

Unmuddling the Mission

How to Blunder-proof your Journey in India

by *Stan Avery*





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The primary strategy for making your journey in India as good as it can be, is to focus on being a humble servant, zealous to lay down your own life in joyful service to those around you. This is true in every endeavor, as Jesus promised us, that if we lose our lives for His sake and the Gospel's, then we will find our lives, at last. Those who visit India while preoccupied with themselves, always seem to end up both disappointing and disappointed. Those who speak and behave with common and wise charity are blessed.

You will observe things in India that will trouble you, because you do not understand their culture, so different from ours. But there will also be things in India that may trouble you, because you do indeed understand. No place is perfect, and every place, including America, has its blind spots, prejudices and sacred cows (plenty of those in India).

This booklet is written to equip you with the basic information needed for any American visitor to avoid becoming a needless source of unintentional trouble, embarrassment or offence, while traveling among the villages of India, and ministering with the churches there. Also, we have included helpful information to make your journey simple, productive and safe.

Vaccinations: It is generally a good idea to keep updated on tetanus vaccine. Also, water-borne diseases, such as cholera and hepatitis A are good to be protected from. Options for the very cautious might also be diphtheria, yellow and scarlet fevers, and common childhood diseases you have never encountered. Make sure to get any vaccinations early, as you may be out of sorts for a few days after receiving them. We recommend avoiding malaria prevention treatments, as they often can have serious side effects. The best way to avoid the unlikely chance of contracting malaria in India, is to simply bring along a small free-standing tent. More on that later.

Travel: Once you have your passport, you can apply online for a visa for India. Just google "India Consulate". Do not procrastinate this, as it can take two or three weeks. Ask for a six month tourist visa. Your "purpose for visit" is visiting friends and touring India. Call us at 541-347-1910 to get an address and contact person for the visa application. Check online to learn the baggage restrictions for the airlines you are using. What you bring will vary greatly depending on the your mission goals and agenda.

Dress conservatively. Even though air travel is internationally accommodating, there is no reason to require the imam from Abu Dhabi, in the seat next to you, to see your legs for eight hours. Jet lag is what we call the debilitating effect of changing our biological clocks to a twelve hour shift. It may be lessened by staying up very late on the night before you depart, or some similar strategy. A tiny pillow can make sleeping on a plane much more likely.

When you pass through customs at your point-of-entry airport in India, it is quite unlikely that you will be questioned, or have your stuff searched. In any case, it is just fine to have a Bible in your possession, but do not discuss your plans or connections regarding Gospel ministry. If anyone does question you, be clever enough to play believably dumb, without actually lying, of course. In any airport, do not wander off away from your team alone. Always keep your passport, ticket, money and other important papers secure and on your person. Keep a photocopy of your passport, including the visa page, in a separate place in your luggage. You will find internet and phone access commonly as you travel. When you arrive in India, there will be places at the airport for you to exchange US dollars for Indian rupees. It is a simple process. If you prefer, there will be times later when you can do that, also.

Abandon any notion of traveling alone in India. You will not be sojourning among structured and predictable tourist sites, but in an indigenous world not designed for you. It may feel bold and exciting, like some adventure movie, to grab a taxi or hop on the train, but it is almost certain to end with regret, embarrassment and trouble for you and the ministry. The BCM disciples are well trained to host and accommodate Western visitors, and God will amply provide you with all the humility it takes to follow directions, stick with the team and go with the flow.

Clothing, shoes and bedding: Take a storable brim hat of some sort, for shade. Wear cool, covering clothes, preferably cotton. Light, solid colors are best. Try to avoid logos. A "Simpsons" tee shirt, for example, might be perceived as your purposeful message. Sandals are the best footwear. If any tribal outreach is planned, bring sturdy hiking sandals for steep trails. Socks are optional. In choosing footwear, take into consideration that you will be taking them off every time you enter a dwelling, and putting them back



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on when leaving; so, quick and simple binding pays off. Even better, sandals that come off and on without bending over for lacing. The rule for shoe removal is this: If it is a home, or if you see other shoes at the door, take yours off. Shorts for men, or pants for women are not good options. Shorts for women are, in India, the equivalent of wearing your underwear here in the US. Most women just take what they need for the air travel, and then buy a few outfits when they arrive in India, to blend in. The cost is very little, as long as you have an Indian sister to help with the bargaining. The whole process is a lot of fun. Wearing a Sari, which is customary for married women, is a challenge to learn, so most women choose a punjabi or halvesari, modest outfits which are breezy, simple and feminine. Tight outer garments are not regarded as modest for either gender, in proper company. Men usually wear thin slacks and shirts. Cotton always works best, but denim is usually too hot. Sunscreen is usually a good idea.

