

JOHN MUIR *in* INDIA

A **Naturalist's Journey** from the Great
Banyan to the Snowy Himalaya



HAROLD W. WOOD, JR.

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For more information about John Muir, see: [John Muir Global Network https://johnmuir.org/](https://johnmuir.org/)

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Introduction

“The amber light is divine.”

- John Muir, upon seeing the Himalaya Mountains.

One evening, on October 3, 1903, the famed Scottish-American naturalist John Muir wrote a letter to his wife, Louie. Having been gone from home for many months, he was currently on the opposite side of the planet from their home in Martinez, California. He was ensconced in a hotel in the mountain town of Darjeeling, India. He wrote, “This so far is the most interesting part of my trip.” Using the same enthusiastic language he usually reserved for California’s Sierra Nevada, he told her he had just seen a most “glorious view of the highest part of the Himalaya.”

What was John Muir, so famous for his adventures in California’s Sierra Nevada mountains and Alaska’s glaciers, doing in faraway *India* of all places?

Like many, when I discovered that the naturalist and writer John Muir (1838-1914) had actually been to India for a month-long visit, I was immediately intrigued.

Even among enthusiasts of John Muir’s writings, few are aware of John Muir’s visit, at the age of 65, to what was then still “British India” in 1903.

Four months earlier, in May of 1903, Muir had been on a now-famous three-day camping trip with U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt in Yosemite. The iconic photograph of Muir and Roosevelt standing together on Glacier Point is frequently shown even today.

Image Intro 1

John Muir with President Theodore Roosevelt at Glacier Point, Yosemite, May 1903.



But many forget that before that month was over, Muir was well on his way to Europe with his botanist friend Charles Sargent (1841-1927), and Sargent's son, Robeson. When he wrote his wife in October, he'd already been traveling for four months. Instead of the hoped-for botanical gardens and natural areas, Sargent had dragged him to innumerable museums and art galleries, which Muir soon wearied of. They "did" all the cultural sites of London, Paris, and Berlin. In St. Petersburg, the Russian capital, Muir described it as a "huge semi-dismal old town, of huge yellow public buildings, war monuments[,] barbaric colored churches & cathedrals & palaces full of armor[,] jewelry & some fine paintings." Later in Moscow, he again found all the "guns and weapons most wearisome to behold." He didn't really perk up until visiting some beautiful forests in Finland and crossing the

temperate forests of Siberia on the Trans-Siberian railroad. But in China, he became sick with ptomaine poisoning, and spending more time on the train in his weakened condition was not something he wanted to do. He complained that Sargent kept urging him on, despite his illness.

Rather disgusted with the militaristic cultural artifacts that he'd seen so far, and not in good health, he could have stayed with the Sargents and simply crossed the Pacific directly to his home in California. But he wanted to see more native trees and great mountains of the world which he had yet to observe first-hand.

John Muir's Passport

Muir's trip to India included initial visits to Europe, including Russia. Going to Russia at that time required a passport, and Muir obtained one before he left, showing he was a naturalized citizen. But upon arrival in London, Sargent, who had taken charge of everyone's passports, discovered that all their passports were missing. Thinking they had been stolen aboard ship, Professor Sargent was able to obtain a new passport for Muir and the rest of the party at the U.S. Embassy in London. In fact, they had slipped into the lining of Sargent's suitcase and would not be discovered until they were back in Boston.

Emergency passports such as this were issued abroad by diplomatic and consular officials for emergency purposes only and were valid for only six months. Issuance of such emergency passports began in 1874 but was discontinued pursuant to an act of Congress of July 3, 1926.

Muir's new two-page emergency passport is shown in **Image Intro 2 and 3**.

