





FOR MANY ST. OLAF STUDENTS, INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL IS ALMOST COMMONPLACE. BUT FOR A GROUP OF STUDY TRAVELERS SPENDING TWO WEEKS IN INDIA — WITNESSING THE GLORY OF ITS PAST AND THE CHALLENGES OF ITS PRESENT — LIFE ON THE ROAD OFFERED A RARE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE.

INNOCENCE ABROAD

By Amy Gage

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAC GIMSE '58 AND ELLEN TEIGLAND '73

THE BAY OF BENGAL stretches as far as the eye can see, with crashing waves reminiscent of the Pacific Ocean in California. The water looks darker and dirtier, as does the sand, but the power of the tide is never lost on a Midwesterner. It is daybreak in late October, monsoon season in this Asian land. Warm rain falls steadily, smoothing my skin. A lean man moves through yoga asanas on a rock, maintaining effortless concentration as I walk by. A mother bathes her children in the ocean down the way.

And then I stumble over an abandoned tennis shoe and see human feces on the sand and hear the growls of a dog pack as the rabid animals roam for garbage, and the reality confronts me: This is India.

"I've never been anywhere with the contrasts of India," says Paula Webster, a semi-retired cardiac nurse in St. Paul who last visited the country in 1971. She was one of 27 travelers on a St. Olaf Center for Lifelong Learning (CLL) trip to southern India, led by Professor Emeritus of Art Mac Gimse '58 and his wife, retired psychiatric nurse Jackie Gimse.

India glows with vibrant colors: in women's clothing, the verdant landscape and the local markets, centers of commerce and community.

Ancient and wise, and yet determined to be modern, the India we visited for 16 days last October was equal parts paradise, poverty and progress. One of the world's great and historic cultures, a country once rich in natural resources, India repeatedly has been invaded and pillaged — for centuries even before the British. The land we saw looked tired.

We saw temples and elaborate statues that took years to construct, paying homage to the hundreds of gods that Hindus worship. We saw families living in tin huts by garbage dumps, with no access to clean or running water. We saw villages where men squat and laugh while women cook and tend children or work in the fields. We saw rice fields and a verdant landscape with infinite shades of green that looked like photos of pre-war Vietnam.



We visited two Christian colleges in a country that is predominantly Hindu and talked with students about the individualistic impulses that are changing the Indian family structure as American companies spread their wealth and influence around the cities. We visited an “untouchables” village where those Christian students are helping residents build schools and irrigate their land to push past the confines of the country’s lowest caste. Then we returned that evening to Christ College in Bangalore, the “Silicon Valley of the East,” where the campus is within walking distance of gated condos and an American-style shopping mall.

Amid it all, my enduring memories are of crowds and color, of streets packed with rickshaws, motor scooters, diesel-powered cars and buses overflowing with shoppers and commuters. The food is healthful and delicious; the public bathrooms are filthy, by Western standards, with “Turkish toilets” that require women to squat over smelly basins rather than sit in deodorized comfort.

In a culture where the majority of the population believes in reincarnation, people strive to be gentle and tolerant in this life so they may progress to better circumstances in the next. And yet animals are mistreated and women are abused, because they are seen as lower beings — as having earned their fate by karmic misdeeds in the past.

“India is an entity unto itself. It’s a very mysterious country. With my finite brain, I can never quite understand how India works,” says Diane Scharmer-Downie, a fourth-grade teacher in Winona, Minnesota, who visited India with the Gimses last October and on their first CLL trip to India in 2005.

“Religion is so powerful in India. It’s a cul-

tural phenomenon that we aren’t used to,” says Mac Gimse, an art history expert who led us through Hindu temples and shrines, as well as a Jain temple where menstruating women are forbidden to enter and a basilica where St. Thomas is entombed. “There’s a moral fiber to the chaos,” he says. “There’s such a strong belief in rebirth, so they live each day like it will affect tomorrow. Without that, India would fall apart.”

