

Stretching from the Himalayas to the tropical spice gardens of its southern shores, the dry plains of Rajasthan to the jungle territories of its eastern border, India is a truly vast country.

The diversity of India's geography is reflected in the diversity of its many creeds. Ancient faiths like Buddhism and Hinduism rub shoulders with relative newcomers like Islam and Christianity. Then there are the many forms of spiritualism, which also thrive here.

Scottish travel writer and historian William Dalrymple has been exploring India for over 25 years. And throughout his travels, he has asked believers to tell him their stories.

From a Buddhist monk who renounced his vows to fight with the Indian army to a Jain nun who watched her closest friend ritually starve herself to death, the result is a glimpse into the lived religion of contemporary Indians.

In this summary, you'll learn

- how caste influences religious practices;
- why a blind boy took to the road and became a wandering minstrel; and
- how the Chinese invasion of Tibet shaped the life of a Buddhist monk.

Chapter 1 - Jainism is a deeply ascetic creed.

Jainism is one of the world's oldest religions. Dating back to the third century BCE, it emerged in the Ganges basin – a vast valley connecting the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. This basin isn't just the heartland of Jainism, though. It's also the cradle of Hinduism and Buddhism.

These three creeds have an entangled history. In fact, Buddhism and Jainism were partly reactions against Hinduism. Both Jains and Buddhists criticized the willingness of Brahmins, the highest Hindu caste, to slaughter animals for temple sacrifices. They also disliked this caste's sense of social superiority.

All three religions have significant traditions of asceticism, the rejection of worldly attachments, and the practice of self-discipline. For Jains, though, asceticism isn't just one part of their faith – it's a foundational commitment.

In ancient India, Jain monks were famous for their refusal to wash. An early description of a Jain monk depicts him as being so dirty he looked as if he were wearing a "closely fitting suit of black armor." Jain monks in contemporary India are allowed to wipe themselves with a wet towel, but bathing in running water and the use of soap are forbidden.

Jains are equally strict when it comes to other ascetic practices. While Buddhist monks shave their heads, Jain monks pluck their hair out by the root. Similarly, while the former may ask strangers for food, a Jain monk must place his right arm over his shoulder. If passersby ignore this signal, he must go to bed hungry.

The term “Jain” itself comes from Jina, a Sanskrit word meaning “liberator” or “spiritual conqueror.” According to the faith’s scripture, there have been 24 great Jinas – human teachers whose self-denial allowed them to achieve transcendent knowledge of the universe.

As Jains see it, asceticism is the only path to salvation. This is why they scoff at Brahmins’ belief that purity rituals can suffice. In an ancient text, a Jain monk who is talking to a group of skeptical Brahmins argues that the only real sacrifice is the sacrifice of one’s own body. “Austerity,” the monk states, is a “sacrificial fire,” and his own life “is the place where the fire is kindled.”

As we’ll see in the next chapter, modern Jains continue to live by this ancient monk’s words.

Chapter 2 - The author learned about the beliefs of modern Jains from a nun in Karnataka.

One of the earliest prominent converts to Jainism was the third-century BCE emperor Chandragupta Maurya. The faith showed him the vanity of his worldly success and the sinfulness of the actions that had brought him that success. In atonement, Maurya fasted himself to death.

In the tenth century CE, a Jain general called Prince Bahubali built a 60-foot statue to commemorate Maurya in Shravanabelagola, a hillside town in the state of Karnataka. Bahubali also renounced worldly ambition. He retreated into the jungle and spent a year in meditation while standing perfectly still. Eventually, vines grew around his feet and tied him to the spot.

Jains consider him the first human to achieve moksha – “spiritual liberation” – and the statue is one of the holiest Jain sites in India.

Every year, thousands of Jains embark on a pilgrimage to Shravanabelagola. It was during one of these pilgrimages that the author observed Prasannamati Mataji, a tiny, bald-headed nun in a white sari, climbing up the steps to the statue’s base. Before setting her bare feet on the stone steps, Mataji gently brushed the surface with a feather – a measure to ensure she didn’t harm or kill a single insect.

The next day, Mataji explained her faith to the author.

All attachments, she began, bring suffering, which is why Jains like her give them up. This principle had led her to leave her family and give away all that she owned. For many years, she had wandered India’s roads, leading a life devoted to ahimsa, or “non-violence” and compassion toward all creatures.

