

## Daily Life In Mayapur

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### Travails in India

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Rested and ready for a new day, my eyes popped open at what I thought was a good hour, ready to get started, only to find the clock by my bed read 3:30am. I had slept for a good ten hours, but obviously my body clock had some adjusting to do to match the eleven hour time change between my home in North Carolina and this new day in

Mayapur, East India, just seventy kilometers north of Kolkata and 350 km west of Bangladesh.

Making as little noise as possible to not disturb my Finnish roommate, I went into the bathroom to take a much-needed shower. I quickly discovered I would first need to master some basics of life in India. Our bathroom was equipped with a shower head and one handle – cold water only – plus a drain in the white marble floor.

Getting dressed to the essentials, I slipped out into the hallway, hoping to find one of my more travel-wise colleagues awake. Perhaps I could get a clue on how to at least get a warm shower, if not a hot one. A young man from Ethiopia provided the following routine, which became old hat by the time we left Mayapur:

Step 1 - Wake up and get dressed sufficiently for public viewing.

Step 2 - Grab the plastic pail from the bathroom, and walk down the hall, then down one flight of stairs to the huge hot water cistern.

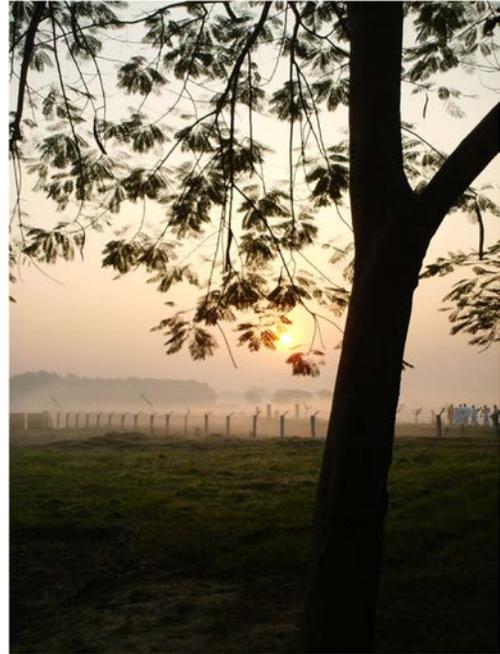
Step 3 - Fill up your pail with a sufficient supply of steaming water, but not so much as to spill over the edges while you make your way back upstairs to your room.

Step 4 - Once back in the bathroom, strip down mix the hot water with enough cold to make a pleasant temperature. Using a plastic cup, pour the mixed water over each body part needing washing to first get it wet. Lather up, then repeat to rinse off. Continue until all ablutions have been completed.

NOTE - One experience of not correctly calculating the pace at which the warm water is used up teaches the essentials of conservation. The only three alternatives are to finish

rinsing off with cold water straight from the tap, start your day with a bit of dried suds in your hair or on your body, or to get dressed and repeat Steps 2, 3 and 4 before finishing your preparations for the day.

Once appropriately cleaned up and ready for polite society, I ventured out of our dormitory into a pre-dawn world, ready to explore my new surroundings. A haunting sound of gongs and chanting wove a spell in the dusky light around me. Following the sound across the campus, I found it emanating from a large temple a-glow with an inner light. Row upon row of bald heads and saffron robes faced an ornate altar colorfully depicting several Hindu figures, with the blue-skinned Krishna and his bride at its center.



Brass gongs chimed ceremoniously while the devotees chanted sounds whose meaning were lost on me, yet their sacred intention was inescapable. Here was the heart of the ashram, and the core of an opportunity for interfaith cooperation and mutual respect. I sat

quietly in the back of the room, just observing. When a monk brought a bowl of burning incense through the crowd of nearly one hundred worshipers in the dimly lit room, I quietly joined in wafting its smoke over my head and shoulders, both as a sign of respect and to embrace the sense of awe and wonder which I was feeling. In the coming days, this visit to the early morning temple ceremony would become a centering part of my morning routine.

When the time came for breakfast, a group of us made our way to the dining hall where we discovered yet another contrast to our Western culture. Scattered across the entryway were pairs of every imaginable size, color and kind of shoes. In the US, one cannot enter a restaurant without being appropriately shod. The custom here is exactly the opposite. No shoes allowed! Considering the amount of powdered cow dung in the streets, that practice came to make good sense.