THE ONSLAUGHT

Although our trip focused on the lush climes of southern India — Hassan, Mysore, Bangalore, Mahabalipuram, Chennai, Mumbai and the hilly, dramatic countryside between cities — the Gimses deliberately began the trip up north, in the capital city of Delhi, so we could see the Taj Mahal. They also arranged to have us land in that polluted, crowded city, whose resources cannot sustain its 13 million residents, because they wanted us to experience the “onslaught,” as Jackie Gimse calls it.

On a rickshaw ride through Old Delhi that first day, I saw a one-armed boy the same age as my younger son approach a tourist bus and hold out his hand for money. (Days later I would spend \$37 on a soccer jersey for my own boy.) A middle-aged man with a spinal deformity walked on all fours like a dog, his legs straight and hips high in the air, with wooden blocks strapped to his hands so he could navigate the pavement. A girl no older than 10 holding a tiny toddler chased my rickshaw and pointed to her open mouth. “Mom! Mom!” she cried. “Food for the baby.” I was teary eyed but held on to my purse.

“You can’t give to the begging children or more will appear,” said Ellen Teigland ’73, a fellow CLL traveler and a St. Olaf parent who had been to India twice before.

LAND OF CONTRASTS “Urban India and rural India are two worlds apart,” a guide told us. Mumbai (top, left), the former Bombay, sports a Manhattan-like skyline, 300 college campuses, a booming film industry and British-influenced architecture. Half of the city’s population, its laboring class, lives in shantytowns and slums, earning the equivalent of \$1.25 a day. “There’s not a quick fix,” said Mickey Monsen ’49 (right), who traveled to India with her St. Olaf roommate, Betty Stromseth ’49. Indian women and children love to be photographed, and Center for Lifelong Learning traveler Ellen Teigland ’73 (far right) often made friends via her digital camera.





It was the historic India, the cultural and spiritual India, that the Gimses tried to show us. The country where elaborate Hindu temples crafted thousands of years ago seem to rise out of the ground, like the majestic trees that surround them.

Roosters and chickens squawked in cages in the open-air markets. Goats were tied up, waiting to be milked or slaughtered. Motorcyclists threatened pedestrians on the narrow streets. Food vendors and spice shops filled the air with scent and color. “This is the real India,” our rickshaw driver said before taking our money and then denying he had been paid.

That was a Tuesday. By Friday we were sleep deprived and shell shocked, our tail-bones sore from bouncing in the bus on rural roads and our eyes widened in awe at the desperate poverty and delirious beauty we saw before us. The Gimses had arranged for us to stay that night at Hotel Sandesh the Prince in Mysore, a city known for its nine palaces, urban planning and government-sponsored silk shops that allow women to sew garments and scarves at home.

We reveled in the air-conditioning, the water pressure, the Western sense of cleanliness and the attentive doorman at this luxury hotel. And we were grateful to be off the roads in a country where the only requirements for driving are “a good horn, good brakes and good luck,” as our guide, Raj Sharma, put it.

By sheer chance — the sort of coincidence you come to expect in India — we met up at dinner with the 28 St. Olaf students on Global Semester, led this academic year by Associate Professor of Psychology Donna McMillan and her husband, Steve Bayne, a professor of political science at Century College in White Bear Lake, Minnesota. During our planned visit with them days later at the Ecumenical Christian Center in Whitefield, we talked about St. Olaf and its global reach, and we talked about India.

“It’s clear that this is just the first step,” said Meg Rooney ’07, a philosophy major from Wayzata, Minnesota, who plans to attend graduate school. “We’re realizing our limits of how much we can affect. It’s not about *me*, about how the poverty makes me feel. You have to go home and act. It’s how this experience will affect my decisions. I couldn’t stop traveling after this trip.”

Asked whether the Global Semester would serve as their catalyst to foster change in the world, students turned the conversa-

tion toward public policy. “It’s self-serving to expect to see change before I die,” said Jacey Reese ’08 of New Richland, Minnesota, who is majoring in sociology/anthropology with a concentration in American Racial and Multicultural Studies. “This program is about not averting my eyes to the injustices of the world.”

LESSONS LEARNED

The trip to India began with the details necessary for any venture beyond U.S. borders. Apply for a visa, and make sure your passport is in order; visit the local clinic for shots. But it didn’t take long to recognize that India would be a more complicated journey than a trip to Europe or another Western culture. “You have to flex with India,” Mac Gimse likes to say.

