

A Mosaic of Faiths: May 2017 Study Tour in Northern India

by Gary L. Hauck

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It was December 26, 2004, when I first flew to India to attend a convention and enjoy a humanities-oriented tour of Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur. That was the same day as the horrible tsunami that devastated major parts of that region of the world. As images of the tragedy streamed across TV screens in our hotel rooms, we were told to continue with our convention and tour, as the nearest point of crisis was still a thousand miles away. We did.

India struck me as a land of enchantment. The smells of fresh-cut flowers and spices, eerie tunes of snake charmers, and colorful saris of bright orange, blue, and yellow filled my senses with excitement and pleasure. I remember watching in awe as elephant taxis paraded down the streets, weaving among the tuk-tuks, rickshaws, cars, buses, and occasional cow or two in the middle of the street. It was the India I imagined.

Following our meetings in the hotel each day, we toured palaces, meandered through forts, strolled the markets, and marveled at majestic mosques, temples, and garden tombs. Of course, the Taj Mahal was at the top of the list, and it did not disappoint!

"Will you bring your students to India?" asked a recent graduate of Agra University.

"I wish I could" was my reply. "But I'm afraid the cost would be prohibitive. Most of our students cannot afford several thousand dollars for even a short-term, study-abroad field trip." And I returned to the States with my photos, souvenirs, and graphic memories.

Then, during the Summer of 2015, Montcalm Community College was contacted by Dr. Brijender S. Panwar, President of the M. S. Panwar Community and Technical College. This college is located in Solan in far northern India, a town perched at the lower heights of the western Himalaya mountains in the state of Himachal Pradesh. Dr. Panwar expressed an interest in partnering with a community college in the U.S. for a mutual exchange. It didn't take us long to explore the possibilities. As part of our newly-established partnership, MCC invited Dr. Panwar to be a guest instructor during Summer 2016, and to

work together on a short-term exchange program for our students and faculty.

In September 2016 we completed an articulation agreement between the two schools, secured a grant from the MCC Foundation to subsidize a short-term field trip for students and staff, developed the curriculum and activities schedule for a three-week visit, and purchased airline tickets for 10 students and five staff members. Our plan was simple: an initial three-week visit by MCC to the college in Solan in Summer 2017, followed by a reciprocal visit of five students and two staff members from M. S. Panwar to MCC in 2018.

Since May is MCC's hiatus between Spring and Summer terms, the college selected May 6-29, 2017, as the dates for this adventure. The trip would cost no more than \$2,000 per participant (including airline tickets, passports, visas, and incidentals) if the MCC Foundation would cover the costs of board and room in India. With Dr. Panwar's plan to place the students and most of the staff in homes, the amount necessary to be underwritten was deemed suitable at \$400 per person. MCC's Cultural Events and PR departments produced recruitment materials and conducted information sessions for students and staff. By January 2017 our team was in place: eight regular community college students, two early college students, and MCC's President, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, the Dean of Arts and Sciences, and the Business Dept. Chair and his wife (a nurse educator).

Academic Preparations

Each student on our study abroad team enrolled in either BUSN 271 (Study Abroad in Business) or HUMN 271 (Study Abroad in Humanities). These two courses have the same basic catalog description, which emphasizes activities and structured observations that allow students to explore differences and commonalities between the foreign country and the U.S.

Although the trip itself was planned for May, class activities and field trips began in January 2017. During the initial meeting, team members learned a little about each other, received an overview of the course, and engaged in a visa application workshop, completing all necessary pre-trip forms.

Required readings from *The DK Handbook* (Pearson Education's courseware on writing and research) began immediately, and an "image paper" was assigned to give each student an opportunity to express pre-conceived notions, expectations, personal goals while in India, and a personal learning plan, including proposed interviews, investigations, and observations. Students also took several field trips to a local Hindu temple, Sikh *gurudwara*, and Indian restaurant.

