



A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Mumbai

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But, seriously...

In April, 1998, I spent seventeen days in India presenting more than 30 hours of seminars on the topics of "Creating Positive Working Environments" and "Don't Postpone Joy". My work is both humorous and about the power of humor. I have sent longer and more general articles detailing my program preparations and experiences of this trip to *Professional Speaker* and to *Sharing Ideas*. From the specific viewpoint of humor, here are some of my observations along with some of the things I did to prepare my programs and to insure success.

In India, especially in the socio-economic levels of the participants attending my seminars, English is everybody's second language. I spoke slower than usual, at first, in order to make myself better understood. It was not necessary. Most of our idioms were well-known, and the audiences rarely missed "getting" the humor even when I spoke at a fairly rapid pace. More often than not, it was me asking them to speak more slowly so that my "American ears" could sort out their rhythms and pronunciations.

Way ahead of time, it had occurred to me to contact the school of business at our local major university (Ohio State) where I found two Indian professors who were kind enough to preview the entire program. They looked at the PowerPoint slides, listened to the content including the jokes, and tried out the active participation exercises. They were enthusiastic about just about all of it and encouraging that it would be received well. However, they made a few key corrections (replace "seashore" with "beach" in one joke),

and recommendations (find some quotations from famous Indian writers to open the program, such as the Indian Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, for example).

I received a key piece of advice for any professional speaker going to India from the speech-pathologist wife of a local Indian electronics engineer, during their preview of my program: "Be aware of the Indian head-shake-bob-nod." This is a pervasive Indian cultural mode of non-verbal communication that appears very much to be the way we Americans shake our heads when we disagree with the speaker. However, when Indians do it, there are very subtle differences in the motion and direction of their head movements and, most importantly, they are letting you know they agree with you. In fact, the more vigorously they do this, the more strongly they are agreeing. This took some getting used to, but after only one week in New Delhi, I was doing it, too.

There are several good websites about India, and many of them led me to Indian humor. We learned about an exhibit in Chicago featuring Indian cartoon art. Political cartoons are especially prevalent and an important clue to the Indian sense of humor. And, humor abounds in Indian movies. Even without sub-titles we could easily spot the influence of the Three-Stooges, Marx Brothers, Charlie Chaplin, and the Monkees. I found satire, Letterman-type Indian top-ten lists, and self effacing jokes which, even without speaking Hindi, gave me comfort because I could see similarities (east and west) in the structure of jokes and humor. Example 1: "How about the various buses where the mischievous have scratched and made 'Kewal Hilayen' out of "Kewal Mehilayen!!!!" Example 2: Question: How does the DTC (public transportation system) promote family planning? Answer: It requires that people "peeche se chadhen"! (When I asked an Indian friend to translate this one he blushed and told me not to use it from the platform.)

Good Humor Prevails

In my opinion, I made the right decision to NOT attempt to tell jokes about India or Indians, or to try to deliver Indian humor. I decided to stick with my American humor, and to let audiences know it from the start. Together, I said, we could learn something about humor by seeing which jokes do well across the cultures. Almost all of the humor worked. If a joke did fall flat, I readily acknowledged it and told the audience I considered it part of my "research". That line was always met with good-natured laughter.

During the "heavy tea" (that's appetizers, folks) prior to my talk at the Rotary Club of New Delhi, while meetin' 'n greetin', I overheard an American businessman who happened to be in town, telling our hosts what struck him funny about Indian names. They may have laughed politely but I was embarrassed for him. The good advice we NSAers get about using humor from the platform --or otherwise-- had been a reliable guide in my preparation and gave me a deeper appreciation for what this professional association can do for a speaker.

As we have long known, the bottom line is your heart and your attitude. When cultures clashed and language was a barrier, we found that sincerity, humility, and a warm smile carried the day. We had several object lessons that a smile is, indeed, a universal language. Once, at the Delhi airport on our way to Mumbai (Bombay), we were held up by a torturously slow-moving, somber, female, military security agent checking my wife's carry on bag. She had Pam holding open every pocket of her small suitcase and every compartment of every cosmetic and jewelry case inside, while making a s-l-o-w visual inspection. All that started to change, however, when Pam opened the little case that contained the Indian accessories for the traditional sari dress she had bought for the trip.