Twenty of these years had been spent with another nun called Prayogamati. When Prayogamati became seriously ill, she didn’t struggle against this illness. Instead, she

followed Maurya's example and embraced *sallekhana* – a voluntary fast ending in death. Unlike suicide, which Jains regard as a sin, *sallekhana* is not a death of despair. Rather, it is about embracing the passage into the next life.

Mataji admired Prayogamati's decision – her faith, after all, led her to see this as an act of spiritual liberation. But she was also heartbroken to lose her friend and companion. This attachment, she told the author, had been the hardest test to her faith. She still felt the pain; how could she not after sharing her life with Prayogamati for all those years?

Chapter 3 - Kerala is one of the most socially oppressive states in India.

Stretching along the southwestern tip of the Indian subcontinent, Kerala possesses some of the world's most fertile soil and luscious vegetation. Often referred to as India's "spice garden," the state has been part of the global trade in spices like pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon, and vanilla for millennia.

It was these spices that enticed Greek, Roman, Arab, and Jewish traders from the Mediterranean into the Indian Ocean. In the medieval period, Kerala was the terminus of a trade network connecting Venice, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of India. Later on, the Portuguese and British empires vied for control of this seemingly blessed tropical coastline.

Kerala's bucolic landscape and agricultural riches only tell one part of its story, however.

The caste system in Kerala was long notorious not just for its rigid hierarchies but for the violence with which they were policed.

In the early nineteenth century, a British traveler called Francis Buchanan noted that members of the highest castes – Brahmins and Nanyars – were within their rights to behead a lower-caste man if he dared to step foot on the same road as his social superiors. Buchanan also documented the detailed legal codes that governed every aspect of lower-caste Keralans' behavior, including how they styled their hair.

A century later, Nanyar landlords continued to execute lower-caste tenants for minor infractions such as failing to present sweets as tokens of their submission. Today, this kind of violence is much rarer, but members of the lower castes – known as Dalits – still face caste bigotry from Nanyars and Brahmins.

Take it from Hari Das, a Keralan Dalit whom the author interviewed. A part-time laborer, Das digs wells for members of the higher castes. When these employers serve their Dalit worker's lunch, they use extra-long ladles to pass them their food at a "safe" distance. Typically, they also use plantain leaves to prevent their hands from touching any utensil touched by a Dalit. Once the laborers are done, these utensils are thrown away. Dalits drawing water from the well they themselves dug, meanwhile, is strictly taboo.

As we explore how Kerala's social inequality interacts with religion in the next chapter, we'll meet Hari Das again. This time, though, he won't appear in the guise of a well-digger . . .

Chapter 4 - Theyyam ceremonies allow Dalits to voice their complaints against upper-caste Keralans.

When the author first met Hari Das, he wasn't dressed as a day-laborer. Nor was he wearing the uniform of a prison warden, his other part-time occupation.

Lying flat on a palm mat in a simple hut, Das wore nothing but a white lungi – a type of sarong knotted at the waist. A young boy stooped over him, applying bright makeup to his face and body. His torso was covered in yellow paint while his cheeks were smeared with pungent-smelling orange turmeric. Paisley patterns circled his eyes, with white rice-paste spots and thin red stripes completing the effect.

This was the first stage of Das's transformation into Vishnu, the Hindu god who would possess him during the theyyam ceremony for which he was preparing himself.

Theyyams are religious ceremonies based around dance that explore social injustice. Unlike most religious rites in Kerala, they are not controlled by Brahmins. Instead, Dalit priests preside over theyyams, which take place in small shrines and sacred groves deep in the countryside.

The term "theyyam" comes from the Sanskrit word daivam, meaning "god." During the ceremony, Hindu gods incarnate themselves in the bodies of dancers. They choose Dalits like Hari Das rather than their social superiors for a simple reason: these gods, like the oppressed lower castes, are appalled at the injustices committed by the higher castes.

Typically, the story told during a theyyam ceremony focuses on a member of the lower castes who infringes on accepted customs and is unjustly punished, usually by death. One famous story, for example, recounts how a Dalit laborer was beheaded by an upper-caste farmer after being caught bathing in the latter's pond.

Appalled at this laborer's brutal death, the gods deify him and he becomes immortal in the local form of one of the great Hindu gods. This form is then incarnated in the body of dancers like Das. Together with the establishment of a local shrine and cult, the ceremony calms the god's angry spirit and enacts the justice that was missing in the laborer's own life.