As a fundraiser and cultural foretaste, students hosted an India Night Program and Dinner on the MCC campus, complete with chai, naan, basmati rice, curried vegetables, and chicken masala, which they prepared and served. Over 100 guests attended and listened to the music, information about



At the Bön Monastery, a Buddhist facility in the Himalayan region of India, each team member was greeted and blessed with a white stole from the abbot, Menri Trizin, center, the religious leader of the Bön movement.

All photos courtesy of Gary Hauck.

monks, and store owners. Each student kept a journal, took countless photos, and noted personal observations.

For group projects, the 10 students broke into four learning teams named after Hindu gods (Ganesha,

Vishnu, Brahman, and Shiva). Using a "Cultural Analysis Toolkit for Study Abroad" by Dr. Deirdre Mendez (Center for Global Business, Univ. of Texas at Austin), each team engaged in a cultural analysis of the people of India and compared them to the U.S. population. Students were unanimous that the number one difference between the two cultures is that Americans are schedule-conscious, whereas Indians are highly fluid and spontaneous. Early college student Heidi Simon observed, "People in America seem to be more individualistic in their focus and pursuits, while the people of India appear to be more collectivistic by nature— thinking mostly of the good of the community."

Our field trips explored Indian art, sculpture, literature, fashion, domestic art, architecture, music, dance, film, culinary arts, philosophy, education, and religion. The business students also observed production, marketing, management, distribution, recycling, advertising, and sales.

In what follows, I focus on our observations of religious sites.

A Monastery of Bön Buddhism

One of the team's favorite trips was to the historic Bön Monastery, the second largest of its type in the world. Bön Buddhism is one of the earliest forms of Buddhism, and incorporates elements of indigenous Tibetan beliefs that far preceded the birth of Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha further south, in India. Buddhism disappeared from most parts of India after the Muslim conquests (1100s – 1500s). Today, it is the fifth most common faith in India, with over 8 million followers, mostly in the far south and in the Himalayan regions of the far north.

continued on next page

India, and an overview of the trip. A similar luncheon was conducted for staff and fellow students at the college.

During a final orientation that presented in detail what to expect, how to prepare, and what to pack, a recent traveler to India also met with the team to show pictures and share his own experiences with the people and culture of India.

Getting Situated in Solan

After a 15-hour flight, our welcome in Delhi was a gusty, late-evening dust storm that gave us some practice wearing the facemasks that we'd brought to endure pollution. We stayed that night at a youth hostel near the airport, then took a short domestic flight from Delhi northward to Chandigarh, and from there hopped on a small bus to negotiate the winding mountainous roads of the Himalayas.

When we arrived in the beautiful village of Solan, our first stop was the one-building campus of the M. S. Panwar Community and Technical College, built into the side of a steep mountain and overlooking the valley below. A crowd in the school's courtyard greeted us with flower necklaces, rose petals, and a gracious "Namaste", a greeting of respect that is said with folded hands and a warm smile. Following introductions, a candle ceremony inaugurated our official partnership, and a two-hour program ensued with live music, dancing, recitations, and prayers.

During our three weeks in India, the team attended special classes in the Hindi language and Indian culture, and took various field trips in the afternoons. Team members interviewed the host families and others that we met along the way, including business leaders, museum curators, clergy,

Northern India *continued from page 19*

The Bön Monastery is considered to be one of the most picturesque monasteries in the world. We were given a tour of the entire complex, and even witnessed the monks' prayer meeting. Inside the main temple is a very large statue of Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche, considered to be a founder of the Bön tradition. Prayers are read to the steady beat of a praise drum, and worshippers move in a clockwise direction around the monastery's inner sanctuary.

