

Visiting India like going back several centuries

This summer, Maria Wawer, a UNB student, went on a World University Service of Canada International Seminar to India. This is part six of her travel story.

By MARIA WAWER

Good grief! Part six of a travel story? Isn't that a bit too much? But, let's face it folks, India is big!

After Calcutta, our intrepid little group headed south into the state of Orissa. This is a coastal area along the Bay of Bengal.

The rainy season had already come to this part of the country, and the region presented a strong contrast to the parched land we had seen around Delhi a few weeks ago.

Lush palm trees of all sizes stood guard over the soft green of the rice paddies. The air had a murky, steamy dimension. It rained every day in big, heavy sheets. The wetness only served to emphasize the greenery that sprouted madly everywhere.

With another girl, I had the chance to spend some time in a small village off the beaten track.

In many ways, it was like going back several centuries. The village was small. It contained about ten mud and straw homes. Rice paddies and some corn patches dotted the peripheries. Palm trees were all around.

No one in the village spoke any English. An older gentleman, who had once lived in this place and who was now the handman in a nearby school, guided us around, and introduced us to the people. His English was also poor.

Big groups of children followed us, at a safe distance, curious and chattering. The reception from the adults was much more cautious. At first, they were extremely reluctant to let us enter their homes. This is easy enough to understand. Who were these two strange females, and what did they want?

Only one or two people in the village had ever seen a non-Indian before. Both my friend and I wore saris, to eliminate the strange sight of women wearing pants. Who ever said a sari is cool? Try wearing a sari in 100 degrees heat, in intermittent rain, while slogging through rice paddies! It is equivalent to wearing tight, wet ropes, but much hotter. I really admire Indian women who manage to look so graceful in the things.

Finally, we were invited into one of the homes. The man of the house suggested, in sign language, that we have something to eat. A shy young woman in a soft blue cotton saree offered us some food — a type of fried, crisp grain. I wish I could have asked what it was.

Each house is quite large, and is built around a narrow courtyard, about five feet wide and 12 feet long. All the rooms open onto this courtyard. Each house belongs to a family group (i.e. usually a father, his sons and their wives). Each family group has a room or two.

The mud walls are a good foot thick, to prevent them from falling apart during the rainy season. They are pounded and polished to a hard, shiny finish.

Inside a dwelling, one finds several cots, a brazier for cooking,

and little else. Grain is still ground in the ancient ways: with two stones, or using a contraption I had never seen before — a low see-saw device with a weight on one end. Grain is put in a little hollow on the weighted end. The person presses the other end with his foot, making the weight bang down on the grain.

After the ice was broken, everyone wanted us to visit them. I have never been fed so often or so much before. It was like a strange, slow pantomime.

The inability to talk to these shy, hospitable folks and the necessity for sign language was most frustrating. Drat the language gap! Even if we had known the language, how could we explain who, or what, we were. Even our guide had never heard of Canada, North America or Europe.

Later we stayed at a trival school in the vicinity. This is a government run institution for young Santal girls. The Santals are one of the almost 30 official tribes in India. Most of the tribes were inhabitants of these regions long before Aryan invaders came from the north between 2,000 and 3,000 years ago.

The girls, about 120 in number, live at the school from the age of seven to fifteen.

The place is quite new, quite comfortable. The girls get their education, food and clothes from the government, and parents are not at all unhappy to leave them here.

The school is run by six young Hindi women. The girls seemed to be a bright, curious bunch, but

extremely well disciplined. When we first arrived, the teachers spent the whole day talking with us, while the girls studied all alone. There was not a murmur out of any of them!

The government is making great efforts to bring education to everyone. However, the curriculum struck me as very strange for girls who will probably return to their village to get married. Instead of learning practical things (including some sewing and health care) the girls were studying nothing but math, English, Sanskrit, Hindi and Orea, the official language of Orissa.

What also surprised me was the attitude of the school teachers towards the tribal people. One of the teachers had been there for six months and had never ventured beyond the compound. She considered the area people somewhat improper. Late one night, the girls did some of their traditional Santal dances for us. This is a beautiful art: quick, graceful, with definite sexual overtones — all in all, sensuous. The teachers seemed embarrassed by these dances. They giggled and made rude remarks whenever the dancing became more energetic.