It is a good idea to bring along a thin cotton sheet for bedding. You will never need anything warmer than that. A sheet takes very little luggage space, and is great to use for sleeping in a tent, on a church floor, or if you end up in a small hotel during a road trip. A small Therma-Rest inflatable foam works well as a mattress, when a conventional mattress or hammock is not available. Concerning tents: Many teams opt for bringing along small, cheap, free-standing tents. The best are all nylon, and have mostly netting for walls. Bringing the rain fly is wise if you will be in India during the monsoon season, usually late September to early December. Two or three people can share a tent. They can be set up anywhere; in a room, on a roof, in the yard, on the trail. Their main advantage is in keeping you luxuriously separated from mosquitoes, and secure from any slightly larger unpleasantnesses of the night, such as scorpions, snakes, spiders, ticks and rodents. You are unlikely to actually encounter any of these, but it is psychologically easier to drift off to sleep when you are persuaded of your invincibility regarding potential pestilences. Most teams choose to leave their tents with the ministry in India when they depart. Such things are not available to the Gospel workers in India (although, ironically, they are often manufactured in Sri Lanka), and it is a great blessing for the pastors and outreach teams to be able to use such tents when they take the Gospel into unreached villages.

Social Etiquette: In most situations in India, except for fancy restaurants and a few homes, you will eat with your fingers. Only use the right hand for this. Watch the other diners, and you will get the idea. There will always be some kind of bowl, faucet or sink provided for washing your hands. Never extend your left hand to anyone for any reason, even to give or receive some item. This is an ancient practical custom, stemming from the realities of toilets without paper.

Bathe every day, if at all possible, and change into clean clothes. You will sweat a lot, and extra attention to keep clean and, shall we say, pleasant to be around, is a must. The ministry in India has had Western visitors in the past who chose for whatever reasons to forego bathing and wearing clean clothes, sometimes for several days. Such neglect in India is perceived as either rude, demented or ascetic.

Never touch anyone of the opposite sex, in any kind of familiar way, such as a hug, a hand on the shoulder, sitting close, a pat or a handshake. This does not generally pertain to prepubescent children.

On the other hand, it is quite normal in India to hold hands, hug, kiss the cheek in greeting, or put your arm around someone of your own gender. Americans should feel free to have affectionate contact with the Indian disciples, once they get past their own Western cultural inhibitions regarding such expressions. Engaging in one-on-one conversation with someone of the opposite sex is not approved, with the following general exceptions: a child, or an old person, or privately with someone of a family that knows you very well. To be alone in a room with, or walking alone with anyone of opposite gender, is to invite trouble and misunderstanding, because in India it would commonly be surmised that there was a romantic dalliance going on. In India, an unmarried man and woman would not even allow themselves to be photographed together, due to the potential for giving a very wrong impression.

American culture is very keen on comedy and joking, in a way that is foreign to most other cultures. Indians are much more sober minded, and you will do well to keep that in mind, as you converse with people. The accepted Indian greeting of respect among adults is to press your hands together near your chin, and bow forward one time. Never address or refer to an adult by their one name, such as "Sally" or "Robert". Always use a title, such as brother, sister or pastor, before their name, such as "Brother Paulose". To use a single name may appear disrespectful or condescending to them, even from an American. If you do not know or recall



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someone's name, you can always call them "Uncle" or Auntie".

Do not over-eat. This may seem obvious. However, the reason is NOT that getting stuffed is a social blunder in India. The problem is that some Americans, despite cautious efforts, end up with tummy troubles, and eating too much can tip the scale toward gastronomic distress. Added to the mix, you will be inevitably and repeatedly plied by the hyper-hospitality tradition of dinner hosts redundantly urging you to eat more and more, and more, to show how happy they are that you are in their home. Don't do it.

One last point here; throughout most of Asia, there is a recurring custom against saying, "No", to any request from an adult, especially from a guest. When you make a request of any sort, you must keep in mind that a hesitant or bland version of "Yes", probably means something a little closer to "No". Also using the word, "Enough." should prove sufficient in deterring further advances for food.