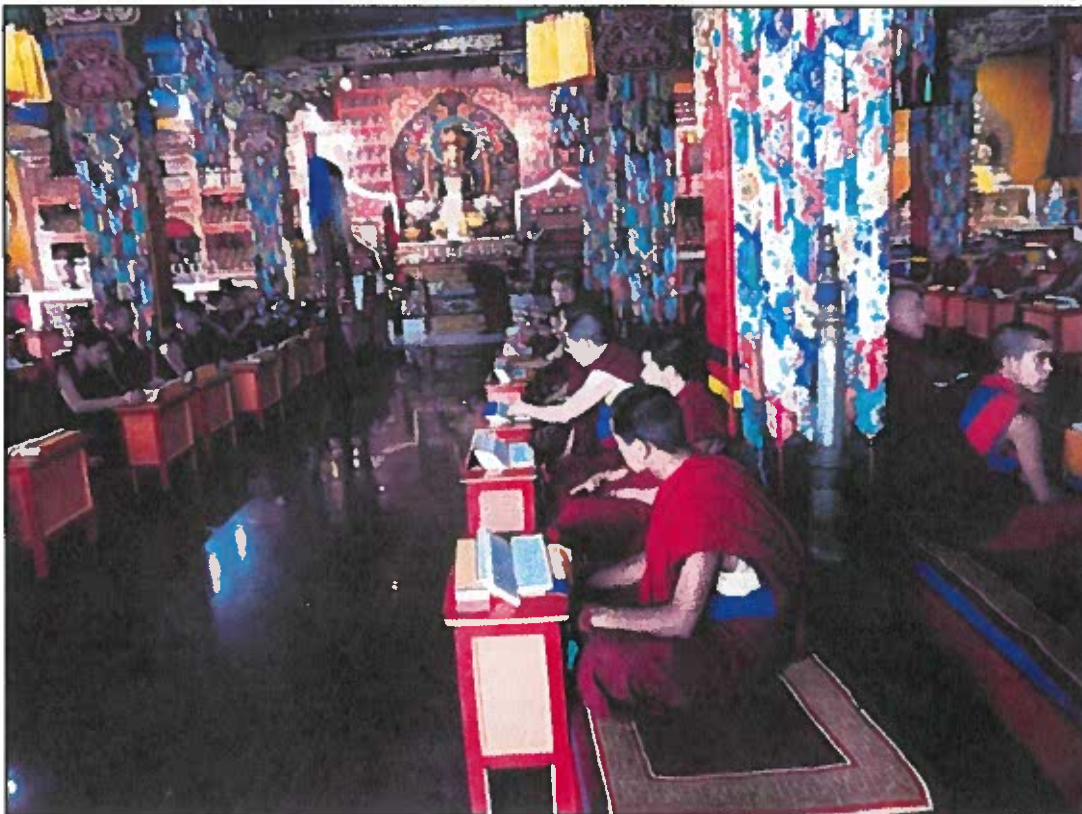
We had the privilege of a private audience with *Menri Trizin*, the abbot of the monastery and religious leader of the Bön movement. He presented each of us with a ceremonial white stole, and explained the history of the monastery as founded in 1969 by Abbot Lungtok Tenpai Nyima. (The abbot *Menri Trizin* would pass away at the age of 88 on Sept. 14, only four months after our visit.)

After visiting the monks' prayer meeting and our audience with the abbot, we spent time in the impressive museum and library, and then were treated to an amazing dinner of Indian cuisine, prepared and served by the monks. The monks spent considerable time with us, answering our many questions and asking about life in the U.S. and in Sidney, MI.

One monk, who identified himself simply as "Michael", told two of our students:

You might find this hard to believe, but we as monks are no different than you, except for our religious devotion. We all have iPhones, are on Facebook and use Snapchat. We'd love to come to the U.S. someday and pay a visit to your campus in Michigan.

The team observed this monks' prayer meeting at the Bön Buddhist Temple.



Hindu Temples

Hinduism is the most widespread religion in India today, comprising about 80% of its population. We made two visits to the Jatoli Shiv Temple, also within the Solan district, one of the highest-altitude Hindu temples in all of Asia. This very beautiful structure is part of a much larger worship complex that contains several buildings and a cave shrine dedicated to its founder. We observed many worshippers, made some new friends, and learned much about the Hindu religion.