The *Frommer’s* list of “fast facts” about the country was peppered with nerve-wracking descriptions. The “exorbitant” telephone costs in hotels, the lax sense of time compared with Americans’ obsessive punctuality, the *bak-sheesh* system of distributing money to the poor by condoning the begging of children and physically deformed adults and by asking foreigners to tip for the slightest service.

The first time I used a public bathroom in India, at the Delhi airport, I was aghast when the gentle lady who had smiled and handed me a square of toilet paper held out her hand again when I emerged from the stall, this time expecting to be paid. I had assumed she was an airport employee. Worse, I had no local currency and nothing smaller than a \$20 bill. Mac Gimse laughed about my introduction to the “large voluntary labor pool” in India. He would laugh often throughout the next two weeks, trying to nudge me over the hurdles of homesickness and fear.

Two weeks before we left, I kept a hastily scheduled appointment with Tom Holt ’80, a family physician and the international travel medical adviser at Allina Clinic in Northfield. He painted an ominous picture of India as overcrowded and unsanitary, a developing country whose infrastructure and social services haven’t caught up with its ambitions. The doctor gave me four shots and dispensed two prescriptions, including Malarone to protect



against malaria. Then he offered up a 10-page report that warned about crime, listed hot spots for terrorism (several bombs had killed 170 people on a Mumbai commuter train only three months before), and told which foods and liquids to avoid.

Tap water was off limits, even to brush your teeth. Pineapples, bananas and apples were acceptable because they could be peeled. Salads were not healthy because the ingredients may have been washed with untreated water. Coffee and tea were OK because the water used to make them had been heated, but any drink with ice cubes was unsafe.

I glanced at his runner's watch and trim physique, judging that he would not dismiss my question about whether it would be safe to jog in India. Holt gave a firm "no" but for different reasons than I expected. He didn't talk about rape or the lesser social status of women, or even about a culture where the backbreaking nature of daily labor makes "working out" beside the point, if not pretentious.

Holt spoke two words that would haunt me every day we were abroad: "wild dogs." They are everywhere in India, and they are hungry. An ignorant American trotting alone on an isolated road looks like a good game of chase to animals that spend their days in pursuit of food. I was threatened twice. Had I been bitten I would have had to fly home, because I hadn't gotten to the doctor in time for rabies shots.

The next time I travel overseas, I will do my homework before the trip: seek out literature from the country, find basic facts on the web, talk to people who have traveled there, learn about roles and expectations for women. Much of that information was readily available in the notebook that Center for Lifelong Learning Program Director Heidi Quiram prepares for every study-traveler. Using the demands of work as an excuse, I didn't review it until days before our departure.

And so, being unprepared, I packed the wrong wardrobe. The basic black that I favor at home was stifling in the tropical heat of India. The mobility that I take for granted as an independent woman in America — where I wear walking shorts and sleeveless tops throughout the summer — was one of many ill-informed assumptions that would prove to be both arrogant and dangerous.

On our first day in India, a Hindu man blocked my entrance to the Jami Masjid, or Friday mosque, in Old Delhi and insisted that I drape a shawl around my bare shoulders. Later that week our guide reluctantly assented to my request to run or take a walk in the

A DEVELOPING COUNTRY Like China, India is facing environmental problems as it moves from being a largely agrarian economy to a player in the global marketplace. The Taj Mahal (right), built of white marble and completed in 1648, is "melting like an ice cream cone" due to air pollution, Mac Gimse '58 says. Factories in nearby Agra have been shut down, and tourists now ride electric buses to the famous site. Still, Gimse adds, "It would be unfair to the culture to see only its underside."

GOLES IN INDIA Seven weeks into their five-month program, students on the St. Olaf Global Semester pored over back copies of the *Manitou Messenger* (right) that Jackie Gimse brought them. Renewed friendships are a highlight of any Center for Lifelong Learning trip, exemplified by Jody Buckneberg '99 and Mari Bonthuis '99 (below, center), who met as students during a St. Olaf Interim in Cuba.

early morning, but he asked that I wear long pants. During our 16 days in India we saw women jogging only once, and that was in westernized Mumbai, the former Bombay. They wore running shoes and saris in the 100-degree heat, with folds of cloth flowing to their ankles.