Image Intro 2 Side 1 of John Muir Passport

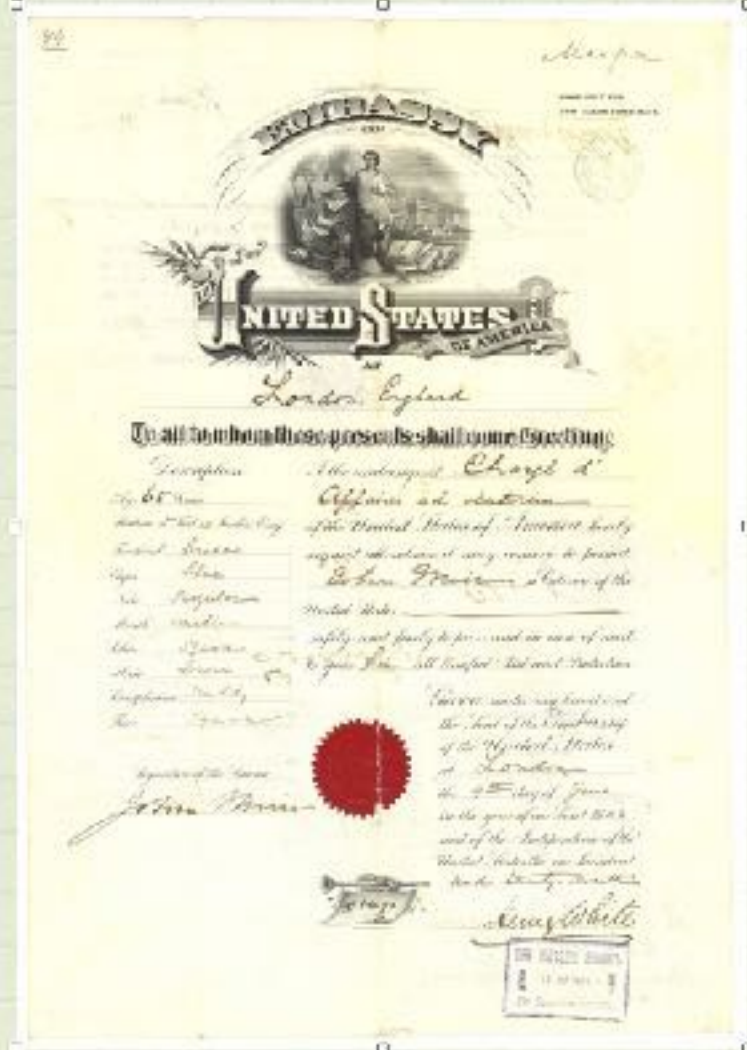
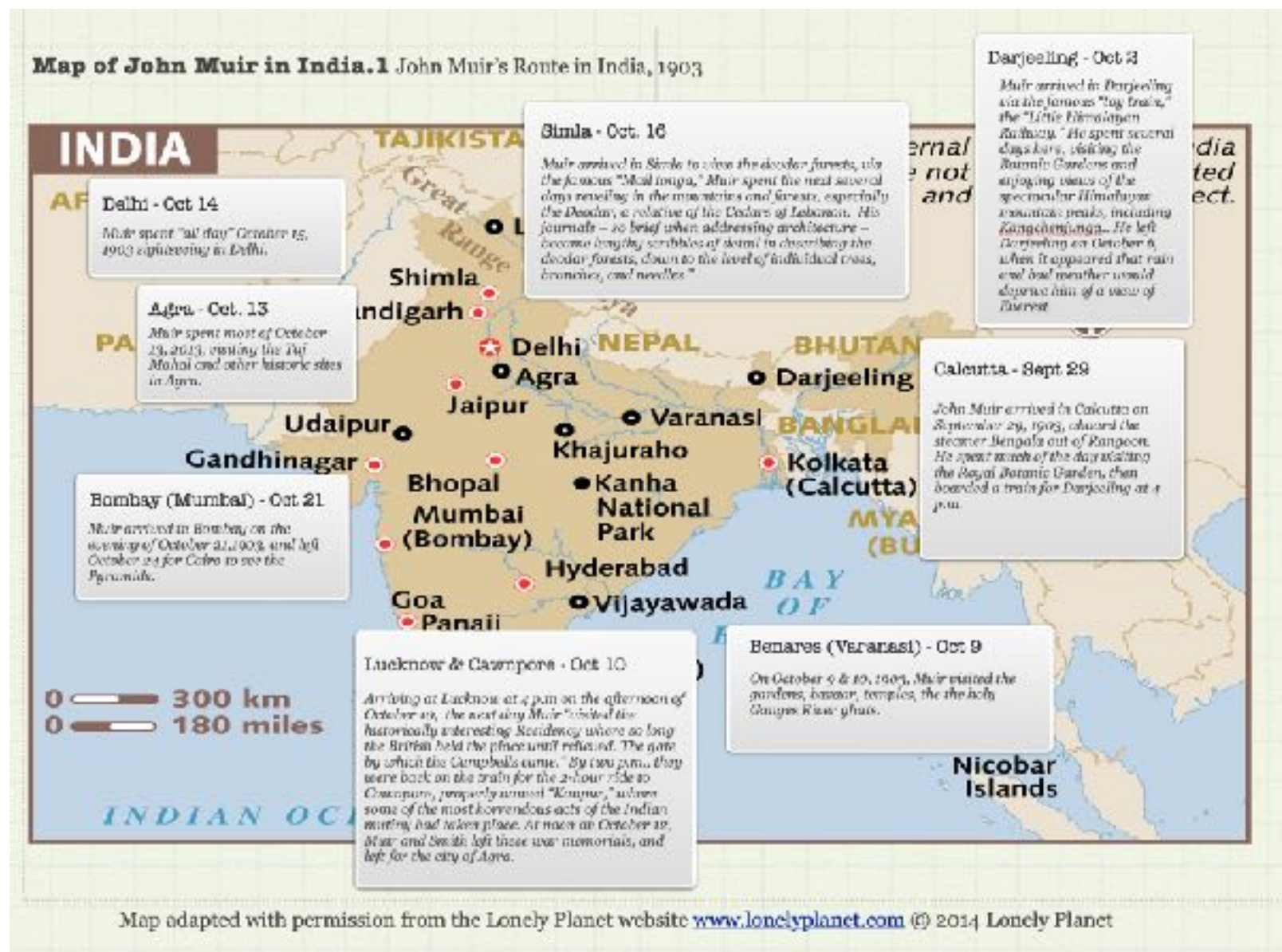


Image Intro 3 Side 2 of John Muir Passport



He left the Sargents in Shanghai, rejoicing in his new-found solitary freedom. His first destination, once he was free of Sargent in China, was India. Now he could concentrate on nature, not museums.

He had not originally planned to go to India at all on this trip. In his letter to Louie written in Darjeeling, he clearly stated that he "had no thought or hope of coming here when I left home, or indeed until I separated from Sargent."



John Muir's 1903 India Itinerary

September 29: Arrived in Calcutta aboard the steamer *Bengala* out of Rangoon. He spent much of the day visiting the Royal Botanic Garden, then boarded a train for Darjeeling at 4 p.m.

October 2: Arrived in Darjeeling via the famous "toy train," the "Little Himalayan Railway." He spent several days here, visiting the Botanic Gardens and enjoying views of the spectacular Himalayan mountain peaks, including Kangchenjunga.. He left Darjeeling on October 6, when it appeared that rain and bad weather would deprive him of a view of Everest.

October 9 & 10: Benares - visited the gardens, bazaar, temples, and the the holy Ganges River ghats.

October 10 & 11: Lucknow & Cawnpore - visited the sites of the "Indian mutiny" and British war memorials.

October 12 & 13: Agra - Visited the Taj Mahal and other historic sites in Agra.

October 14: - Delhi - Sightseeing in Delhi.

October 15: Simla - Arrived in Simla via the famous "Mail Tonga," walked through the deodar forests and reveling in the mountains.

October 21: Bombay - Arrived in Bombay, made travel arrangements, and left on October 24 bound for Cairo to see the Pyramids.

Muir's wanderlust is contradicted in some of his writings, if not his actions. He had earlier written, "All the wild world is beautiful, and it matters but little where we go, to highlands or lowlands, woods or plains, on the sea or land or down among the crystals of waves or high in a balloon in the sky; through all the climates, hot or cold, storms and calms, everywhere and always we are in God 's eternal beauty and love." In the same passage, he asserts that "the spot where we chance to be always seems the best, and it requires a distinct effort of the will to get oneself in motion for a change of place."