Dr. Panwar explained that the Jatoli Shiv Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, the "destroyer of evil and the transformer" within the Hindu divine trinity, which also includes Brahma the creator and Vishnu the preserver. He went on to comment that he personally views all of the gods as one:

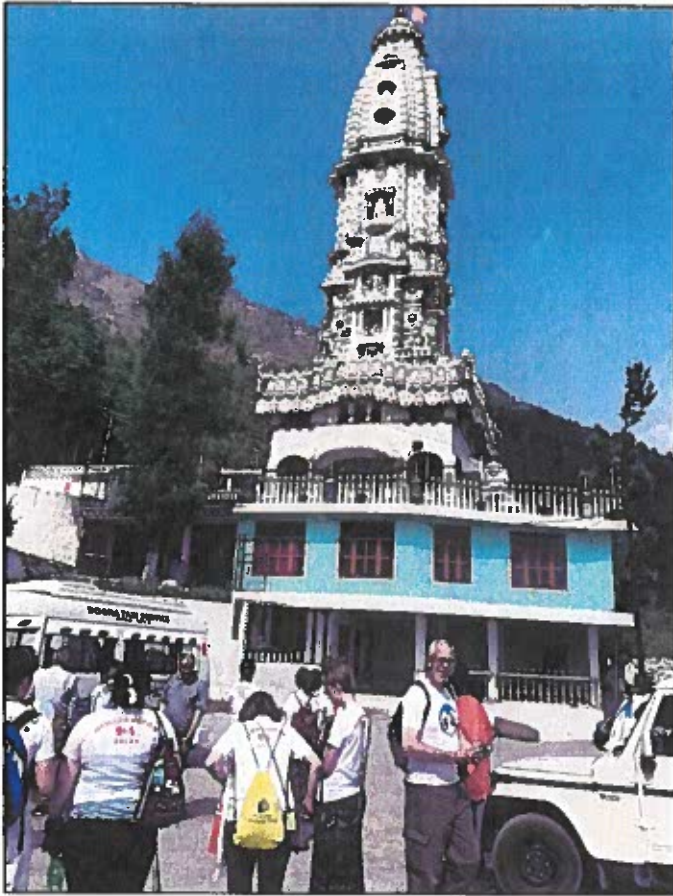
You see many gods around this Hindu temple. But not all Hindus are polytheists. I, myself, am a Hindu, but believe that there is one god who reveals himself in many forms. So, I see all of these representations as of the same god.

Until this conversation, most of our team had not been aware of monotheistic beliefs within Hinduism. As it turns out, Hinduism is a religion that embraces a broad range of traditions regarding god(s), including polytheism, monotheism, pantheism, humanism, atheism, and others.

During our second visit to Jatoli, we enjoyed a Community Luncheon where literally thousands of people throughout the day were served a meal of rice, curry, and naan flatbread. When it was our turn to be served, we sat on the floor, and a gentleman used his hand to scoop cooked rice from a bucket onto our paper plates. Someone else served us the curry sauce, and a final one handed us a piece of naan. It was delicious!

The Mohan Shakti National Heritage Park, near the town of Kandaghat in the Solan district, is also dedicated to the Hindu religion. The site is surrounded by beautiful mountain ranges and, as a result, our journey there was a bit scary: many squeals could be heard inside our bus as it drove along very narrow roads without guardrails, thousands of feet above the valley visible below us.

The National Heritage Park includes a major temple along with many outdoor shrines. The park itself is a work of art, and we watched several artisans carving beautiful designs into the marble and polished rock. A smaller shrine, the Shakti Temple, was nestled high in the mountains above nearby Shim-



The Montcalm Community College study team is about to enter the Jatoli Shiv Temple, one of the highest-altitude Hindu temples in Asia. At right is Business Dept. Chair Bill Bishop.

la, where we braved a thunderstorm to visit its unique setting. This is one of many temples in India that are devoted to Shakti, the goddess of creative power and energy, or to other Hindu goddesses.