Elephants, cobras and bears, oh, my! Village pastors in India do indeed face, as the Apostle Paul did, "dangers in the wilderness." However, unless you spend a lot of time trekking around the Ghat mountain trails in search of unreached tribal villages, your far greater peril will be from **critters that you can't see**. Giardia, amoebas and a variety of malevolent bacteria are quite at home in the local water sources of rural India, as well as the rest of our planet. Be afraid, at least enough to take some practical precautions. Only drink bottled water, which is readily available in roadside shops everywhere. When you brush your teeth, do not use tap water for rinsing. If you ever have an opportunity to swim in a canal or lake, you are at risk of ingesting enough pathogenic water to make you very sick. Keep your face above water.

Jewelry. Elaborate outward adornments, such as jewelry, paint, piercings, cosmetics and tattoos, are an important part of the Hindu religion and culture. Regardless, you may feel free to bring your tattoos along, but keep them covered as much as is practical. For everything else, it is best to leave it all home, including any of the recent American fads, such as facial piercings. Indian disciples who are accustomed to interacting with American visitors will not be troubled by such things as wedding rings or small single earrings. However, in India, adornments are strongly associated with pagan religions, and the sensible policy is to leave adornments at home, rather than risk negatively adorning the Gospel you represent, in the minds of Indian villagers.

Money. For simplicity, think of one Indian Rupee as a worth a little more than two cents. Practice doing the math in your head, so that, in a hurried moment, you will not goof up by giving a baggage carrier a tip of one week's wages. A typical wage for unskilled labor is perhaps one dollar per day. You may encounter, in some settings, a lot of beggars in India, just like in most of the world beyond our shores. In India, the culture requires that only rupees be offered to a beggar. Never offer them food, for example. Even if they are hungry, for them, to be seen taking food would seriously shame them, even among the other beggars. Be very circumspect about giving to beggars, and defer to the advise of your Indian hosts regarding that (as well as in all such matters). You can very easily become thronged by urban supplicants, if they perceive you as being a generous foreign neophyte.

Carry Your Own Weight. As guests of the church in India, it is easy to lose track of the cost to them, of hosting an American ministry team. Vehicle repairs, telecommunication, meals, bottled water, fuel, electricity, transit fees, hotel rooms, insurance, and the support of BCM host staff workers, all add up to the real cost of short-term missions. The ministry hosts are sometimes hesitant to ask for funds to cover the expenses incurred along the way, as it seems impolite to ask such of guests. Make sure that your team is abundantly covering in advance the cost of your outreach. If you ask, they will tell you plainly what is needed for the outreach, and the cost of your stay with them. The best policy is to provide adequate funds in advance, or upon arrival. They will make very prudent and judicious use of it, on your behalf. Do not hesitate to ask how much things cost, if you are curious.

Take The Heat. Air conditioning is wonderful, but not ubiquitous, especially in rural India. There are three seasons in South India: hot, hotter, hottest. If you are not physically or psychologically able to thrive in serious heat every now and then, you will be more effective to not make the journey to India, but rather to stay back and work, to help support the team ministry. King David made this a strict law in ancient Israel. (1 Samuel 30:24,25)



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“Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking...” Some of your team members, if not eventually all of them, will be at some point called upon to speak to a large group of people, either in a church meeting, a dusty village street, at a conference, or perhaps at a school. If this will cause you to faint, or to run away in panic, let someone know ahead of time. Otherwise, be a good sport, and trust that God will help you through it, as He has promised. Do not count on being given any advance warning about your speaking debut. There is a custom among the disciples in India, to just sort of hand you the microphone after a few minutes’ notice, provide you with a multi-lingual brother to translate, and away you go.

When you speak, keep it simple, in concept and vocabulary. Testify of things you know or have experienced personally, as there is authority and authenticity in that. Speak loudly, slowly and clearly. After one or two sentences, let your translator interpret. That pause will give you luxurious seconds to consider your next words.