But the chance to see beautiful forests, magnificent mountains, and wonderful glaciers would always inspire him.

As one contemporary newspaper account of his trip on his return explained, "Where other travelers find good, bad, or indifferent hotels, Muir found mountains and trees which he greeted in every land he visited as old friends."

And even - - despite his fondness for mountains and glaciers, "So also in the glorious exuberance of the tropics we would abide forever, were we not driven and pulled away by the same mysterious forces that send birds and animals on their travels."

I can imagine why Muir would find the idea of going to India appealing. Although I am California-born, I lived an entire year as an 11-year-old boy in India, 58 years after John Muir's visit. I've been to India twice since then.

When I was a boy living in India, I pined for California's national parks because my father had often taken me on camping and fishing trips, and I was already feeling the same love for wilderness that John Muir had. My homesickness as a boy in India was alleviated somewhat by visits to some of the beauty spots of northern India. Just as Muir adventured in bits of wildness as a boy, I pretended I was a

world explorer by clambering up a tiny canyon stream located near my boarding school located in the Himalayan foothills. From these forests, I could glimpse snow-capped peaks far above. Climbing up the trail through the forest every morning to get to school, I loved the beauty of the unique flowers and trees, though sometimes found the monkeys throwing fruit at me an irritant.

Later with my family, I reveled in the beauty of the lakes and mountains of Kashmir; I watched wild rhinos in northeast India and heard thrilling tales of tigers while riding an elephant through their habitat. We visited the wettest spot on Earth at Cherapunji, a beautiful mountain area covered with vegetation, and I regularly climbed a tall pine in my backyard in the hill-station of Shillong, from where I could see surrounding tree-tops among the hills. Like the average tourist, I saw the Taj Mahal, and plenty of cities, but was fortunate to actually live in some of India's more remote landscapes, among forests and scenic hillsides.

I wished that the "travel diary" my mother made me keep had more passages about my boyhood life in India. Alas, it emphasized only the "travel days" going to India and back, with only a few scant passages written about India itself. And yet, it was the year living there that is forever imprinted in my memories as a major turning point in my life.

John Muir started keeping a journal in his twenties, and years later at the same age, I would too. Muir's journals began at least as early as 1867 and spanned through 1911. Fortunately, he kept a journal of his world tour in 1903-04, as part of that lifelong habit. That is the source for much of this book. Unfortunately for us, this journal was often much more of a limited "travel diary," unlike his earlier lengthy rapturous essays he penned while exploring alone in the Sierra Nevada in his youth. But I often think that journal-writing, as practiced by Muir and many of his contemporaries, is something that all of us can learn from and emulate. See my essay "Journal Writing with John Muir" <https://planetpatriot.net/journal-writing-with-john-muir>

When I returned from India to California, my continuing interest in mountain forests, meadows, lakes, and peaks, and equally in desert landscapes, would lead me to discover, in junior high school, the writings of John Muir. I became enthralled with his adventurous and poetic writings about nature.

At the same time, the chaotic diversity and exotic wonders of India continued to hold a fascination for me that is impossible for anyone who has been there to forget.

My interest in both India and John Muir grew steadily over the years. After 1994, as I launched the [John Muir Exhibit website](https://johnmuir.org/), my interest only grew as people from around the world contacted me with questions about Muir. (A few years later, this growing interest resulted in the [John Muir Global Network https://johnmuir.org/](https://johnmuir.org/), with special emphasis on Muir's world travels and the growing inspiration his life and legacy brings to people around the world.)

