

## Christ's India Connection

*The Statesman*

*December 25 2017*

In the immediate aftermath of Gujrat elections, political pundits expectedly had a field day with their nonstop slicing and dicing of the poll results, and we commoners were getting thoroughly confounded by the proclamations of 'electoral victory', 'moral victory' and 'political victory' claimed by the rivals. Looking desperately for a more sobering subject, I was offered a pleasant distraction by an article in the latest issue of the National Geographic magazine on what archeology has so far revealed on the life of Jesus. This being Christmas time, a time for celebrating peace, love and harmony all of which are becoming more elusive with every passing day, I thought of moving away, at least temporarily, from the ceaseless onslaught of politics and intrusion of propaganda unto our lives which tend to turn us into thoughtless morons.

Many readers are certainly aware of the book "The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ" by Nicolas Notovitch, originally published in 1890 from Paris, which attempted to explain the missing years of Jesus's life from the age of 12 until 29, of which no reference is found in the New Testament Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John which detail his life and teachings. Luke merely says "And the Child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his sheaving unto Israel." (Luke, 1, 80).

Notovitch, a Jewish adventurer, author and journalist, had visited India during October-November 1887 and reached Leh during the course of his sojourn where he learnt of the existence of a series of scrolls written in Pali describing the life of a saint called Issa who had lived there some 2000 years ago and "until he attained the manhood, studied the laws of the Great Buddha". It was a matter of chance that while negotiating a difficult terrain in the mountains, he suffered a fall from his horse and broke his leg and was brought to a monastery he called 'Himis' (possibly Hemis monastery of Leh) for recuperation. There a monk showed him "two big books, the large leaves of which were of paper yellow with age, and from them he read to me the biography of Issa, which I carefully transcribed in my travelling notebook according to the translation made by the interpreter". The description of the places, terrains and customs of the people he claimed to have visited appear to be pretty accurate.

According to this account, Jesus had arrived in India at the age of fourteen "through the country of the five streams and Radjipoutan", where he spent his first few months in the temples of the 'Djainites', then went to 'Djagguernat' in the country of Orsis" where he spent six years studying Sanskrit books and religious manuscripts, visiting "Radjagriha, Benares and other holy cities". He "found much to blame in the Brahminical laws and usages", thought the caste system extremely unjust, and fell out with the Brahmins who plotted to kill him when he "took refuge in the mountains of Nepaul", the land where Buddha was born. He spent another six years in the Himalayan mountains among the Buddhists where "he found the principle of monotheism still pure", before returning home to Galilee through Persia, preaching a doctrine of love and brotherhood and against idol-worship all along the way. He reached home when he was 29.

While Christian theologian and scholars universally discard this book as a pack of fanciful lies without an iota of evidence, some scholars attempted to seek such evidence in Jesus's teachings which bore remarkable similarity and sometimes striking resemblance to the teachings of Buddha. But none else has

so far glimpsed through the manuscript which contained the alleged account of Jesus's escapades in India. Notovitch had difficulty in publishing the book in Russia and was eventually arrested and exiled to Siberia for engaging in "literary activity dangerous to state and to society" by the head of a ministry department.

The National Geographic article by Kristin Romey makes no reference to Notovitch. It follows the archeological trails of Jesus's life in places associated with him as described in the Gospels- in Nazareth where he grew up till adolescence, in Magdala, the birthplace of Mary Magdalene, and in Capernaum, a fishing village on the northwestern shores of the Sea of Galilee which actually is a freshwater lake, where he made his first disciples from among the tribe of fishermen – Peter, Andrew, James and John – when he was 30. The Gospels pick up the thread of his life from that point and archeological evidence more or less tend to support their account. The trails finally lead to Jerusalem, the seat of the holiest shrine of Christianity. Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre stands on the site of an ancient Jewish cemetery dating back to the time of Jesus. Christians believe that this church enshrines Golgotha, the place where Jesus was crucified, and a nearby tomb where he was buried and resurrected - archeologists in fact have unearthed an abandoned quarry at this site that was used as a Jewish cemetery. The shrine at the head of the Church of Holy Sepulchre, known as the Edicule, is revered as Jesus's tomb and believed to contain his remains. Within the Edicule, there is the 'Stone of Unction', where his body was anointed before burial and there is a flat stone, known as the 'Holy Rock', which is revered as the place where his body lay in its final rest. But here the archeological evidence grows somewhat cold and contradicts the burial practices of those days according to which the dead were placed inside long burial niches dug in the walls of burial chambers rather than upon a bench like the Holy Rock. Bodies discovered in the nearby tombs were all placed inside the burial niches. There was no reason why the body of Jesus, who was crucified as a criminal would have been given any special treatment.

In March 2010, Sam Miller of BBC published a curious report from Srinagar. Titled "Tourists flock to 'Jesus's tomb' in Kashmir", it identified an old building known as the Rozabal shrine in the backstreets of downtown Srinagar where tourists were returning after several years of terrorism related unrest. The shrine located on a street corner in a town full of mosques and mausoleums was a modest stone building with a traditional Kashmiri multi-tiered sloping roof. Through the gaps in the wall, Miller could see a gravestone covered with a green cloth and wrote, "according to an eclectic combination of New Age Christians, unorthodox Muslims and fans of the Da Vinci Code, the grave contains the mortal remains of a candidate for the most important visitor of all time to India". Though officially, the tomb is the burial site of one Youza Asaph, a medieval Muslim preacher, there is a growing belief that it is in fact the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. The myth found its way into the Lonely Planet, and started attracting tourists from all over; one foreigner in fact broke off a bit from the tomb to take home with him, when the tomb was closed to tourists.

I had read this report and my curiosity led me to a book called "Jesus Lived in India: His unknown Life Before and After the Crucifixion" by the theologian Holger Kersten (Penguin, 1981); in fact there are quite a few books on the subject. Kersten supports Notovitch's account as well as other accounts testifying to Jesus's sojourn in India during the missing years. Using evidence and elaborate arguments from religion, science and history, he seeks to prove that Jesus did not die at the crucifixion, but was only injured. He was 'buried' and 'resurrected' after medication, and transported to Damascus, where he lived in a place known as '*Mayuam-i-Isa*' (abode of Jesus). He arrived in Kashmir via Mari, (Murree, now in Pakistan), and lived the rest of his life there as Yus Asaf, preaching his doctrine of love. He died a natural death at a ripe

old age beyond 80. The story of Jesus's two journeys to India is also told by the 10<sup>th</sup> century historian Sheikh Al-Sa'id-us-Saliq in his famous work *Ikmal-ud-Din*.

I do not know if any of these accounts is true, and am not qualified in the least to give an opinion. But I thought this to be more entertaining than the dreariness and fatigue of Gujrat elections and its impact of the future of BJP and India. As far as religion is concerned, I do not believe in anything. But as Romey says, "to sincere believers, the scholars' quest for the historical, non-supernatural Jesus is of little consequence. That quest will be endless, full of shifting theories, unanswerable questions, irreconcilable facts. But for true believers, their faith in the life, death, and Resurrection of the son of God will be evidence enough." If that faith can usher in a little more love and diminish some of the violence we see around us, the faith will be well worth it.