Church Meetings and Worship. In some formal settings, you may be expected to sit on the front platform in a special chair. You are their honored guest, and it is important to them for you to be recognized in this way. Cooperate graciously, even if you don’t feel like it. Always keep a small set of foam ear plugs in your pocket. There will be times when you are trapped socially in circumstances where the decibel level from nearby amplifiers could do real damage to your hearing. Be very discrete in putting them in your ears. During meetings, men sit on one side of the room, women on the other. Public worship among the disciples of Jesus in India is generally far more exuberant, demonstrative, spontaneous, extensive, loud and fervent than it is in American congregations. This is viewed by nearly everyone, and most likely by God, as a liberating improvement. Feel free to forget yourself and get right into it. It is very common for American believers to experience rather dramatic epiphanies during their sojourns among the churches in India, and to see and experience spiritual dimensions which they had previously only read about in the Bible.

Gifts. The formal presenting of gifts is an important matter in Indian culture, at least compared to ours. You may want to take small gifts for any special friends you already have in India, or for those you may become close to during your time there. Children always love gifts, but sharing never comes naturally to them. If you are going to bring little gifts for children, bring a LOT of them, and go more for quantity than quality. It is helpful to confer with the ministry ahead of time, if you need counsel concerning this.

It is likely that your time in India will involve village ministry with church planting pastors, or interaction with other facets of outreach. You will become very aware of daunting needs in just about every direction you look, and you will naturally feel compelled to help out in some way. That is good. However, do not make hasty unilateral pledges to take on such projects. Feel free to offer to pray about and consider a need, and then later confer with the ministry leadership. Your inclination to help with a particular need may indeed be a wonderful and worthy idea, but if you make open promises without counsel, you may end up doing more harm than good. Always check with BCM ministry staff. They are totally open to the Holy Spirit leading each individual, and they can also provide you with insightful wisdom to choose well.

Deciphering Caste. A final word on an important social nuance: The Indian caste system. Social class structure is endemic and ubiquitous throughout the whole world. The system entrenched in India is unique, in its extremity and rigidity. Tradition points to an Aryan migration from Eastern Europe several thousand years ago, which eventually prevailed over the indigenous dark-skinned Dravidians of India. Somehow, Indian society came to be ruled by an exquisitely detailed system of unchangeable strata, defined by skin color, birth, occupation and other factors. There is a relentless color code there. If your skin is pale, common people may revere you. (I once had a remote village offer to worship me!) If your skin is dark, some may feel more dismissive toward you, ignorantly based on their exposure to 2,000 years of race-tinged Hindu religious fables. Completely disregard any such attitudes you perceive. As an American, you will be assumed to be rich by most of the Indians you encounter, (outside of ministry staff). Bear in mind that most of them live on one or two dollars per day, or less, and you are probably the first Westerner they have personally encountered, beyond the movie posters splashed all over the towns and cities.

Americans tend to be very egalitarian, in that we enjoy an unusual degree of social equality. Any American reading this would be comfortable having a “level” conversation with Bill Gates, Maria Shriver or Colin Powell. In India, people from birth are pro-



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grammed to perceive that everyone they encounter is either above or below them. The Gospel message is against the tide of this in India, but it is a very strong and deep tide, despite church efforts to undo the hurt and damage of caste.

As always, speak the truth in love. But, avoid expressions of sanctimonious indignation, as we very much live in our own glass house, replete with glaring failures of our own.

Pre-flight Homework Assignment: Take the time, before visiting the churches in India, to google up a basic familiarity with the following characters of Indian and Church history: The Apostle Thomas, William Carey, Amy Carmichael, Gandhi and the 1948 Indian independence, Sundar Singh and Graham Staines. All this will help you to understand more about the India you encounter. You may not use every name in conversation there, but it will be a blessing to know, anyway. Finally, if you have not already read “Missionary Challenge”, do so. It is the testimony of Moses Paulose and the journal of Body of Christ Ministries. You can buy a copy from Amazon.com for \$27(!), or you can download it from our website, www.unreachedvillages.com. (Peruse the website articles about BCM while you are at it). It is in a scanned pdf file. If time is too short for you to read all 168 pages, then print up a copy, and pass it around for your in-flight enjoyment.

Call to remembrance the former days... No doubt, your team will take plenty of photos, and that is very important. If you are not sure about taking a photo of something personal or religious, just ask. It is a super good idea to take along a small blank journal and a reliable pen. There will often be moments of waiting, rest and travel, when you will find time to write down the thoughts, experiences and impressions of your day. Include details. Your grandchildren will appreciate it, and this will also greatly enhance your ability to convey a compelling portrait of your experience in India, when you return back home.