Figure Intro 1 John Muir Exhibit Website

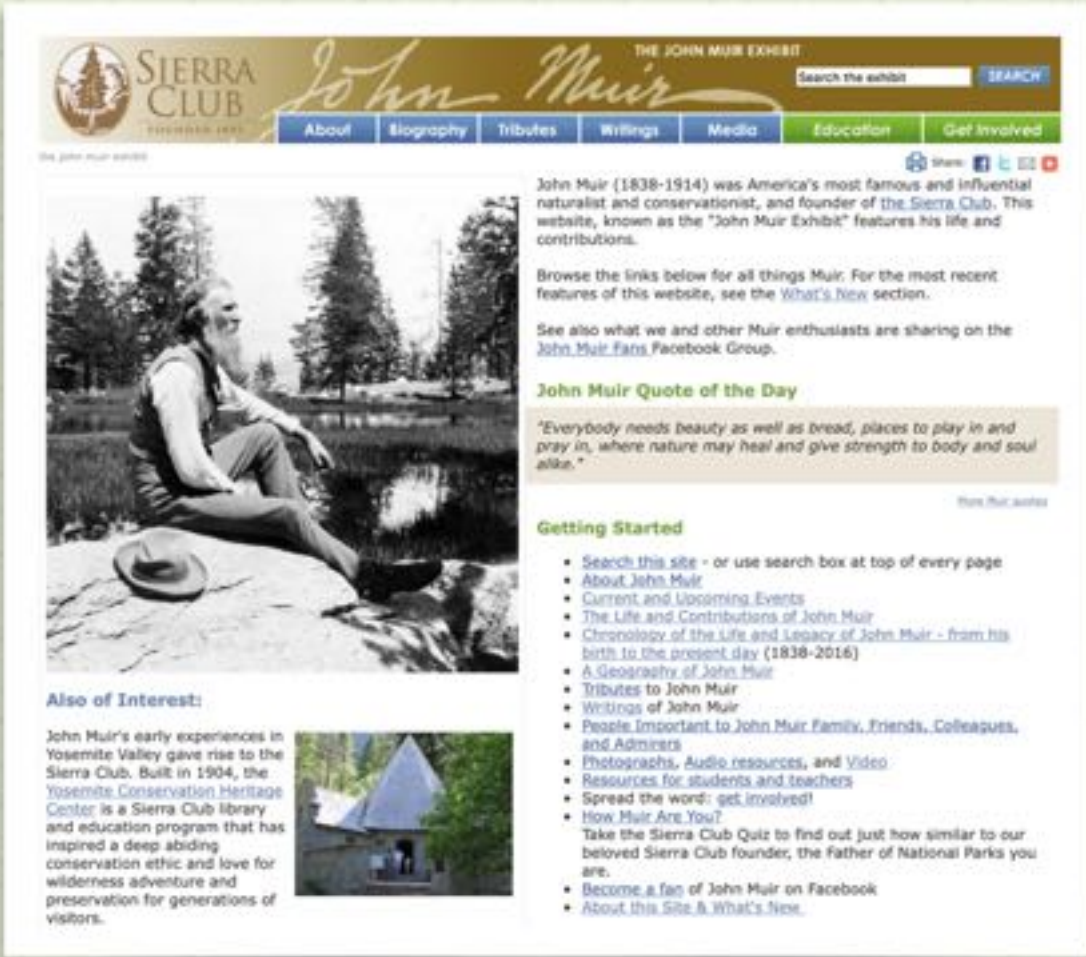


Figure Intro 1 John Muir Exhibit Website

The screenshot displays the homepage of the John Muir Exhibit website. At the top, the Sierra Club logo is on the left, and the text "THE JOHN MUIR EXHIBIT" is on the right. Below the logo is a search bar with the text "Search the exhibit" and a "SEARCH" button. A navigation bar with links for "About", "Biography", "Tributes", "Writings", "Media", "Education", and "Get Involved" is positioned below the search bar. The main content area features a large photograph of John Muir sitting by a stream. To the right of the photo is a paragraph about John Muir (1838-1914) and a "John Muir Quote of the Day". Below the quote is a "Getting Started" section with a list of links. On the left side, there is a section titled "Also of Interest:" with a paragraph about the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center and a small photograph of the center.

John Muir (1838-1914) was America's most famous and influential naturalist and conservationist, and founder of the Sierra Club. This website, known as the "John Muir Exhibit" features his life and contributions.

Browse the links below for all things Muir. For the most recent features of this website, see the [What's New](#) section.

See also what we and other Muir enthusiasts are sharing on the [John Muir Fans Facebook Group](#).

John Muir Quote of the Day

"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike."

Getting Started

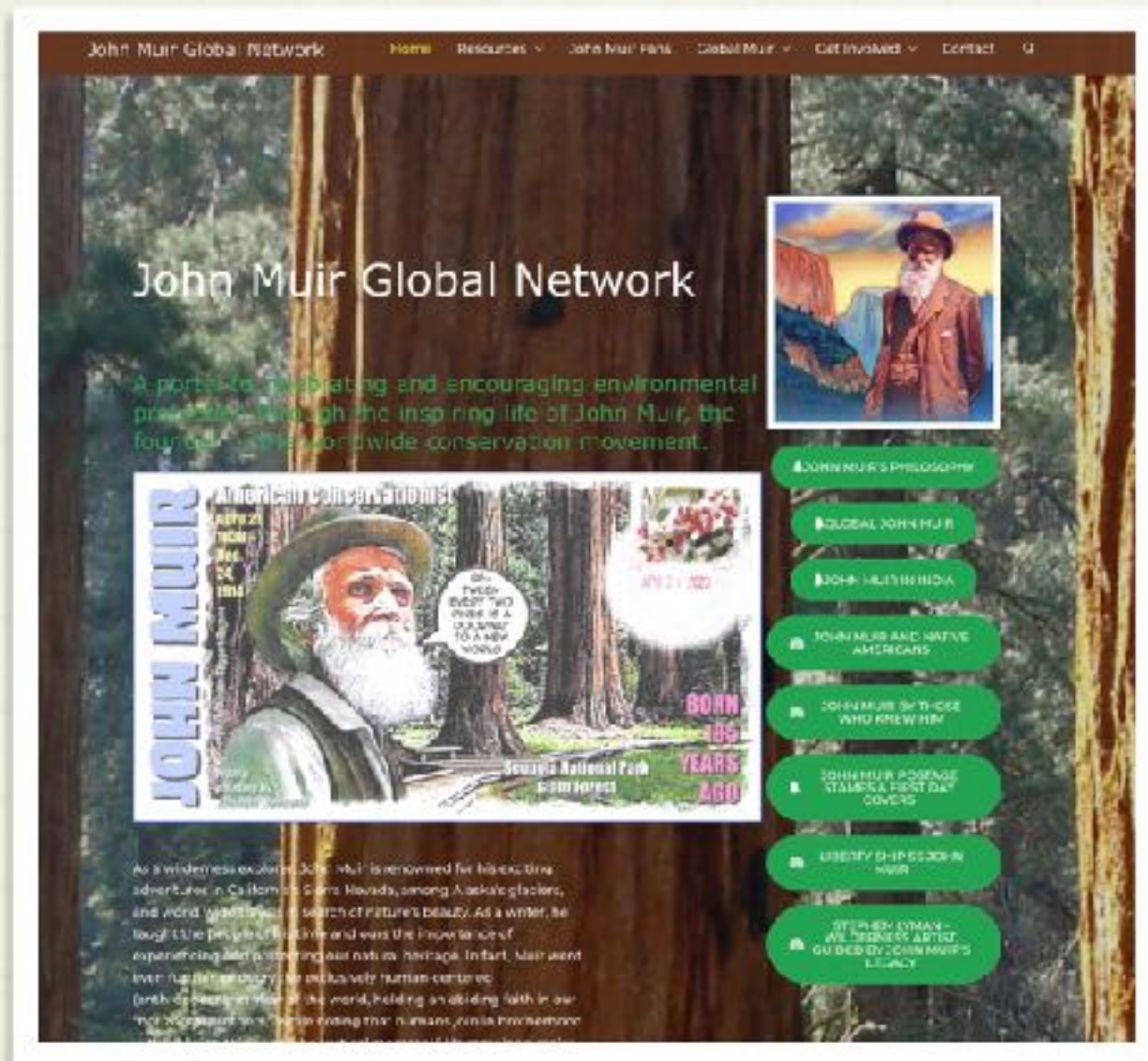
- [Search this site](#) - or use search box at top of every page
- [About John Muir](#)
- [Current and Upcoming Events](#)
- [The Life and Contributions of John Muir](#)
- [Chronology of the Life and Legacy of John Muir - from his birth to the present day \(1838-2016\)](#)
- [A Geography of John Muir](#)
- [Tributes to John Muir](#)
- [Writings of John Muir](#)
- [People Important to John Muir Family, Friends, Colleagues, and Admirers](#)
- [Photographs, Audio resources, and Video](#)
- [Resources for students and teachers](#)
- [Spread the word: get involved!](#)
- [How Muir Are You?](#)
- [Take the Sierra Club Quiz to find out just how similar to our beloved Sierra Club founder, the Father of National Parks you are.](#)
- [Become a fan of John Muir on Facebook](#)
- [About this Site & What's New](#)

