

Impressions of India

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The Scenic Beauty of India

It has been a year and a half since I came to India. I have been in close communion with nature and art of the Indian subcontinent.

When it comes to India, Japanese people in general tend to instantly associate it with a land prone to febrile illness and tropical disease, and danger of fierce animals or venomous snakes. Before I traveled to India, I was certainly one of them.

However, once I entered the country, I found that many things were not what I expected. Most rural houses and fields were not so different from those in Japan. I sometimes felt as if I were in my own country.

The climate in India is divided into three seasons: summer, monsoon and winter. But the country covers a large area, with mountains and rivers that vary in shape, with steep snow-capped peaks in the north and a vast ocean in the south. Between them abound fertile lands, vast wilderness, or wide forests. The climate thus varies so much that one can distinguish six seasons in a year.

In areas close to the sea, palm trees create a tropical atmosphere. Further inland, there proliferate famous banyan trees and bodhi trees, as well as abundant mango trees bearing beautiful fruits and thick-leaved evergreen trees. In the fields, cattle, goats, and water buffalo leisurely fill their stomachs with pasture grass. The way all creatures rejoice in the blessings of great nature truly leaves the magnanimous impression of a vast continent.

In the northern regions near the foothills of the Himalayas, during the cool season, the nights are cold enough to require considerable layers of clothing, contrasting sharply with the heat of the day. In the plains of the south, however, even during the coldest season, the temperature is comparable to that of March or April in Japan, a delightful climate where flowers bloom and birds sing. Thus, India is a land endowed with nature's gifts beyond measure.

The Ajanta Caves

During my stay in India, I spent about three months living in Ajanta to replicate the murals in the caves. Ajanta is located about eighty-seven miles from the railway station called Jalgaon. The road is mostly flat, suitable for a one-day tour by horse-drawn carriage or ox carts, though they are slow.

While proceeding along the road, one can find a single building, like an inn, erected on the plain about three miles and a half before reaching the caves. This facility was specially established by the government for travelers who visit Ajanta. Our group stayed in this house, going to the caves day after day to work on reproduction.

The road from this inn to the caves, which runs along a mountain stream, is not very steep. A long mountain range is raised in charming undulations. Looking down upon the distant plain, one sees an endless and expansive vista. That is where nature's magnificence fully reveals itself. During the daytime, it is not unusual to see deer and rabbits roaming along the road, large monkeys gathering in groups, and peacocks and other rare birds showing themselves among the rocks and in the treetops. Almost every other kind of bird and beast lives there, too. It is interesting to see them enjoying a peaceful life. At night, however, that area turns so dangerous that a strict official curfew is imposed after sunset due to the frequent appearances of fierce animals, especially leopards.

The famous caves are located on the mountainside, built in a quiet environment with superb scenery along the stream. The first one I reached was the tenth cave. The moment I saw the murals inside, I experienced a feeling that words and brushes could not express. Up until that moment, I had felt familiarity with them only through photographs while at home. But when I faced with the real thing right before my eyes, it was as if I had met a friend of a hundred years. For no clear reason, I could not hold back my tears of emotion.

Among the caves, the tenth and the ninth I saw next are said to be the oldest. I subsequently visited the first cave and proceeded to explore other caves sequentially from there. Some were halted midway through construction, and some of the sculptures inside are also unfinished. In particular, there were murals that had been half-drawn and ended in line drawing before coloring. I found them extremely convenient for learning the techniques used.

The murals have a variety of styles. It is beneficial to simply study the styles, such as those of the pillar paintings and patterns. Although the inside of the caves is almost entirely covered with murals, many parts have significantly peeled off.

The paintings are grand and free, which is genuinely continental in style. If viewed solely in book illustrations or photographs, they may appear quite vulgar and uninteresting. But, upon encountering the real works in person, one naturally reaches a lofty state of mind, feeling a deep awe for their solemnity, and cannot help feeling a deep reverence for them.

Of course, it is not the case that all the paintings in the caves are excellent; indeed, there are some that are vulgar and lacking in artistic value. But on the whole, the murals leave a deep impression.

There are also excellent pieces, among the sculptures, with a grand scale that should be considered representative.

Every day, we went to the caves located in that calm and secluded environment and quietly worked on replicating the murals in the dimly lit interior. Recalling those days now, I cannot suppress a flood of boundless emotions. When I arrived in India, I was completely terrified to learn that the entire area around Ajanta was a plague epidemic zone. However, as we got used to being there, our anxiety dissipated. It was most delightful that we could complete the work safely, basking in the grace of nature. To me, the three months we spent in Ajanta were especially fascinating and one of the most unforgettable times during my stay in India.

Pilgrimage to Buddhist Sacred Places

I have long had reverence for Buddhism, and consequently, I had a long-cherished wish to make a pilgrimage to Buddhist historical sites. It was an incredible delight that I fulfilled my wish during this opportunity.

Gautama Buddha traveled to preach sermons in the northern region near the Himalayas, an area that is relatively small in India. Lumbini, the place of the Buddha's birth, currently belongs to Nepal. In general, there are only a few sculptures remaining in the Buddhist ruins, and no noteworthy works of art exist.

Sarnath, also known as Deer Park in the Buddhist scriptures translated into Chinese, is located near Benares. A museum has been established there that displays Gupta sculptures in an advanced flamboyant and soft style, much like the Fujiwara style of Japan. They also have one of the pillars of Ashoka that is adorned with designs.

In Bodh Gaya, there still remain the stupa and its fence with Ashoka-style carvings. There is a small building where a small number of sculptures are displayed. Not many sculptures remain in other places connected with Buddhism.

The ruins of Nalanda Monastery are currently being excavated. It seems that a considerable number of bronze Buddhist statues are being unearthed. This was the first time I saw bronze statues of Buddha in India. A fair number of stone carvings and clay figures have also been excavated, but no single painting has emerged.

My Explorations in Art

During my stay in India, I mainly sojourned with the Tagore family in Calcutta, who possessed many antiques. The oldest paintings within their collection were from the Mughal period, with none older than that. The museum in Calcutta houses a large collection of ancient Indian sculptures, starting with the oldest relics from Bharhut and continuing to display items chronologically by era. It is certainly a must-see place in the city. The museum also has Mughal paintings, which can be viewed through special procedures. By utilizing classifications of sculptural relics from various regions dating after the Persian era, they provide valuable materials for research purposes.

On one occasion, I traveled into the countryside near the Himalayas to appreciate the natural scenery. Starting in the cool autumn, I set out on a journey, visiting various scenic spots and historical sites. Among those places that particularly remained in my memory is a city called Puri in Orissa. There is the Jagannath Temple, a major Hindu temple. It is a grand complex with over two hundred branch temples; it is said there are many sculptures within the main hall. But due to the religious custom strictly forbidding followers of other faiths from entering the temple, we unfortunately had to be content with viewing a few sculptures applied to its gates. One attractive thing about this city is the row of residences belonging to many painters who work on new wall paintings. Each house displays wall paintings as a kind of billboard and sells works that depict divine images. The atmosphere of the town, which retains what it used to be, is quite appealing.

About 20 miles north along the coast from the city, there is a temple known as Konark (The Konark Sun Temple). The locals say it is a Buddhist temple. But it does not really look like Buddhist, nor does it appear to be Hindu either, so its sectarian affiliation is unclear. The sculptures at this temple are quite superior, with some depicting sexual intercourse that demonstrate physical beauty. As the late Mr. Okakura is said to have visited this temple for research purposes, I also had an opportunity to visit there again. [The rest is omitted.]