The security guard's eyes widened in surprise as she asked Pam, "You wear bindi?" (the traditional forehead dot that indicates that a woman is married).

"Yes, I do. After all, I am married."

A look of surprise, and, "You wear bangles?" (the dozen or more traditional clinking bracelets worn with sari dress).

"Of course. They go with my sari."

Half-impressed, half-disbelieving, "You wear sari???"

"Sure! I bought it at the Indian store in Columbus, Ohio."

A small smile from the guard, and, "You know how to drape the sari?"

"Yes, the woman in the store taught me."

"Oh, that's good!" (I thought the next thing would be, "You go, girlfriend!")

Now, Pam and the guard smiling and laughing worked like magic, because the guard then quickly picked up the official rubber stamp and marked our tags "Passed Security", telling us to hurry, she wouldn't want us to miss our plane!

Advice And Warnings

Everyone has an opinion, and we received many. some of them turned out to be false alarms.

1. Don't drink the water, ever, under any circumstances --not even ice in a drink-- unless it is from a sealed bottle that has been opened while you watched. (Absolutely true.)
2. Don't eat anything unless it is cooked until it is piping hot. (Often true.)
3. Don't eat any fruit unless you personally peel it. (Usually true.)
4. Do not eat dairy products; there is no pasteurization. (We took it to be true.)
5. Take two Pepto Bismol tablets after each and every meal and at bedtime to prevent stomach upset. (It worked for us.)
6. Forget rupees. Just take a stack of hundred-dollar bills; a dollar is worth a fortune to those people. (False.)
7. The weather is hot and your electrolytes will get out of balance: be sure to take along Gatorade chewing gum. (False, for us.)
8. The food in India is low in protein: be sure to take along high-protein power-bar nutritional supplements. (False.)
9. Eat 4-strain-bacteria yogurt everyday for a month before the trip. (Good advice.)
10. Be prepared for power failures; they happen daily. (Often true.)
11. The worst thing is the poverty; it will make you sad. (True, for us.)
12. The worst thing is the food; everybody gets sick, you will, too. (False.)
13. The worst thing is the traffic; there are no traffic lights, no lanes painted, and cattle roam freely in the streets. (Mostly true.)
14. The worst thing is the smog (False); there are no emission controls on automobiles or factories (Seemed to be true); the air will poison your lungs. (Exaggerated)
15. The worst thing is the smell (False); they burn dung for fuel (many people do); be sure to take along menthol inhalers to use to mask to odors (False).
16. The worst thing is the water (it IS dangerous for us American tourists); bring one suitcase just filled with bottled water (False).
17. The worst thing is the heat (False); it is stifling (True).

18. The worst thing is the language (False); Hindi is impossible (well, what would you expect?) and there are fifteen official languages and 1,000 dialects (True).
19. The worst thing is the politics (hmm...); there are political assassinations daily (False).
20. The worst thing is the sheer density of the population (well, there a LOT of people); there are three times as many Indians as Americans in one third of the area (True).
21. The worst thing is the bureaucracy (well, it is noticeable); there are rules and regulations and bureaucrats that impede everything, unless you pay big bribes (False).
22. There are monkeys everywhere (well, we did see lots of monkeys).
23. After seventeen days in India, you will be more than ready to come home (True).

We heartily recommend that you jump at the chance to go to India. We look forward to many happy returns. And, if we can help in any way as you get ready to go, call us.

Steve Wilson is a psychologist, author, speaker, workshop leader and consultant who helps people and organizations get the absolute most out of themselves while they love every minute of it. He is the Cheerman of The Bored of World Laughter Tour, Inc. and USA Laughter Clubs. For more information visit his website www.stevewilson.com, or www.worldlaughtertour.com, or phone 1-800-669-5233.