Also of Interest:

John Muir's early experiences in Yosemite Valley gave rise to the Sierra Club. Built in 1904, the [Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center](#) is a Sierra Club library and education program that has inspired a deep abiding conservation ethic and love for wilderness adventure and preservation for generations of visitors.

Visit this site at: https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/

Figure Intro 2 John Muir Global Network Website



Most of the questions came from the U.S., Canada, and Scotland. But in 2003, a student in New Delhi, India, contacted me for more information about John Muir for a school project. This reminded me that Muir had spent a year in India, but I realized I didn't then know much about his sojourn there.

I was intrigued by the idea of combining what I knew about India with what I knew about John Muir. I embarked on a study of Muir's original journals and letters during his India sojourn, and with photo research provided by my Indian correspondent, I presented a preliminary slide show of the results at the 2006 John Muir conference held at the University of the Pacific. This ebook is a significant expansion of that original presentation.

In 2023, as I was working to complete this book, I was glad to learn about two people in India who were working to re-trace John Muir's visit to India: tourism specialists Professor Chander Mohan Parsheera (Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, India) and his associate Ms. Surjeet (Eshita) Chatterjee. I soon began a regular correspondence with Dr. Parsheera, exchanging messages as he and his colleague deeply researched Muir's archival writings. I gladly assisted his research with an early copy of this book, and shared many of the resources that I had found in researching it. I avidly followed their travels as the two authors then physically traveled through several states throughout India retracing Muir's travels there. Their on-site visits to the locations John Muir explored during his India tour in 1903 often included extensive interviews with hotel staff, railway officials, and botanic garden authorities to gather insights and contextual information. Many of the people they met wanted to learn more about John Muir, and to find ways to recognize his forgotten visit to their location so long ago.

The result of their research is a new book, John Muir Trail India | *A Book for Nature Lovers on the Man Who Inspired the Leave-No-Trace Philosophy*, published in India in early 2026. Their book is quite different from this one, as it focuses on the present while here I focus on what things were like during Muir's 1903 visit. Dr. Parsheera asked me to write the Foreword for their book, which I was happy to do! As tourism scholars and researchers, Dr. Parsheera and Ms. Chatterjee early on recognized that "The John Muir Trail [in California] is a pillar of eco-tourism, blending economic growth with environmental stewardship and creating transformative experiences for adventurers worldwide." They recognized that "The trail helps tourists connect with John Muir's legacy, emphasizing the value of protecting natural resources and landscapes." They quickly realized that modern-day treks along Muir's route *in other places* could similarly inspire today's travelers. Thus, the authors assert that following John Muir's trail in India would "not only promote tourism in multiple regions of India but also encourage collaborative efforts in environmental education and sustainable development." To this end, Dr. Parsheera's and Ms. Chatterjee's contribution is an important addition to John Muir's legacy.

Figure Intro 3
John Muir Trail India Book Cover

John Muir Trail India



CHANDER MOHAN PARSHEERA
SURJEET CHATTERJEE

Source: Penguin Books India

<https://www.penguin.co.in/book/john-muir-trail-india-a-book-for-nature-lovers-on-the-man-who-inspired-the-leave-no-trace-philosophy/>

John Muir wrote in 1890: “Every excursion that I have made in all my rambling life has been fruitful and delightful, from the smallest indefinite saunter an hour or two in length to the noblest summer’s flight.”

Although the prime objective of Muir’s visit to India, not surprisingly, was to see the mighty Himalayan mountains, glaciers, and their Deodar cedar forests, his visit also included a somewhat typical tourist sojourn to the historic cities of Benares, Lucknow, Cawnpore, Agra, and Delhi.

Not a huge fan of architectural sites, Muir wrote only a little about the man-made historical monuments and buildings he saw, but he expressed sympathetic and sometimes witty commentary about historical, cultural, and religious features that

by necessity figure prominently in most India travelogues. Muir even wrote with evident delight about some of his modes of transportation, including Darjeeling's famous and historic "toy train," and Simla's exciting pre-railroad "mail tonga," which Rudyard Kipling celebrated in verse.

Muir also witnessed and described the scenes of religious devotion along the banks of the Ganges River at Benares, which remain profoundly fascinating.

In virtually all of his writing, especially when transforming his journals to published writings, Muir often omitted facts regarding people he encountered or traveled with, names of places he visited or stayed, routes he took, or his modes of transportation. His expressed purpose in his published writing was typically to "entice people to look at nature's loveliness." His method was to describe a sacralized, divine landscape, a benign wilderness which to him was "Nature's warm heart." But many of his journals give notations of the names of people he met and where they were from. So Muir's interest in people as well as places and nature is more evident in his journal entries than in his published writings.

It can be readily inferred from his journal on virtually all of his travels, as well as from his extensive correspondence, that Muir was a spirited conversationalist and delighted in social exchange with other people. Clearly, Muir spent many hours talking by the fireside hearths of friends or new acquaintances he made in his travels. On mountain excursions as a younger man, this might be around a campfire with fellow travelers; but in his later travels in his 60's and 70's, it may just have often been in a hotel, a restaurant, a train car, or a steamship.

