

Patience and Persistence in India

by Dan Levesque on May 22, 2017



Our first test started with our very first day in India. I don't typically find myself the target of locals trying to swindle tourists (maybe it's something to do with the beard and my overall unkempt appearance while traveling), but India has had a few trying moments.

We got a rickshaw to go and see some sights in Delhi. We agreed on a price to our destination (about \$2) and got in; at the same time, a guy who claimed to be the driver's "friend" started talking to us. He seemed nice. As we started going to our destination, he hopped in next to the driver and turned around to talk to us and ask us questions about our stay in India. Our first impression was 'hey, this guy is nice and seems cool'.



Happy and content in a rickshaw, most of the time.

A few minutes later he offered to take us to a "tourist information center" before going to our destination, saying that he could "help us get some information."

We politely declined, thinking he was just being nice. He reiterated that he was just trying to help. It became obvious that he was trying to take advantage of our newness to India... One of the first questions he asked was how long we'd been here. Fortunately, I knew that the place he was trying to take us was in the opposite direction from where we were trying to go, and would have ended up taking triple the amount of driving time (not including talking to the people at the 'tourist information center').

He wanted us to go so that we could get a map, and get 'some information', and **then** he would take us to see the sites in Delhi. We said we already had a map. Canadian politeness doesn't really work in India a lot of the time; if you say 'no' nicely, it doesn't really mean *no*. Sometimes it takes a forceful **NO** to get the point across.

By this time, the rickshaw driver had stopped on the side of the road and we weren't moving. Which was frustrating, because it was 40 degrees in Delhi and we had somewhere to go, and we were paying this guy to take us there. Naturally, our frustration at his

repeated solicitations grew—we're not push-overs, and if we don't want to do something we're **NOT** going to do it. So we counter their persistence with our own.

Eventually the guy gave up. A man who had previously been smiling and talkative stopped smiling and talking, and wouldn't even look at us. About a third of the way to our destination, the rickshaw driver pulled over and had us transfer into a different rickshaw. This new driver took us the rest of the way; we paid him, but the first driver and his little companion didn't charge us anything. We realized this tourist information thing was obviously some sort of scam (as we would later confirm in person).

It doesn't feel good to turn down help from people who seem to be genuinely trying to help you. Even when it's help you didn't need or ask for. Everyone's just trying to make their money and get by; it's just unfortunate that there's a whole industry built around making money off of gullible tourists.

Sometimes, I feel guilty saying no. In South India, we had one old woman at a bus stop who wouldn't leave us alone, sticking her hand out and repeating some phrase we couldn't understand. She looked destitute, and we became her sole targets because we're not Indian.

At the time, we were just trying to get our bearings and figure out where we were, clearly discombobulated and busy. Janice was keeled over in motion sickness after a two hour journey on a shitty Indian bus. We weren't in the mood to be solicited for money randomly on a street corner, but hey, India can be relentless like that.

I gave the old woman a ten rupee note. It's one of the few smaller bills I had in my wallet, equivalent to about 25 cents CAD. She looked at it in disgust and walked off, not even looking at us or saying anything.

I guess since we're from a foreign country we just have money to give away to random people in the street? I mean, we're **so well off** that we just spent \$2 each for a bus that took us a few dozen kilometers in 2 hours. We didn't spend the \$20-30 on a taxi because we just thought it would be **more fun** to take a local bus and occasionally almost die in a head-on collision when the driver attempted to overtake another car around a blind corner.

The reality is that we spent 2 years saving enough money to comfortably go on this trip. We have a daily budget (which we're currently a little bit over), and we closely monitor our

spending each day. I don't like giving handouts when they're demanded of me, but I'll gladly partake in voluntary charity for a good cause.

For example, let's match this experience of the old woman demanding money with a cafe we went to in Agra called "**Sheroes**" (just before the Taj Mahal proposal). That's **Heroes** but with a **SHE**.

It's a cafe operated by women who have been the victims of acid attacks. These are occasionally carried out by potential suitors to whom these women have rejected a marriage proposal, or even from family members if the woman has rejected an arranged marriage or done something perceived as being 'dishonorable'. Gender equality is still a huge problem here in South Asia.



Sheroes Cafe Menu

Sheroes Cafe doesn't have any prices on their menu. You pay what you think is fair, in the form of a donation to the organization. Their goal is to raise awareness and prevent future acid attacks. That's a big task in a society of 1.3 billion people in which women are widely viewed as subordinate to men.

I got a coffee and a bottle of water. I paid 500 rupees, or around \$12 CAD (20% of our targeted daily budget). My bill would otherwise have been more like \$1.50 at any regular cafe. But being in that place voluntarily and having the option to give a little more makes me actually want to do so. And that makes all the difference: nobody's asking me for money, I'm giving it by my own volition.

The terrible part is being hustled, especially when it's happening in quick succession. Dealing with this often requires as much patience as you're able to summon, and then some. In Delhi we often had random people come up and talk to us like normal people, seemingly interested in where we were from and what we'd seen in India. Their English was good and they seemed educated, and it was legitimately nice to talk to them. But quickly they'd shift topics, ask us where we were going and then try and redirect us to a "tourist information center."

They did this one after the other. It got really old, really quickly. But one time we actually went. We asked one guy where we could get a SIM card for our phones. Since it was a Sunday, he told us all of the phone shops were closed, but said there was a government-run information center that could help us out and pointed to a spot down the road. He seemed professional and kind, so we followed.

The place ended up being a lot further away than where he pointed. That was the first sign it wasn't going to go well. But now that we were being caught up in the hustle and it would be quite rude for us to decline at this point, we decided we'd go check it out anyways.

