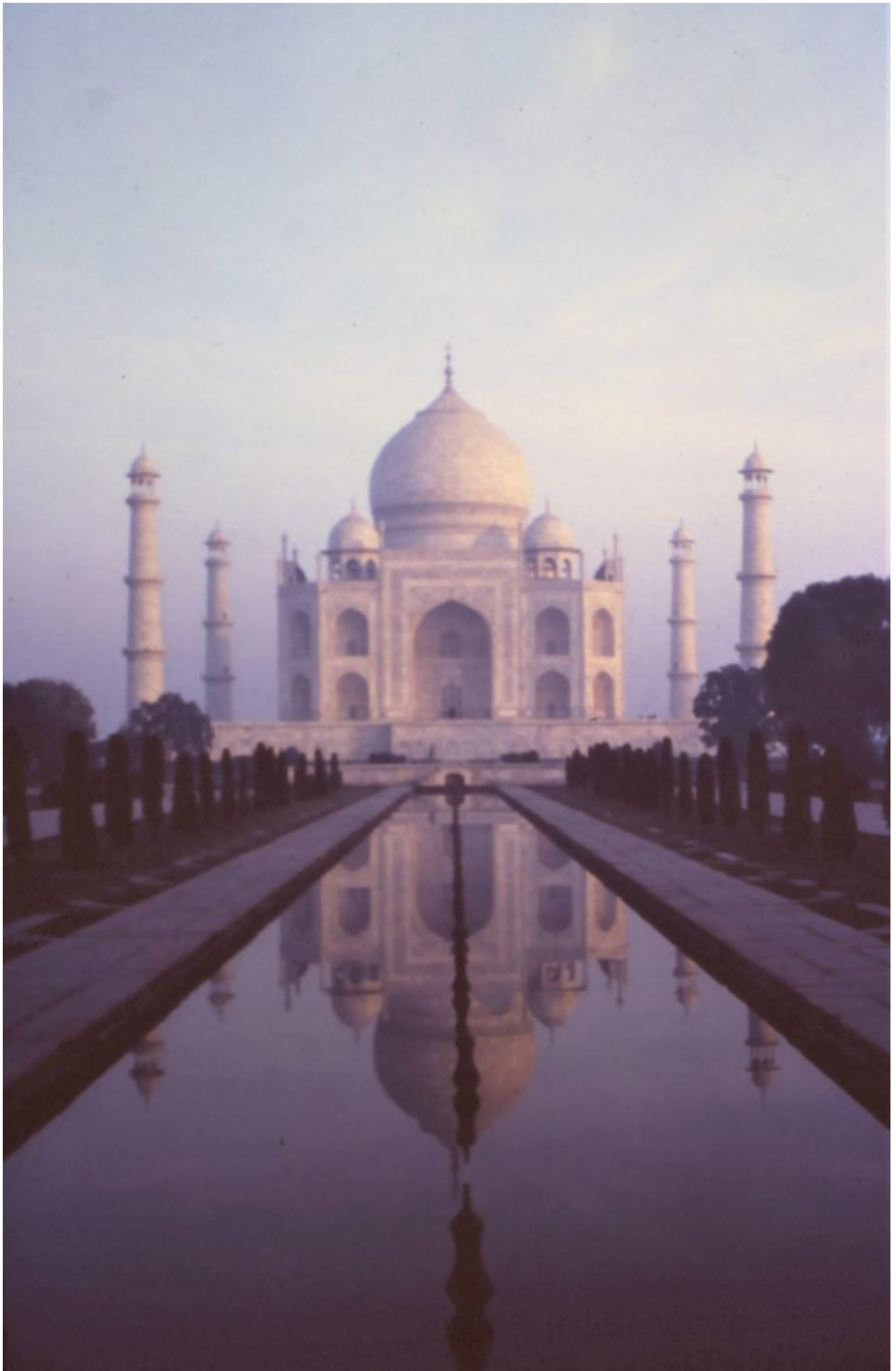
At the beginning of December, I fled the cold in Darjeeling and headed back to my home away from home with Jim and Charlotte Stringham in Lucknow. They continued to show me unconditional love and to make me feel welcome. Whenever they went to service or prayer meetings, I tagged along. Here's what I wrote back to my parents about my experience of Christianity in India.

“One of the facets of India that has amazed me most is Christianity. One expects to meet Christians in a ‘Christian’ country, such as America proports to be. The Christians one meets in India don't *seem* astonishing because they stand out in relief against people of other religions. They *are* astonishing because they are seriously trying to live the life that Christ lived—something I have witnessed little of in America.”

I continued to write (remember that I'm still an unbeliever): “The most important thing that is required is for everyone, YES!, ME TOO, to realize that they are not serious enough about being Christians. They need to surrender their lives completely to God—this is the only thing that really is effective. Otherwise, we are leading lives of rebellion and are no use to God besides which our rebellion keeps us from receiving God's gifts, which He wants to give to us.”

After a few days, I climbed aboard my usual IIIrd class sleeper to New Delhi to check in at the embassy and collect any mail being held for me. I made a quick side trip to Agra to see the Taj Mahal and Red Fort. Unlike some tourist attractions, there

was nothing disappointing about the Taj Mahal. It is a gorgeous edifice with perfect proportions, a true labor of love. The carving of the marble and the inlays of semi-precious stones are breathtaking. I stayed in one of the least savory hotels I visited while in India. I can testify that it had a truly "gray atmosphere" and that there were "flash latrins".



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From Agra, I moved on to Varanasi (Benares). Even as an unbeliever, I felt that there was something spiritually dark about Varanasi. As one person put it "half the people are stoned and the other half are waiting to die." To friends, I wrote, "A person is supposed to gain the equivalent of 'grace' by dying and having his/her body burned and ashes scattered in the most sacred of all Indian rivers—the Ganges. It's a sobering thing to watch a body burn on a funeral pyre—really brings home the futility of most ventures on earth."



I wrote my parents, "Took a nice boat ride along the Ganges and saw the people bathing and performing their religious duties. Spent quite a bit of time at the burning ghats. Males are brought in white shrouds, females in red. The ghats run around the clock. Some of the bodies are wrapped with garlands of flowers, which passing cows casually nibble off."

Until the early 1800s, widows were burned alive (often unwillingly) on their husbands funeral pyres, a practice called sati, which was supposedly supported by the Hindu scriptures. The great Indian missionary, William Carey, took a lead role in convincing the British authorities to finally outlaw the practice in 1829. Carey and some notable Indian scholars of the Sanskrit language argued convincingly that there was no support for this horrific practice in the Hindu sacred writings.

I will save the account of my visit to the nearby village of Sarnath for a later post.