

Sam Allison

Dear Members of the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship Committee,

While writing my fellowship proposal, it occurred to me that a project to document the changing face of north Indian holy sites could never be complete, whether I had a month or a lifetime to pursue it. I feel that all the more acutely now, having returned -- with health and sanity intact -- from a year at the attempt. Instead of a sense of resolution, I'm left with more questions and an almost overwhelming urge to return, to go deeper, to witness with greater clarity. It is with a good deal of satisfaction, however, that I now sit next to a couple hundred rolls of developed film, some preliminary enlargements, and audio disks containing dozens of interviews and hours of street recordings. There are successes mixed into the medley of missed opportunities. If not completion, I'm left with a solid beginning.

The route I followed in India more or less adhered to my original plan, with additional excursions to Rajasthan, Ladakh and Sikkim, and "visa runs" to Burma and Nepal. My arrival in Delhi was heralded by sweltering humidity, and I feared an attack of fungus to the six cameras in my arsenal. I headed north and spent the month of August in Dharamsala, home of the Tibetan government in exile and a hub of the international Buddhist scene. Photography was often hampered by monsoon deluges, which some days came half a dozen times. But I gradually got my visual bearings and honed in on scenes relevant to the project. The highlight of this time was photographing at close range monks debating in the traditional Tibetan way, an activity that to outsiders might resemble the prelude to an all-out brawl.

The visual paradox of Buddhist monasticism in a rapidly modernizing world

continued to fascinate me further north in Ladakh, where I arrived for the culmination of the region's summer festivities. Music, dancing and polo matches enthralled the citizens of Leh, which maintains a medieval core buttressed against the concrete development of middle class and tourist infrastructure. While I'd become accustomed to the site of Tibetan monks being very much a part of our age of rampant materialism, the scene in Leh astonished me. Young monks strutted in western baseball caps and leather jackets over their saffron robes, talking on cell phones and riding motorcycles with their girlfriends on the back — this in a town where the surrounding areas have seen little change beyond asphalt and electricity for the past hundred years. I also spent time in the great monasteries of the region, documenting scenes, which for the most part evoked what is ancient and enigmatic about Ladakh. Even here visual incongruities abounded, such as a novice monk wearing a red t-shirt emblazoned with Hulk Hogan's face and a wristband with the marijuana symbol.

From Ladakh I headed southwest to the desert region of Rajasthan. Most of my work there took place in Jodhpur, called the 'blue city' for the azure wash on most facades. Jodhpur has proudly sustained its historic heart of temples and winding alleys. Life there is slow, contemplative, and ruled by its religious verve. I was often welcomed into homes, shops and temples for tea and hours of conversation (my Hindi was refreshed by then). I began taking portraits and returning with them as gifts for my subjects, both as a way of thanking them and to gain opportunities to photograph at close range. One of the most quintessential scenes I returned to daily was the entrance to a temple where old men escaped the roadside bustle to drink tea, read newspapers, and spend hours chatting with each other. Once they realized I wasn't a just a tourist drifting through, they welcomed me to hang out with my cameras.

By late September, the monsoon had ended and it was time for me to head to

Varanasi. The ghats, or stone steps where the whole spectrum of Hindu life is on display, were nearly free of their annual submersion in the Ganga river. I rented a flat with a cool, dark area to store my film and no longer had to fear losing images to heat or fungus. Varanasi was already a second home to me and I met up with many old friends, including locals who had given me invaluable help and advice with a documentary project two years earlier. Over the next several months in Varanasi, I was introduced to many more contacts, people whose assistance was essential for two of the projects I focused on: life at Manikarnika Ghat, the city's main cremation ground where cameras are considered taboo, and festivals in the Muslim neighborhoods of the city.

While Manikarnika Ghat has been exquisitely photographed, by Mary Ellen Mark, James Nachtwey and Michael Ackerman, for instance, I felt that there were abundant scenes and moods still to record there. Several times I tried to move into the cremation ground on my own to slowly begin photographing, but the many touts and hustlers who haunt the area thwarted me. It was a difficult endeavor, as many tourists over the years have angered locals by stealing snapshots of burning bodies.

