

## **Lydia Bunt (Modern and Medieval Languages) - India, Summer 2018**

My travel grant from Pembroke College helped me undertake a two-week trip to India. My aim in going was to broaden my cultural horizons by exploring a non-European country and its architecture, following on from an interest in European visual culture that I have built up over the past year of my degree. I had a wonderful, fast-paced trip and engaged with a different culture to that which I have been used to studying.

I flew first to New Delhi, where the 43-degree heat didn't stop me from exploring. I visited the tomb of the Mughal Emperor Humayun, the Persian-inspired architecture of which motivated the design of the Taj Mahal in Agra in its turn. Another highlight was Jantar Mantar, a collection of thirteen architectural astronomy instruments built in 1724 whose modern geometrics contrasted with the delicate Persian buildings I'd already seen. The Red Fort, a seventeenth century Mughal fortress complex, was also particularly impressive from the outside, and I enjoyed visiting the India Gate, which commemorates Indian soldiers killed in the First World War, in the evening. Before the rains come it seems to serve as a focal point for evening shopping, games and festivities.

Flying to Ladakh and spending the next five days in Leh was a contrast to busy and intense Delhi. With my hostel near the centre of Leh, I took the local bus out to several different Buddhist gompas. The sprawled buildings of the monasteries are often built into cliff or mountain faces and necessitate steep climbs to reach the top. Thicksey monastery, as a twelve-storey complex scattered across the hillside, was particularly impressive, and I enjoyed both the trek to the top and learning more about the Buddhist temples that I could enter on arrival. Leh and Stok Palaces were also impressive, and the pictures of Ladakhi royalty inside, along with their jewellery, ceremonial dresses and crowns, provided an interesting insight into Ladakh of the seventeenth century.

Bus journeys from Leh to Delhi via Srinagar and Jammu allowed ample opportunity to appreciate Kashmir's natural beauty from high mountain passes, and staying in a houseboat on the Dal Lake in Srinagar was also an exciting experience. Travelling in this way also gave me a good impression of the varied spread of religions across India. Where in Delhi the predominant religion is Hinduism, in Leh Buddhism was widespread, with monks riding the buses to their monasteries almost every time we jumped on. In Srinagar, however, it was clear that the main religion was Islam, if only from the many mosques we passed and the changed dress of women on the streets. I found it interesting to see how culture can vary so broadly within national confines, and I could see clearly how this is still a matter of dispute in Jammu and Kashmir.

Having reached Delhi again, I took the train to Jaipur to explore more of India's varied architecture. Pristine sights such as the Hawa Mahal and the Amber Fort made a contrast to the rustic gompas of Leh in their structured beauty. I had been particularly looking forward to seeing the honeycomb-like structure of the Hawa Mahal, and was not disappointed, with the golden and peacock-painted doors of the City Palace an equally impressive sight.

Altogether I am very grateful to Pembroke for having facilitated my trip, which was informative, hugely enjoyable and has made me keen to return to India in the future.