So, reading Muir's journal entries of India results in some surprising insights. For one thing, compared to his contemporaries, Muir exhibited a notable and unique tolerance when encountering a culture that was alien and even repugnant to the Western mind-set of his time.

As his friend, *Century* magazine editor Robert Underwood Johnson, wrote: "A delightful feature of our campfire talks was Muir's Scotch humor." Despite his mock contempt for man he was deeply interested in human nature..."

On his Indian sojourn, just as on his trips in the American West, Muir engaged in plenty of "friendly repartee" with people he met, native and non-native alike.

As his friend and editor, Francis H. Allen, commented: “In more intimate relations he was a ‘born tease,’ and he delighted to take his friends ‘down a peg’ when he thought it advisable, all with the greatest good humor.”

As Robert Underwood Johnson further tells us, Muir “loved companions and craved good talk, and was glad to have others with him on his tramps, but he rarely found congenial friends who cared for the adventures in which he reveled.”

And so it was that on his trip to India, Muir no longer had the Sargents as traveling companions, and was rather glad to be rid of them. But despite initially reveling in being “alone,” he quickly found another congenial person to accompany him on much of his excursion to India. That person may seem to be an unlikely match in temperament, but it turns out that he became a most amiable companion throughout the first half of Muir’s excursion to India. William Lord Smith was a big game hunter, who was in the middle of an around-the-world trip to hunt big cats. Muir and he apparently enjoyed traveling together, and became good friends. As a younger man, it seems that Smith, a seasoned traveler, often assisted the older Muir in making and implementing their travel arrangements. William Lord Smith’s life is so interesting, I have added an appendix to this book to tell more about his life and his relationship with John Muir. See Chapter 11, William Lord Smith.

While Smith’s interest as a naturalist was in hunting big game, especially big cats, by contrast, Muir’s interest as a naturalist was firstly the plant world, and secondly the glaciers and peaks of mountains; and he found those both in abundance in India.

Accordingly, as soon as arriving in Calcutta, Muir made haste to make a pilgrimage to the Great Banyan Tree - still living today - in the Royal Botanic Gardens. Then in Darjeeling, he and Smith spent some rainy days barely catching glimpses of the snow-capped peaks. At Simla, he gloried in the Deodar forests, writing more detail in his journal about them than any other phenomena he saw.

And so we see that Muir’s visit to India was not utterly random. Even before his world travels, Muir had an interest in the botanical and geological features of the Himalayas, which was his prime reason for going to India. His visit - and his tentative preparation for it even before leaving with Sargent - showed that he held

a strong fascination with India, especially its trees, mountains, and wildlife. Indeed, in a 1873 newspaper report from Wisconsin, it was reported that when Muir was shown some photographs of the Himalayas, he said, "I must study those Himalayan glaciers - after I have finished with [Yosemite] Valley." The journalist laments that if Muir goes to India, "when he goes California will lose one of the purest minded, most sincere, modest, and energetic searchers after truth, she has ever held within her borders."

In 1901, Muir had given a book published in 1900 to his then 20-year old daughter Wanda: *In the Ice World of the Himalaya* by Fanny and William Workman.

This gift is especially interesting since it was co-authored by Fanny Workman, one of the world's first female professional mountaineers. She set several women's altitude records, published eight travel books with her husband, and championed women's rights and women's suffrage. The Workmans cycled thousands of miles on their travels through Europe, North Africa, India, Ceylon, Burma, Indo-China, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Members of the French Alpine Club, they climbed many peaks in the Alps. Motivated by an interest to see "something of the treasures of Buddhist, Hindu, and Mohammedan Architecture and Art" of the East, they went to India. Not confining themselves to bicycle in the lowlands, the couple spent two summers among the higher Himalayas, writing that "during 1898 we made an expedition from Srinagar, to which point we cycled, into the mountains of Ladakh, Nubra and Suru, and in the autumn, from Darjeeling into Sikkim."

They returned to this region seven times over the next 14 years. Despite not having modern climbing equipment, the Workmans explored several glaciers and reached the summit of several mountains, eventually reaching 23,000 feet (7,000 m) on Pinnacle Peak, a women's altitude record at the time. These mountaineering expeditions incorporated "many days' march beyond even semi-civilised villages, into the savage and trackless wastes, that surround the giants he would conquer."

Muir may have been especially interested in the Workmans' description of the rigors of Himalayan mountaineering:

"It has been asserted, that, aside from their altitude, the Himalayas are very easy mountains to ascend. Let no one cherish this delusion. Let no one suppose that the world's vastest mountain chain is fashioned on any such

mild scheme as this. In the Himalayas are mountains of all kinds and sizes. Some can be ascended. Many more probably never will be, by any creature without wings. There are perpendicular walls towering thousands of feet above the valleys, precipices descending into abysses, which the sunlight never penetrates, pointed spires and aiguilles piercing the loftiest clouds, so sharp, that they scorn the snowy mantle nature would throw around them, Matterhorns and Crépons, and Funffingerspitzen many times magnified, vast fields of snow, arêtes and domes of snow crowning inaccessible rock massifs. “The mountain flanks are constantly scored by avalanches of snow and rock, which thunder down at all hours of the day. Immense landslips are frequent, which fill the valleys and dam back the water from the melting snow, which later, bursts the unstable barrier thus formed, and tears downward, a living mass of water, mud and rock, with terrific force, carrying all before it and spreading devastation and ruin in its path. Against these, as well as the dangers of the glaciers with their enormous crevasses, the mountaineer must be constantly on his guard.”

The Workmans also lamented about human troubles— frequently bemoaning the inadequacies of their “coolies” who they hired to carry all their gear. While the difficulties of mountaineering were emphasized by the Workmans, they also extolled the ultimate fact of the spiritual and sacred found in the mountains, in language that surely resonated with Muir:

“He who has spent months among the silent glaciers and peaks of the icy wilderness on the northern boundary of India, can understand, why the Men of the Hills should invest these temples, built by architects no man can emulate, with a sacred character...”