*Shoes at the cafeteria entry*

Our meals were served cafeteria-style from long tables, and always served with a smile and a greeting in impeccable English by ladies dressed in lovely saris. I learned later they were wives of the ashram's staff and instructors who had taken on this duty in honor of our delegation. The fare included a wide variety of good foods, considerate of the broad variety of tastes and preferences represented attending our conference. We came from every continent of the world (short of Antarctica). I could always find something familiar to eat, but soon began experimenting with delicious dishes new to me including plantain, spiced hummus, and a number of tasty foods and dishes whose names I never did learn to pronounce.



*Beautiful grounds and gardens of ISKCON*

Our days were filled with meetings, lively debates, discussions and one-on-one conversations. Our large assemblies were held in a two story structure on the lawn made of only bamboo and cloth. The shade in the hall provided a cool oasis in the humid 90+F heat of the day. Strolling around the lovely grounds with their green lawns, stone walkways and floral gardens was a daily treat.

When I complimented one of our local hosts on the fine accommodations they had provided for our conference, I learned a backstory that was shocking to say the least. In August of that same year, just three months before our conference was to convene, the nearby Ganges River had extensively flooded the whole area. Five feet of water had covered the grounds of the ashram, damaging the



*Interior of the bamboo Pandal or Assembly Hall  
with lawn-over-sand flooring*

clay-sided buildings and stripping away much of the soil and gardens on the campus. Once the water receded, it left a stinking layer of river mud and sand coating everything in its wake.

With typical Indian determination and the hard work of many hands, the local community pulled together to help residents of the ashram prepare for our arrival. New sod created instant lawn; blooming flowers were quickly planted in freshly defined gardens; walkways were cleaned off; the first floors of all the buildings were scrubbed clean, disinfected, and repairs made where needed. Most remarkable of all was the construction of our large Pandal, or assembly hall. A dozen workers had put up the structure in just three days, complete with a stage and sound system, finishing just one day before we arrived. The Indian people give a whole new meaning to hospitality.

Our stay in Mayapur was not all work and no play, however. Daily field trips enabled us to visit nearby sights to give us a deeper understanding of India and our host community. Having been raised on a farm and my father being a veterinarian, I was very interested in visiting the ashram's dairy. As with so much of India, its story had so much more to it than was obvious on the surface.

A group of us walked to the northern outskirts of the ashram's campus where nearly thirty cattle were tended in a complex of fields and large open-sided barns. The valuable animals had come to the ashram from local farmers when the cows had become so old or ill that they no longer produced calves or milk. Since Hindus have a strong prohibition against

killing cattle, donating them to the ashram solved the farmers' problem of surplus cattle while gaining good karma in the process. Little did they know what would become of their "useless" cattle.



*A devotee hand-feeds a brahma cow some banana treats.*

At the ashram, each cow is given a name and treated with loving care and affection as a valued guest. If diseased, they are given the best available veterinary care and brought back to health. Within a year or two, even many of the "old ladies" begin

producing calves and giving milk again. The herd now produces so much milk and cream that it provides for all the dairy needs of the ashram's kitchen, with enough left over for sale to the community. Amazing.

On one of our field trips, a brief ride by bus took us into the town of Mayapur and its surrounding rural countryside. With great pride, our local guide walked us through the town's newly completed pink stucco dental clinic. The clinic was fully equipped with an X-ray system and the latest in examination and treatment tools and equipment. When asked when the clinic would be open for business, our guide hesitated a moment, then admitted they had not yet been able to locate a dentist willing to come work in this rural area. They can make much more working in cities such as Kolkata. It had been six months since the clinic had been constructed and equipped. The community was still hopeful they would have



*Janne Karimacki of Finland and Judith Ondisah Mondi of Kenya visit the Mayapur Dental Clinic*



the clinic open before much longer.

The time we spent at Mayapur flew by, and soon it was time to leave the safe haven and add even more adventures to our experience of India. But that's another story. Continued in Chapter 4 – The Escapades of India Jones.