Westerners often use the word "modesty" to describe women's decorum and dress in India, noting the old-fashioned allure of saris that drape over the body, as well as the colorful fabric, jangling jewelry and red dot on the forehead (*bindi*) that celebrate femininity among women of all ages. Female sexuality is softer and less self-conscious than in the United States. Whereas men preen in makeshift barbershops along the rural roads, middle-aged women, especially, resist any temptation to show off their thick, heavy hair — or perhaps they pull it back simply to free their hands to work.

MYSTERY AND MAGIC

Four months after we returned from India, I finally had enough perspective to unpack my memories, my mental bags. For weeks all of my photos, notes and cheap souvenirs had languished in a backpack tossed in the corner of my bedroom. "Did you like India?" A common question, seemingly a simple one to answer, but I've struggled with a response from the moment my feet stepped back on Western soil, in the spacious, pristine airport in Amsterdam.

"Like" is not a word you use," said Jackie Gimse during a lunch and reminiscence in

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late November. “We learned so much.” This was the Gimses’ sixth trip to India, but even they were not immune to the sight of half-naked babies lying on highway medians or the extremes of wealth and poverty in Bangalore and Mumbai. She recalled walking the dusty streets of Delhi before sunrise to catch a train to the Taj Mahal and smelling the stench from open-air latrines. “It was culture shock,” she said.

Ellen Teigland, the alumna and a licensed psychologist in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, spent seven weeks in India on the St. Olaf Global Semester in 1971. “I’d just turned 20,” she says. “I had waist-long blonde hair. I was very out of place, looks-wise.” The trip last October was her second tour of India with the Gimses through the Center for Lifelong Learning; she’d also been on their CLL trip to northern India in 2005.

“You know how hard a place it is,” Teigland told me. “There are always beggars. There are always people living in the streets. It was really hard the first time I was there, but by the time we left, we all just loved it. I can’t explain it completely. It’s an incredible country. The people are just wonderful: friendly and accepting and curious and interested in us.”

The current American fascination with India seems to center on how its culture is becoming more like ours. *Fortune* magazine recently trumpeted the rise in billionaires from India. *Newsweek* declared in March 2006 that “messy, raucous, democratic India is growing fast, and now may partner up with the world’s richest democracy — America.” *Time* magazine last June dubbed a cover story “India Inc.” and reported how “wealth is uprooting tradition and transforming India’s way of life.”

It was that 6,000-year-old way of life, the historic India, the cultural and spiritual India — what they appropriately dubbed “mystical India” — that the Gimses tried to show us.

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WORLD TRAVELERS Mac Gimse ‘58 (kneeling, right) and his wife, Jackie (in polka dots), have been leading St. Olaf trips abroad for 30 years.

They kept our intrepid band on schedule and inspired with bags of candy on the bus, yellow tape on all our luggage and group checks to ensure no one got lost. After visiting the home of Mahatma Gandhi (above), Mac shared what the father of India deemed the seven sins, including “wealth without work” and “science without humanity.” Our guide, Raj Sharma (center, kneeling), lives in Delhi.



ST. OLAF COLLEGE STUDY TRAVEL PROGRAMS

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professors for adults of all ages.

Behind The Seen

**Jotunheimen: From Myth
to Modern Norway**
Aug. 1–12, 2007

**The Land of Oz: Environmental
Diversity in Australia**
Sept. 1–18, 2007

**Prague, Vienna and Budapest: Old
World Cultures in the New Century**
Sept. 14–30, 2007 (wait listed)

**Dragons in the Mist: Art and
Architecture in China and Tibet**
Oct. 13–31 and Nov. 3–21, 2007
(both wait listed)

**England and Wales:
Highways and Byways**
June 6–22, 2008

**Rediscovering the Germ
in Paris: Continuing Medical
Education Study Travel**
June 20–28, 2008

**Circling the Rim of the
Aegean: Greece and Turkey**
June 13–29, 2008

Denmark
Aug. 4–16, 2008

**Performances, Protestants
and Progress: Germany
in the 21st Century**
14 days in September 2008

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INNOCENCE ABROAD [CONT. FROM PAGE 18]

The country where the game of chess first appeared, where the decimal system was invented and the practice of yoga has evolved, where elaborate Hindu temples with intricate handcarvings crafted thousands of years ago seem to rise out of the ground, like the majestic trees that surround them.