These ceremonies help Dalits voice their complaints against the ruling caste while creating their own canon of heroes and set of rituals. Rather than being simple morality plays, theyyams give Dalit communities a sense of solidarity and self-confidence.

Chapter 5 - After a cave retreat, a Tibetan monastery student vowed to become a hermit.

Tashi Pasang was born in 1936. Like many Tibetans, Pasang's family lived in a house during the harsh winters and spent the summers herding yaks in the mountainous pastures above their home.

Pasang was 12 when he first accompanied his brothers into the mountains. He enjoyed the family trade, and things began to fall into place; he would also become a yak farmer.

This decision displeased his great uncle, a Buddhist monk. Pasang was a bright boy and could already read and write. That made him an ideal candidate for a monastery.

Farming, he told Pasang, might bring him worldly wealth, but no one can take riches into the next life. As a monk, though, he'd learn dharma – the eternal law of the universe. Wasn't that worth more? Pasang agreed it was.

The Buddha laid out four things that must be avoided in life – desire, greed, pride, and attachment. These passions bring nothing but strife and misery. Worse, they are illusions. As Pasang's great uncle had argued, the things that we gain in this world do not last. Even the bodies we inhabit are left behind when we die.

This idea was the first, and most important, lesson Pasang learned in his monastery. Of course, letting go of desire, greed, pride, and attachment is difficult. But there were ways to help a young man like Pasang forget about yaks, money, and beautiful women – techniques like meditation and memorizing holy scripture.

Isolation was another technique. After three years of instruction, Pasang was sent to a cave in the mountains. His task? To spend four months learning the value of solitude. Pasang performed 4,000 prostrations a day and prayed until hunger and fatigue finally overwhelmed him. After drinking some butter tea and eating a frugal meal, he fell asleep and the cycle repeated itself.

Lonely and scared, Pasang's first weeks in the cave were miserable. After 14 days, though, something changed. Suddenly, he grasped the vanity of pleasures and ambitions. His mind was clear, and he felt his sins being washed away. The hermit's life had purified him.

This, he realized, was true happiness, and he decided to devote himself to a life of quiet devotion. History, however, had other plans.

Chapter 6 - Tibetan monks renounced their vows and took up arms to resist the Chinese occupation.

In 1912, the Chinese Qing dynasty collapsed, loosening the Chinese state's hold over its vast empire. Tibet, which had been a protectorate of this empire, suddenly gained its independence.

In 1950, after decades of civil war and foreign occupation, the Chinese state – now under Communist control – began to reassert itself in territories like Tibet. Its forces quickly overwhelmed Tibet's small army. Within a year, Tibet had been reoccupied.

At first, Pasang barely noticed the Chinese presence in his home country. Soon, though, rumors began to spread that China wanted to destroy Buddhism. In 1954, there were stories of terrible massacres in monasteries. Slowly, monks like Pasang began talking about resistance.

Non-violence is at the heart of Buddhism, so Pasang's decision to fight and potentially kill other humans was not taken lightly.

True, there are some exceptions to this principle in Buddhist scripture. Violence is permitted if it prevents an even greater sin, such as the destruction of the faith. This is a form of sacrifice, though: the person who commits violence, however, justified, takes the bad karma that flows from this act upon himself.

The Tibetan resistance was poorly armed and organized, and the Chinese army quickly crushed groups like the one Pasang joined. He fled to India and joined other Tibetans in Dharamsala, the capital-in-exile of the country's leader, the Dalai Lama.

In 1962, China and India came to blows over a disputed border region. Previously neutral toward China, the Indian government changed course. Anticipating further clashes on the Indian-Chinese border, India recruited Tibetans like Pasang into a special mountain warfare unit. They were promised the opportunity to lead the liberation of Tibet.

This promise was never fulfilled. In 1971, India intervened in East Pakistan – today's Bangladesh – to support the local independence movement. Pasang's mountain unit was deployed alongside the Indian army to aid Bangladeshi fighters. For India, this war was a great victory. For Pasang, it was a total defeat. He had shot and killed men for no good reason – Pakistani forces, after all, weren't a threat to Buddhism. In his heart, he knew he had committed a terrible sin.

As a volunteer, Pasang couldn't leave the Indian army until 1986. He returned to Dharamsala and devoted the rest of his life to atoning for his sins.

Chapter 7 - Bauls' esoteric creed draws on ancient Indian religious traditions.