After several weeks of observing Manikarnika without my cameras, I was given the contact of a young boatman who lived nearby and was supposedly on good terms with everyone in the area. Vinod agreed to be my assistant for what became a two-week project to document the cremation ground and surrounding ghats. My objective, in keeping with the larger theme of the project, was to portray neither ghoulish nor ethereal extremes, but the play of everyday life within the atmosphere of holiness and death. I took portraits of the barbers and wood carriers, of men sifting through the ashes to find charred jewelry, children playing in clouds of smoke rising off the pyres, mourners performing the death rites for their elders, and old women awaiting the end of their days in a hospice above the ghat.

Photographing Manikarnika was the most intense project I'd ever taken on. There were several confrontations and attempts to extort money from me, which were averted swiftly thanks to Vinod. But I experienced far more acceptance and friendly interactions with people. By the time my project there came to a close, I realized that it was only by resolving my intentions and quietly communicating respect for people and for the place itself that I could work under such difficult circumstances. And the work felt all the more worthwhile because it had been difficult.

For several months I documented Muslim festivals, notably Eid and the Muharram processions. This work was dispersed between Old Delhi, Varanasi and Kolkata (if only I could have been in three places at once!). In Old Delhi I was granted access to a butcher shop where hundreds of fattened goats were being slaughtered for the feast day of Bakara Eid. The butchers were dressed in once-white traditional Muslim robes, and it was perhaps the most prime opportunity for portraits I'd ever gotten. To my chagrin, I was booted out when the old proprietor complained that he didn't want to be seen blood-soaked by anyone in a foreign land.

The Muharram processions provided ideal scenes for my project. They took place in the streets and outside mosques, transforming both medieval and modernized stretches of city into the timeless stage of devotion. The crowds were so magnificent that it was difficult to focus on capturing images. On parade were camels and white horses blindfolded and adorned with bloody sheets to symbolize the martyrdom of the ancient hero Hussein. Men and women of all ages were in the throng. While the older generations were dressed in the traditional *kurta pajama* or *burqa*, young men were typically dressed western style, which in India still exalts the flashiness of '70s and '80s attire. The culmination of the Muharram processions is when men ardently beat their chests in rhythm with a heart-sundering elegy. It is

said that a true Shia will feel no pain through this ordeal. Some go so far as to mortify themselves with chains, whips and swords. I managed to photograph such scenes at close range, and had to repeatedly wipe splattered blood from my lenses.

It was astonishing that in all my time observing the Muharram processions, I only came across two other photographers. One was in Kolkata and appeared to be a local journalist there to get a few “peak moment” shots. The other was in Old Delhi, a Shia from Bombay who started shooting after whipping his back with a sword. The only published photographs of Muharram festivals, which I can recall seeing, are a few by Nachtwey and Abbas. This strikes me as a grave deficiency in our visual historical record. I’ve started planning a long-term reportage on Muslim life in India, a kind of eulogy, which could in some way counterbalance the egregiously negative portrayals of Islam in the international media.

In January, I continued my work on Buddhist life in Bodhgaya, the site of Shakyamuni’s enlightenment in what is now Bihar, the poorest state of India. The town was inundated by thousands of Tibetans, and monastics and pilgrims from all over the world came to venerate the Bodhi tree and attend teachings. The main promenade was thronged by hundreds of beggars, people whose lives were wretched beyond comprehension. The visual dichotomy was staggering. Tibetan lamas paused in the street to watch Indian circus performers. A tall concrete wall excluded beggars from the Mahabodhi temple ground, but they were able to reach through slits to receive alms from people circumambulating the Bodhi tree. At the outskirts of town, monks wearing dust masks had to trudge around sewage-flooded marshes and step over pigs to make it back to their newly constructed monasteries. The only Buddhist congregation that doesn’t have its own monastery in Bodhgaya, in fact, is that of the Indian monks. While in Bodhgaya I began a project, which I hope to continue in the next few years, of documenting the plight of these impoverished monks as they attempt to revive Buddhist monasticism at its origin.

This is just a rough sketch of the project and a smattering of all that I was fortunate enough to witness. If you'd like to see some of the photographs, please visit my website at www.flickr.com/photos/rusted-aperture. I'll be printing the year's work once I begin attending the New England School of Photography this fall. I'm already planning a trip back to India this winter.

Thanks would sound paltry at this point, so I'll just say this: for all that the fellowship made possible, I am endlessly grateful.

– Sam Allison

September, 2007