We saw the house in Mumbai where Mahatma Gandhi lived and worked, from which he directed a nation toward peaceful independence and away from British rule. We made an impromptu stop at a rural market one day, where beggars didn't dog us, "where no one asked for anything," Mac Gimse said, leaving us free to smile at strangers and enjoy the sweet aroma of food and flowers.

India is a democracy about one-third the size of the United States. English is spoken widely, and food chains such as Pizza Hut and McDonald's are popping up in urban areas, making the cities we visited feel both exotic and familiar. More Americans are getting to know India through the novels and movies it exports. "Bollywood," the \$1.5 billion film industry headquartered in the former Bombay, produces almost a thousand films a year. Chronicles of India from writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri (*The Namesake*, *Interpreter of Maladies*) and Sarah Macdonald (*Holy Cow*) also have gained a wide audience here.

"I'm slightly obsessed with Indian literature," says Mari Bonthuis '99, an attorney in New York who joined our group after a 15-day solo trip through Eastern Europe. "Right after college I read Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. India seemed like this mystical, magical place, incredibly beautiful and intense."

In a country as diverse and contradictory as India, it is impossible to generalize about culture or social norms. For every two steps toward "progress," as many Westerners would define it, you see a distinct and disheartening step back.

Yes, India is booming with energy and new money, but those forces are creating their own set of social problems. A Christian journalist from India who recently visited St. Olaf noted a rise in suicides among farmers who can't feed their families. A law that attempts to curb domestic violence took effect while we were there; the first arrest was of a man who tried to bite off his wife's nose in a drunken rage. A ban on child labor was enacted shortly before our trip, in the hope that more children would attend school.

St. Olaf has had ties with India for at least a generation through Global Semester,

INDIA: KEY FACTS

- India is among the world's largest countries, covering 1.2 million square miles.
- With 1.1 billion people, India is the world's largest democracy. It boasts 15 percent of the world's population crowded onto only 2.4 percent of the world's land.
- Hindi and English are the two primary languages, but India also recognizes 16 other official tongues.
- About 80 percent of India's people are Hindu and about 2 percent are Christian; other religions include Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism.
- One-third of the population lives on the equivalent of less than a dollar a day.
- The annual per-capita income is \$500.
- India has more people afflicted with HIV (5.7 million people) than any other country in the world.
- The British ruled India from the early 19th century until 1947, when Mahatma Gandhi's nationalist movement of passive resistance prevailed.
- Americans made up 16 percent of India's tourists in 2005.
- Indian immigrants in the United States enjoy the highest average household income of any ethnic group.
- Indians make up 25 percent of the world's software engineers.
- Seventy percent of people work in agriculture in India, a country that feeds its own and imports no food.

SOURCES: BBC WorldService.com, "India Rising"; St. Olaf Professor Emeritus of Art Mac Gimse; Raj Sharma, Indebo Tours; Time magazine, June 26, 2006.

the Biology in South India program and Indian academics such as Dr. Gabriel Merigala, a philosophy professor from Madras Christian College who spent the past academic year on campus as a Kierkegaard Scholar.

That deeper knowledge of India helps students and Center for Lifelong Learning study-travelers to look beyond the problems and the poverty, the Gimses say, to find the good in that historic, gentle culture where people remain open-hearted and open-minded, despite living amid conditions that would overwhelm the average overfed American.

"Travel like this takes you down to your core values," Mac Gimse explains. "You fall apart, and then you put yourself back together." He smiles, but by now he has convinced me. "You've got to do India more than once. It will change your life."

I will learn that, once I find the courage to return. 🐼

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