Once a year in mid-January, thousands of wiry men with tousled hair, long beards, and bright, saffron-colored robes gather on the floodplains lining the Ajoy river in West Bengal.

There, they build a huge, makeshift campsite. They light bonfires, smoke marijuana, exchange gossip, and greet old friends. When night falls, they gather around the fires and begin dancing and singing.

These men are known as Bauls, meaning “madmen” in Bengali. For over 500 years, these wandering minstrels have traveled northeastern India’s roads, stopping only to perform their songs. Bauls aren’t just musicians, though – their art is a means of teaching an esoteric spiritual philosophy.

Bauls are the guardians of a body of knowledge that stretches from meditations on breathing techniques to sexuality, mysticism, philosophy, and asceticism. At the root of their creed, though, is a belief that defies conventional religion.

God, Bauls believe, does not dwell in bronze or stone idols. Nor will you find him – or her – in the heavens or the afterlife. No, God can only be found in the bodies of the men and women who seek truth in the here and now. Provided you are willing to give up your worldly possessions, take to the road, and follow the path of love, you will find god.

The Bauls’ doctrine melds influences from India’s many different religious traditions. On their journeys, Bauls stop to pray in temples and mosques. They worship Hindu deities like Krishna and draw on the wisdom contained in texts revered by Buddhists and Muslim ascetics known as Sufis. As they see it, no single creed can hope to exhaust the truth of God. They all, however, contain valuable clues and signposts that can guide the attentive toward Moner Manush – the form of enlightenment known to those who have learned to love God from their own heart.

What kind of god is this god? Bauls do not believe there is a final answer to this question. In this regard, they draw on ancient humanist traditions in India. Take the Rigveda, a collection of Sanskrit hymns composed over 3,000 years ago. Like the Bauls, this text leaves questions about the origin of the universe open. Maybe, it states, the world created itself, but maybe it didn’t. Only god, it adds, knows – but, then again, “perhaps he does not know.”

Chapter 8 - A life scarred by tragedy led a blind boy to join the Bauls.

How do you join the Bauls? The author met one of these wandering minstrels, a blind man called Kanai Das Baul, to find out.

Kainai lost his sight when he was just six months old. His early years were filled with tragedy. When he was ten, his brother was killed by a falling ox cart. His father died a year later, the victim of an asthma attack. That left Kanai, his mother, and his sister.

Unable to work as a farmer, the teenage Kanai became a beggar. His neighbors were kind, giving him enough food to support the family. But they refused his requests to provide a

groom for his sister. They knew he couldn't provide a dowry and believed the family was cursed by evil luck. In despair, his sister died by suicide when Kanai was 15.

It was too much. Shattered by grief, he took to the road.

A passing Baul had heard ten-year-old Kanai singing as he bathed in the village pond. The child had a high, sad voice – the kind of voice that lends itself to the Bauls' songs. He had asked the family to allow Kanai to become his pupil. A blind man, he argued, cannot farm, but he can earn money as a singer.

The family had turned this Baul down, but Kanai remembered the name of the ashram – a kind of religious hermitage – where he could sometimes be found. He resolved to find the Baul and dedicate his life to singing. This art form would allow him to live the “life of the heart.”

Kanai was shadowed by a thunderous storm for much of his journey. Using his bare feet to feel his way along roads and through fields, he was soaked when he finally found the ashram. He expected to be turned away. But when the old Baul laid eyes on him, he welcomed him, saying that he had been expecting his arrival.

Today, Kanai lives the wandering life of the Bauls. This life, he told the author, can be lonely, but it is also fulfilling. When villagers in the rural communities that Bauls visit spot one of these “madmen,” they are overjoyed, crying out, “now we can take the day off and have some fun!” In return for a little fish or rice, Kanai sings for them. Often, these pieces mock the rich, tease Brahmins for their hypocrisy, and praise universal brotherhood. Above all, though, they seek to help common folk find their way toward the divine.

Nine Lives by William Dalrymple Book Review

A Jain monk struggling to come to terms with the death of her friend, a Buddhist monk who went to war, a Dalit who incarnates the gods, and a boy who turned to spiritual singing after a family tragedy. What do these stories have in common? Well, they show that faith in contemporary India is about much more than scripture and theological doctrine. Behind every story, there is a human struggling to square their beliefs with a world shaped by inequality, paradoxes, and distant historical forces.

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