Another strange thing found not only here but in many parts of India is the poor diet — which could be improved using available products. It is traditional to eat only white rice, even though brown rice could a major source of badly needed protein. It is most difficult to change such traditions.

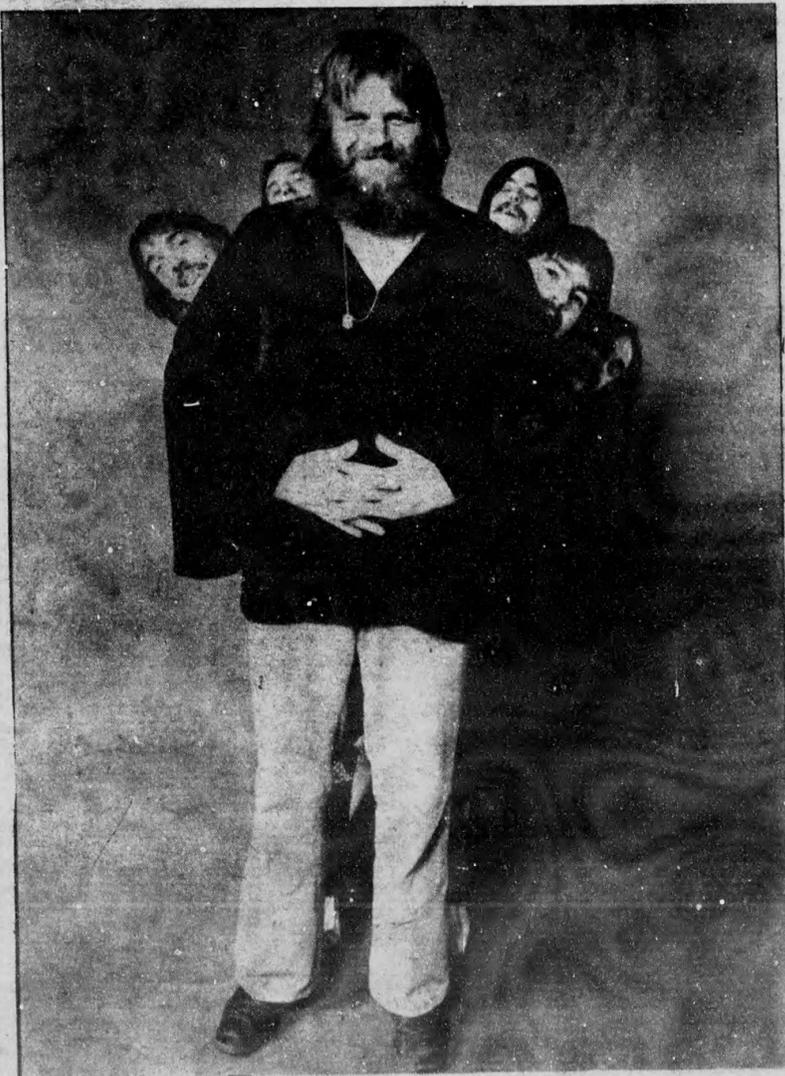
Fresh fruit and vegetables are

abundant during and after the rainy season, yet are seldom eaten as such. Everything is boiled and carried to the point that the nutritional value is halved. With this lack of nutrients, it is no wonder Indian women are slim and small. By Indian standards, I was big (4 foot 11¼ inches) and fat (secret).

One of the wonders of this part of the country are the temples. Famous examples include the Lingaraj Temple from the 10th century in Bhubaneswar, the capital of Orissa. The best known one is in Konark — the Black Temple of the Sun, a massive stone structure.

It celebrates the cycle of life, as symbolized by the passage of the sun through the skies. The entire temple is built in the form of a giant chariot, pulled by seven huge horses. Also, with its cossical roof, it is an enlarged version of a "stupa", a fertility symbol.

It is one of the best known erotic temples of India. Many of its beautiful carvings represent an important aspect of life's cycle — man's sexuality. Without this, how can life proceed? It is perhaps unfortunate that the spirit of earthiness, mixed with a lack of fear for the sexual act, has not been passed on a little bit more to modern India (at least officially?). This is probably the only country where the movie "Sound of Music" was censored. After all, one can't allow a kissing scene on the screen!



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