All we wanted was a SIM card anyways. How hard could that be?

Our guy led us through a doorway, pointed at a man, waved, and then walked off without saying a word. So we sat down and started talking to our "government" information person, during which half a dozen other Indian people walked in the door and shook his hand. It was a strange scene. We asked if we could get SIM cards there and he called someone on his phone and said that someone from one of the big national cell phone carriers would bring SIM cards for us. Which seemed odd, since this was Sunday and all of the phone outlets we'd seen were closed today.

We said we'd wait. Then our government information guy turned salesman.

He asked about our plans. We said we were taking a train to Agra the next day to see the Taj Mahal. He went off telling us about how this was a bad idea for such and such a reason,

and insisted that we should instead hire a car and driver. We said no, but he insisted and presented us with a price.

The price was around \$200 CAD to drive us to Agra to see the Taj Mahal and come back the same day. Our round-trip train was costing us about \$60 CAD, and his price was over 50% higher than what we'd seen online for a similar package. We repeatedly declined his offer, saying we already had our trains booked. He said he'd give us a map while we waited for our SIM cards. Then he went off and started eating lunch with a group of other people while we sat there awkwardly waiting.

We never even got a damn map. He asked us if we wanted tea, and I accepted. No tea ever showed up. I think he knew his hustle wasn't going to work on us—we just don't really fit the gullible tourist profile. And we're on a budget! Patience and persistence persevered...

Ten minutes had passed with us just watching them eat and no SIM cards materializing, so we decided to get up and leave. We said we'd come back later (Canadian politeness), but that we had to go meet a friend at a cafe (a white lie... But we did want to go to a cafe). The guy insisted we wait a little bit longer. Some of their chairs were awkwardly blocking the door—probably not for some malicious purpose, but rather because the space was so small.

We agreed to wait another few minutes, and asked how long. He said he didn't know, that the guy was on his way. We sat down. Then we reiterated to each other

"They're going to be waiting for us."

"Should we go now?"

"Yeah probably."

We got up and insisted we had to go. The guy said he would take us anywhere we wanted to go if we just waited. We declined and said we could walk. They moved their chairs and we walked out. Then we discussed the prevalence of scams in India and agreed that we wouldn't get led around like that again.

But it kept happening. Strangers would come up and talk to us, trying to redirect us. We'd answer all of their questions politely and say we had to go somewhere. They'd ask us where. They'd ask us a million questions, they'd stop us and try to get us to go down a

different street. We'd say we had already visited a tourist information center, and they'd ask us if we were sure it was a **Government**-run one. They throw around the word Government a lot, thinking it makes them sound more authoritative. Too bad we're from a part of the world where the Government is supposed to *serve* the people, not take advantage of them. Their Jedi mind tricks won't work on us.

People can be like that here, trying to control your autonomy. They don't seem to respect your independence, and they like to tell you what you "have to" do. They see us as intruders, or dollar rupee signs, or pure spectacle. But once you make a non-bullshit connection and talk to them like human beings, they're generally pretty normal.

One guy on a beach in South India came up to us trying to sell us one of his watermelon-size drums. There weren't many other foreign tourists around, so he probably looked at us and saw rupee signs (the other drum-salesmen weren't so persistent).

After a few minutes of talking and explaining to the guy that his drums were way too big for us to carry around for 3 months in our backpacks, he gave up. He looked defeated. Then Janice asked him how he came up with the idea to sell these drums to people here, and told him that he might be better off coming up with a different product to sell. Ever the candid salesperson, she is.

He told us about how he was from Rajasthan, an Indian state west of Delhi famous for its dry heat and desert. He told us that he sold things to tourists up there and did quite well, but that he came to South India because someone told him he could make even more money selling to tourists down there. Unfortunately, it was low-season, and not many people wanted to buy his drums. He left his family for the chance at making more money in another state, but it wasn't working out for him—the cost of living was more expensive and he was selling less than before.

That's because Rajasthan is part of the **Golden Triangle** of India. It's the three places tourists to India visit most often—Delhi, Agra, Jaipur—and then they fly home. It's easier to sell to them because they tend to be financially well off (it's significantly more expensive to tour the Golden Triangle than it is to do what we're doing) and only visiting India for a week or two, so they could more easily carry souvenirs home. But people visiting South India usually travel the country more extensively and for longer periods of time (like us), and we haven't afforded ourselves the luxury of buying a single souvenir.

It was interesting and sort of sad hearing that guy's story. He just wanted to go somewhere to make more money to better support his family, being told by someone that it was a good idea. But it hadn't been. It almost made me want to buy a drum. But I think that's the wrong response.



In India, I find myself channeling my inner Buddha more often.

He ended up on that beach with those drums because of a choice he made. He made that choice freely. His goal was to make more money off of selling souvenirs to tourists, even though he was already making an adequate living doing so where he was before. He took the risk and it didn't pan out for him. And he still has the opportunity to do something differently and succeed in the future.

My buying a drum off of him isn't going to help him. He needs to sell those things consistently in order to get by. And my buying a drum isn't going to help me either, because I'm not going to carry that thing around with me for 3 months. I don't even drum. Ever.

Back when we were in China 3 years ago, we consistently heard "that is impossible" whenever we wanted something—even if it was pretty basic (like transferring money between bank accounts).

But in India, they always say "anything is possible." If we want something, no matter what it is or how niche it might be, there's someone in India for everything. But in order to get it, you sometimes have to break down a few walls and firmly say **NO** a lot first.

And that requires patience and persistence—and lots of it.