

## THE SADHU, METER GAUGE, AND THE BANGALORE EXPRESS

By Nick Gier

It was August 1992 and I was in Bangalore for my first sabbatical to India. This city of 6 million is principally known as India's Silicon Valley, but I had chosen a very different venue in this sprawling metropolis. I had my own monk's cell in a Roman Catholic monastery and I was deep into my sabbatical research.

After three months of study I was ready for a break. My partner Gail was coming from the U.S. and I was planning some excursions for us. Gail had visited the 64 cave temples in Ellora and Ajunta during a previous trip and she wanted to see them again with me. There were also four cave temples in Badami that we wanted to see for the first time. Later on we planned to attend the Goddess festival in Katmandu, Nepal.

We booked a sleeper car on the express train to Hospet, where we would then travel by bus to Badami. Right next to Hospet are the ruins of Vijayanagar, a fabulous Hindu city that was destroyed by a Muslim army in 1565. (Ironically, Vijayanagar means "City of Victory.") We spent most of two days touring the site with a local guide. There were still hundreds of exquisite sculptures and dozens of building remains to admire.

The cave temples at Badami are on a smaller scale than Ellora and Ajunta but still worth the effort. Two caves are devoted to the Vishnu, one to Shiva (with a very nice bas relief of the dancing Shiva), and the fourth built by the Jains, a small but spiritually powerful Indian sect.

Our stay at the government guesthouse was literally a riot. As we approached, resident monkeys greeted us by throwing garbage at us. They had also taken over the dining room and had left deposits from their own snacks on the tables. Our non-violent hosts, a typical Indian response, had done nothing to control their simian pests.

After enjoying the temples, it was time for us to return to Hospet to catch the train back to Bangalore. Indian bus drivers are very accommodating. They stop wherever a person wants to get off. Also if they need to travel a little extra way to drop someone off, it is no matter. We became concerned that we would miss our train, so we jumped off and found a taxi to drive us into Hospet. The road was one paved lane and a complicated system of blinking lights decides who has the right of way and who ends up in the ditch. The big trucks of course always win.

Finally we got to the train station and we ran in with our luggage. The Bangalore Express was in the final boarding stages on the far side. It was running on a "broad gauge" line built by the British. Before we could start over on the catwalk, the train pulled out of the station. As we stood in despair on the main platform, a Hindu sadhu—complete with dreadlocks, a long beard, and loin cloth—came up to us. He explained to us that the train departing on the first track—a "meter gauge" track built by the French—would overtake the Bangalore Express and that we could catch it at the next junction.

Initially, we thought that the sadhu had been smoking too much ganga, because this train's destination was north and we needed to go south to Bangalore. We had no desire to spend the night in dinghy Hospet, so, out of desperation, we took the sadhu's contradictory advice. The always-friendly Indians made room for us in the jam-packed third class compartment. The seats were hard but the company was wonderful. Our new friends offered us food, and the one English speaker named Raj explained that this train had to travel south to a junction before turning north.

We pointed out that the Bangalore Express already had a 15-minute head start and that it was a faster train. Raj assured us that work was being done on the broad gauge line and that we would easily catch up and overtake the Bangalore Express. Sure enough, we started catching up with the express, which now ran parallel with the meter gauge train. Raj held on to me while I hung out an open door (how else would passengers get on top to enjoy the stars?) to wave at the engineer to slow down. Knowing that few foreigners rode the meter gauge train, the engineer would know that I missed his train. The entire car cheered me on in my impromptu train signaling.

Within minutes the Bangalore Express slowed, but I was sure that he got a proper signal to do so. Raj, however, was certain that my frantic signals did the job. The meter train made it to the junction with only minutes to spare, and our new friends helped us with our luggage over the cat walk. The conductor was surprised to see us, but he led us to our compartment where we slept soundly until our arrival in Bangalore the next morning.

The Indian government has now relaid all the old meter lines at broad gauge width (a final victory by the British over the French), but we will be eternally grateful for that little meter train "that could"—headed north but going south to save us. We've also learned that because just because a person looks strange does not mean that he is not wise.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.