While in the beautiful mountains of Shimla, we also visited the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS), a research institute housed in the 1884 former palace of the Viceroy, or governors-general, of British India. It was there that the fateful plans were laid in 1947 to partition the region upon independence from Great Britain: India was designated as a majority Hindu country, and Pakistan as majority Muslim. Some 15 million people became refugees or displaced persons as a result, and about one million others perished in the spasms of violence directly sparked by the partition.

Sikh and Christian Sites

Because of our interest in learning about many different religions in India, our team experienced additional services in the Temple of Brahma Kumaris and in a Sikh *gurdwara* or place of worship (literally, “door to the Guru”). Brahma Kumaris is a Hindu reform movement, nearly a century old, that emphasizes “soul-consciousness”, an awareness that all souls are divinely good regardless of gender, caste, or nation. Sikhism is a

monotheistic religion that arose in the 1400s in Punjab, a large geographical and cultural region in what is now Pakistan and northwestern India. The Sikhs rarely seek converts, but they welcome people of all faiths into their *gurdwaras*. They are the fourth largest religious group in India today, with about 20 million people.

Christianity is the third most common faith in India, with over 25 million adherents, or a little more than 2% of the population. Some of the Christian communities in India date back to the first few centuries after Christ, while others arose during the period of colonization by British and other European powers. We visited a service at St. John’s Church in Solan. This church is of the Anglican faith and tradition, now aligned with the National Church of India. The pastor was pleased to have our team visit, and asked our leaders to say a few words on behalf of the two colleges. After participating in the singing and service, the pastor invited us to mingle with the congregation and to have group photos taken both outside and inside the church. Everyone enjoyed the warm interaction.

Exploring India’s educational system was another objective of our trip, and we visited several schools, colleges, and universities. Among them were St. Luke’s Parochial School, the Hindu University, and the Government Dileep Boys’ Secondary School. At the Dileep Boys’ School, we observed over 1,000 students beginning their school day with exercises, prayers, and ceremony. We were all awarded trophies as visiting educators, and hosted to a party with dancing and food.

We traveled to the Dr. Y. S. Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, a “land-grant” university patterned after Michigan State Univ. There we met with administrators, faculty, and students, and learned more about Parmar University from an alumnus, Dr. T. D. Verma, who is now Dean at M. S. Panwar Community and Technical College, our partner school. We also observed the children’s academy at that college.

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The Shakti Temple, high in the Himalayan mountains above Shimla, is a shrine to the Hindu goddess of creative power and energy.



Northern India *continued from page 21*

In the closing ceremony held for us at M. S. Panwar College, we shared our testimonials, our Cultural Analysis, and expressed our thanks to the college, to our host families, and to all of our new friends. We were presented with roses and were given gifts of caps and scarves. Then we headed back to Chandigarh, where we toured Panjab University and prepared for our final weekend, which we would spend in Agra and Delhi.