Muir would have agreed, as he frequently in his writings referred to forest groves, mountains, and canyons as cathedrals or temples. He wrote in his journal that “No synonym for God is so perfect as Beauty. Whether as seen carving the lines of the mountains with glaciers, or gathering matter into stars, or planning the movements of water, or gardening - still all is Beauty!”

Another mountain climbing book that Muir had in his library was *Climbing on the Himalaya and Other Mountain Ranges* by J. Norman Collie, published in 1902.

Muir further prepared for his travels by reading about the natural history of India, and most likely some of its human history as well.

In addition to the mountain climbing books, he had two copies in his library of the 1891 edition of *Himalayan Journals*, by botanist Sir Joseph Hooker, which he annotated in the back, primarily with botanical notes. Muir had camped and botanized with Hooker in Northern California, along with Asa Gray and John Bidwell, around the Lassen Peak and the Mt. Shasta region botanizing in the summer of 1877. Hooker and Muir found and catalogued the Twinflower (*Linnaea borealis*), the first of its kind discovered in California. Muir recounts how, around the campfire, Hooker told stories of his travels in the Himalayas, “and of his work with Tyndall and Huxley and grand old Darwin.” A portion of [Muir's tribute to the great botanist Linnaeus](#) tells the story of John Muir's travels with Asa Gray and Sir Joseph Hooker in the forests around Mount Shasta.

Muir maintained a continuing [correspondence with Hooker](#) for years afterward, and even visited him at his home in Sunningdale, outside of London, in 1893. In a 1902 letter, Muir congratulated Hooker on the completion of his “great work on the Flora of India.”

Upon returning from his trip, in October 1904, Muir wrote to Sir Hooker, lamenting that he had been unable to visit him when in London on his world tour with Professor Sargent, and commenting “You were so many times in mind when I was in India and I often thought of the pleasure you must have had as a young, enthusiastic naturalist in the magnificent New Zealand forests. Your long life, Sir Joseph, has been truly noble; and I am, with sincere respect and admiration... Faithfully yours, John Muir.”

Muir's conversations with Hooker were not confined to the mountains and flora; they spoke frequently about scientific luminaries of the day: “Huxley, Tyndall, Darwin, Sir Charles Lyell, Asa Gray, etc.” Muir annotated his personal copy of Hooker's *Himalayan Journals*; one mysterious annotation makes reference to “climate,” “Darjeeling,” and “children's faces.” But Muir's interest is made clear in

reading Hooker's passage that he identified: "I believe that children's faces afford as good an index as any to the healthfulness of a climate, and in no part of the world is there a more active, rosey, and bright young community, than at Dorjiling [sic]. It is incredible what a few weeks of that mountain air will do for the India-born children of European parents: they are taken there sickly, pallid or yellow, soft and flabby, to become transformed into models of rude health and activity." This observation served to confirm Muir's oft-quoted comment that "I know that our bodies were made to thrive only in pure air, and the scenes in which pure air is found."

Muir also had a copy in his personal library of Caleb Wright's 1860 book, *India and its Inhabitants*. Filled with the Euro-centric religious and social prejudices of the time, the book was illustrated with engravings of the diverse ethnicities of people of India. Of most interest for Muir, it also included engravings of some natural features, such as the native Indian Banyan tree, a copy of which is featured in the Calcutta chapter of this book.

On the ship to Rangoon, Burma (present-day Yangon, Myanmar), he was reading Sulpiz Kurz, the Curator of the Herbarium at the Royal Botanical Garden in Calcutta, quoting from his *Forest Flora of British India*, 1887 [sic] - [but Kurz's work is actually *Forest Flora of British Burma*]. Muir noted that Kurz enumerated 1500 species. Muir seemed especially interested, as may be expected, in the flora of the mountains of India, writing notes in his journal about: "In damp hill forests oaks, chestnuts, magnolia at elevations of 3000 to 3500." He then quoted extensively from Kurz: "The tropical forests marvelous in their luxuriance of vegetation. Abundant rain fall and complete protection of surface soil and the soil moisture are the essential requisites for this type of forest. Here the forest consists practically of 3 tiers of trees, exclusive of underwoods - bamboos, palms, screw pines, rattans, woody climbers, ferns, etc. The lowest tier consists of trees like *Garcinia*, *Diospyros*, *Cinnamomum*, *Tetranthera*, *Ardisia*, *Millettia*, *Ficus*, *Eugenia*, *Myristica* and a host of others. Above these are loftier species of *Ficus*, *Bursera*, *Semicarpus*, *Cedrela*, *Lagerstroemia*, *Mangifera*, and other genera, while over these again tower the still loftier crowns of forest giants belonging to the genera *Sterculia*, *Tetrameles*, *Artocarpus*, *Parkia*, *Diplerocarpus*, *Parashorea*, *Hopea*, *Anisoptera*, *Antiaris*, and many others."

Muir did not confine himself to reading about India alone. His ship stopped briefly in Burma (which between 1897 and 1937 was administered as a separate province but still part of British India). He reported in his journal reading Nisbet's "Burma Under British Rule," concentrating on the sections about the teak forests. Muir would have been interested in Nisbet's comment in that book that outside of areas where slash-and-burn agriculture was still practiced and allowed, "The killing or injury of teak and certain other reserved trees, and permitting fire to spread into Reserved Forests are also prohibited, and are made punishable under the forest laws; but the latter are, in these particular respects, applied only with leniency and discretion." Unlike the forests of the United States prior to forest protection laws, Muir may have been interested to learn from Nisbet that "Teak trees have always in Burma been royal property, and the ownership of all teak trees growing in any of the forests, reserved or unreserved, is vested in the Government."

Although a major focus, Muir did not confine his interests to botany; his journals are abundant with commentary showing he was really fascinated with people as well. While in Rangoon, changing ships to depart for Calcutta, he noted, "The crowd of natives and Indians of different castes at the wharf was extremely interesting, brightly colored and varied, never before saw so brightly clad a crowd, or one so varied and interesting."

