

Today members of the JREF team left for our sixth Amaz!ng Adventure, along with a full contingent of adventurers and speakers like Ben Radford, Jamy Ian Swiss, D. J. Grothe, Jennifer Michael Hecht, and Toni Van Pelt. And last week, I, along with D. J., and Brian Thompson, were in Australia for a speaking tour, media appearances and the Australian Skeptics National Convention. But more on both of these jaunts later...

Right now, I want to report briefly on our recent tripto the wonder that is India. A few weeks ago, D. J. and I returned from an 11-day adventure in India, and I'll just say that it was exciting, invigorating, surprising, and very satisfying. We met a wide spectrum of people who welcomed us warmly, and it appears that our JREF message was well received, as well.

Personally, I was rather bewildered by problems with electronic communication, but I was sufficiently well rescued from that confusion that I stayed in touch with the USA all along the way. I'll add that the results of the US Presidential election quite satisfied my needs... Thank you, ubiquitous CNN! And that so many of our friends in India celebrated the election results with us, really says something!

My presentations to audiences were also well received, and I was flattered and impressed to learn that some few citizens of that continent underwent as much as two days of train and bus travel just to hear in person what we had to tell them. I also had many private discussions, and

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overall I believe that the JREF message was delivered on fertile ground. As you may know, India has long been afflicted with such "godmen" as the late Sri Sathya Sai Baba [1926-2011] who performed clumsy sleight-of-hand to deceive and cheat citizens of that land and thereby amassed a literal fortune. His amateur production of "vibhuti" – "sacred ash" -- from his closed fist, was his most common trick, but his Big Number was the production of a "lingham," a small egg-shaped or phallus figure. This can be seen exposed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yblhsr1O4IQ

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This trip, for me, was exhausting but very enjoyable. We met with a number of Indian skeptics and rationalists including Professor Narendra Nayak, president of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA). He is having such a positive influence on the culture of India, traveling the country giving literally hundreds of lectures and training sessions on scientific skepticism and critical thinking and — get this, folks! — it is actually funded by the Indian government! You see, according to Article 51 A(h) of the Indian Constitution, they have a goal to "develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform." Consequently, Nayak is financed to train hundreds, even thousands, of rationalists annually.

We also met a number of Indian magicians, including JREF friend the mentalist Nakul Shenoy, and prominent Mumbai mentalists Pradip Rao and Mohit Rao, who were our gracious hosts in Mumbai. While in that world-city, the Society of Indian Magicians hosted a public event in Bangalore at a beautiful magicians' performance space run by Bhupesh Dave. (My lecture received not inconsiderable media attention, which you can find here).) In Bangalore, the fabulous magic shop called

The Magic Space

, owned by the generous magician and magic manufacturer Giridhar Kamath (known as Giri), seems to have become the premiere venue for magicians to hone their skills and learn the art together in that fine city, and The Space hosted me for a number of lectures and events. I also did numerous public lectures at the KEYS Hotel chain.

I was especially gratified that so many eager young students of magic expressed their interest in bringing the JREF skeptical philosophy to their country, since that was the major purpose of our visit: we were originally brought to India to appear at the "THiNK" conference, which I believe ranks right up there with the famous "TED" meetings, having been to both. The caliber of the participants at this august event was simply exceptional, and I must say that I was exposed to several new aspects of scientific and critical thinking, as a result.

India, aside from such jewels as the beautiful Taj Mahal, can boast of major contributions in science and mathematics, the latter being of great interest to my late and great friend Martin Gardner, who held in high esteem such Indian mathematicians as Srinivasa Ramanujan [1887-1920]. I was flattered and pleased to note the surprise expressed during my visit whenever I mentioned that Martin had been a close friend of mine. I also "dropped in" casual mentions of my acquaintance with Jose Dunninger, Harry Blackstone (both Sr. and Jr.), Penn & Teller, and Lance Burton – all very well-known to the Indian magicians, I'm happy to say. I was even able to demonstrate a couple of tricky moves of my own that earned the attention of that tricky community...

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The JREF has made a name in India as a result of our visit there. It remains for us to cultivate and nourish that connection, and I am confident that we will continue to do so. And you should look forward to seeing some new faces at TAM and an even greater cultural and ethnic influence...!

For a photographic slideshow of highlights of the trip, click the photo below.



James Randi is founder of the James Randi Educational Foundation.