The Muslim Legacy in Agra and Delhi

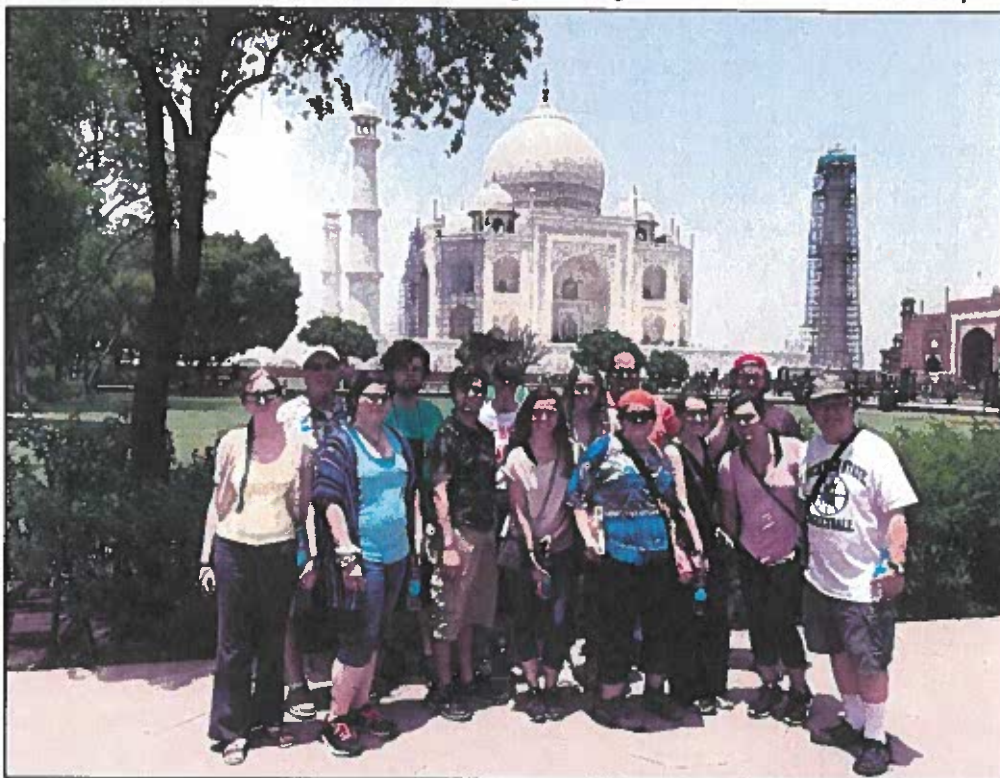
Agra is situated in the northern "U.P."— the state of Uttar Pradesh. It's most famous as the site of the beautiful Taj Mahal, which we toured in 107° temperatures, even venturing inside the iconic structure. In the mid-1600s, the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan had this gleaming white mausoleum built to house his wife's tomb. The Mughal Empire was a Muslim dynasty that ruled most of South Asia and Afghanistan roughly from 1526 to 1857, leaving a legacy of great wealth and culture to that region and the world. Today, Islam is the second-largest religion in India, at over 14% of the population.

In Delhi, we visited two other landmarks built by the same Shah Jahan: the Red Fort and the Jama Masjid. The fort is a spectacular palace that was the center of Mughal power during the empire's final two centuries. The masjid, or mosque, India's largest, is majestic with its three domes and two towering minarets of red sandstone and white marble. In Old Delhi, we visited the elegant garden tomb of the earlier Mughal Emperor Humayun, which is surrounded by a building of red sandstone; it was this tomb that inspired the Taj Mahal.

Also in Delhi we visited the famous India Gate (a WWI memorial) and the resplendent Lotus Temple, built in 1986 as the central house of worship for people of the Bahá'í faith in India. The Bahá'í religion, founded in Iran in 1863 and now with about 6 million followers worldwide, emphasizes the unity and equality of all people and the essential worth of all religions.

Back home in Michigan after our three-week study tour, the team members participated in several steps of debriefing and reflection. Teams collectively wrote a 10-page paper of lessons learned, selected the top 50 photos to document the shared experiences, and presented PowerPoint presentations and slide shows to an audience of family, friends, supporters, and members of the community. An assessment session was conducted to evaluate the extent to which objectives were addressed and met, and the course, instructors, and students were evaluated.

The MCC study team at the Taj Mahal in Agra, a mausoleum of white marble from the Muslim dynasty of the Mughals. At right is Dean of Arts and Sciences Gary Hau



Great Lakes Anishinaabe *continued from page 16*

Read the old stories, look for chickadees, and consider taking time to sing:

Gijigijigaaneshiinh ayaa gawaandag
The marsh chickadee is there in the white pine

noondaagozid noondenimiyangidwa
calling out and flirting with us

manidokeyaang manidoowiyaang
life is a ceremony, a way to be alive.

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