It would seem Muir had prepared for this human element as well, as he possessed in his personal library several books about human cultures, such as Harry Gardner Cutler's *Panorama of Nations; Or, Journeys Among the Families of Man: A Description of their Homes, Customs, Habits, Employments, and Beliefs, their Cities, Temples, Monuments, Literature, and Fine Arts*, and Rev. J. Goldsmith's *Geographical View of the World, Embracing the Manners, Customs, and Portraits of Every Nation*, and Sven Hedin's *Through Asia* [Annotations at back.], Nordenskiöld, A.E. *The Voyage of the Vega Round Asia and Europe*. Volumes 1 & 2. London: Macmillan and Co., 1881. [Inscribed to John Muir with compliments of L. Cooper, annotations at back.] Each of these books had chapters covering India and its people, and several had Muir's annotations.

In fact, as early as 1872, Muir had written his friend Jeanne Carr, "I read your Hindu extracts with much interest," showing that at young age he had some

acquaintance with writings from India. (Letter to Mrs. Ezra S. Carr, March 16th, [1872], in *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, Chapter 9, 1903.)

After such readings, Muir surely realized that he was about to encounter in India not only unique mountains and forests, but also a people, a culture, and a history that he could not help but find astounding and fascinating.

Yet Donald Worster, in his extensive 2008 Muir biography, *A Passion for Nature*, tends to downplay the effect Muir's world travels had on him. Worster claims: "He had added to his herbarium, his stock of impressions, his long list of friends and colleagues, but he came home with no new large insights into nature or society. Nothing in his journal suggests that travel had helped him see the world, himself, or his adopted country more profoundly. Had he walked the whole distance, it might have been different."

But perhaps the seeming lack of "new large insights" was because as a mature 65-year-old, Muir would soon have— if he did not already have— a global, even cosmic view of the world. He would go on to write in his posthumously published 1915 book, *Travels in Alaska*:

"When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty." He later confirmed this global perspective, writing how there was always an *"eternal sunrise, eternal sunset, eternal dawn and gloaming, on seas and continents and islands, each in its turn, as the round earth rolls."*

Muir had long embraced the writings of Alexander von Humboldt, that theorist of cosmic unity amidst the complexity of phenomena. Even by the time of his India trip, Muir had achieved a global, even cosmic view of the world. Even his views about spirituality and religion, as we shall see, would allow him to overcome some, if not all, of the cultural prejudices of his time.

Muir's embrace of the equality of all mankind is well expressed in this 1872 statement he wrote in a letter to a friend:

"We all flow from one fountain Soul. All are expressions of one Love. God does not appear, and flow out, only from narrow chinks and round bored wells here and there in favored races and places, but He flows in grand undivided currents,

shoreless and boundless over creeds and forms and all kinds of civilizations and peoples and beasts, saturating all and fountainizing all.”

With such a tolerant view, Muir is actually an exemplar for the kind of evolution and transformation we need as a society. Muir largely – if incompletely by modern standards – overcame cultural prejudices that were widespread during his time and in his culture.

As we will see in the chapter on Benares (Varanasi), Muir seemed far more tolerant of people of many religions, cultures, and races than the majority of 19th-century European visitors.

Clearly, Muir had an especially deep aversion to dirt, filth, and squalor anywhere he found it, disapproving of domestic animals or people alike who were unkempt and dirty compared to the “clean” forest animals he observed in his wanderings. Having witnessed first-hand my own share of dirt and filth in some of India’s cities in person, I can understand how Muir felt when visiting a “filthy” place such as the Monkey Temple he visited in Benares. Invariably though, after encountering people with a different sensitivity to dirt and odor than him, he would quote his favorite poet Robert Burns’ ringing endorsement of the brotherhood of all people: “It’s coming yet, for a’ that, that man to man, the warld o’er, shall brothers be for a’ that.”

Muir’s acceptance of people of all stripes and colors is also revealed in his 1879 trip to Alaska, where Muir spoke to the Alaskan Natives about the “the brotherhood of all peoples of whatever color or name.” He talked to the Tlingit tribe “how we were all children of one father; sketched the characteristics of the different races of mankind, showing that no matter how far apart their countries were, how they differed in color, size, language, etc., and no matter how different and how various the ways in which they got a living, that the white man and all the people of the world were essentially alike, that we all had ten fingers and toes and our bodies were the same, whether white, brown, black, or different colors, and speak different languages.”

Those who have studied Muir extensively, rather than cherry-picking a few quotes, find a man who, as noted historian Donald Worster observed after making a detailed analysis of Muir’s journals, “I will say this: John Muir was one of the most

racially unbiased Americans of his day.” We will explore more of this topic in later chapters of this book.

In any case, Muir’s journals and letters home during this period contain only a hint of what he saw and felt in India and the other places he visited on his global travels. His journals served only as a reference for future writing— in this particular case, never fulfilled. Because they were scribbled as they were at odd moments, they lack detail.

Yet, although we have today a mere inkling of what Muir experienced in India, if we combine his journal and letters home with what we independently know or can observe about many of the special places he visited, we can reach a much better understanding of how John Muir experienced what the Persians called *Hindustan*. Reviewing Muir’s journals in light of the kind of amazing places he visited, Muir’s visit to India could not possibly have left him unaffected in significant ways.

Moreover, since his views of India contrast significantly from many his contemporaries, Muir’s travels in India can at least help give us today some new insights into nature and society. I hope this book will help shed some light on an experience in Muir’s life that is not well-known or understood.

For best results, please read this book with Internet access turned on, as videos, sound files, and links will require it.

If you have trouble viewing the videos in this book, go to this book’s companion website where you can watch all of the [Videos for John Muir in India](https://johnmuir.org/india/india-videos/) - or <https://johnmuir.org/india/india-videos/>

For a convenient way to read the entirety of Muir’s journals and letters from his India excursion, see “John Muir’s World Tour (Part III)” in *The John Muir Newsletter*, University of the Pacific, Vol. 16, No. 2/3, (Spring/Summer, 2006) at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmn/83/>

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