INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GSA-18
India: Out of Station

Aligarh
13 April 1965

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New York, New York

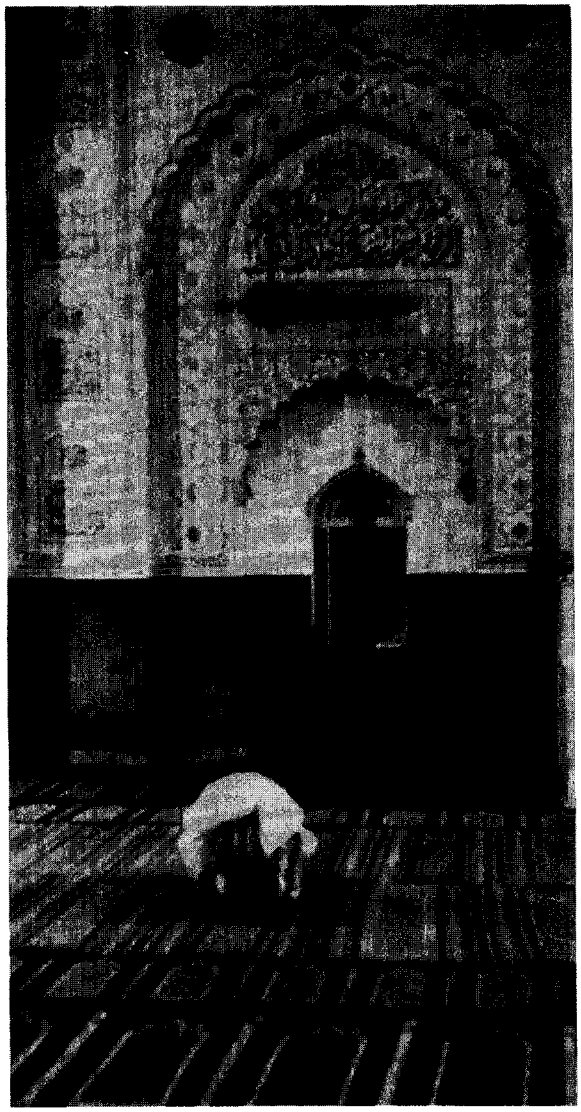
Dear Dick,

A week ago a scrawny porter in his faded red uniform shirt and dirty dhoti put my suitcase on his head and my bedroll under his arm and led me through the throngs of Old Delhi railway station to the 'Calcutta Mail'. I was bound for Aligarh, a Muslim cultural center, to be 'out of station' for several weeks.

We rattled across the rusty bridge over the shrinking Jumna. And as I stared through the dusty window at men and women in the wheat fields sickling in the harvest I was happy to be leaving the city. New Delhi's business is government. Clerks and officials by the hundred thousand, legislators, diplomats, foreign experts, journalists, lobbyists and favor seekers, everyone exists to partake in or observe or influence the government. Everyone breathes speculation, sneezes rumor, and inhales gossip, most of it cynical, defamatory, gloom-filled and frustrated. The country, says New Delhi, is a cow in a bog with no dry land in sight. I don't really know what is happening or is going to happen in India, few do. But New Delhi is a poor place to find out.

In my compartment the top berths had been pulled down to accomodate suitcases, bedrolls, and several pungent straw baskets. Sharing the green plastic seats below with me were four Indians. Three wore slacks and sport shirts--summer had begun and India is informal in the heat--and the fourth wore more traditional dress, white flowing trousers and a long-tailed shirt, both of handspun cloth. One man read a paperback whose title I couldn't see. The man with the smallpox scars read the Readers Digest, and the third chewed betel. The man in white smiled politely. It is possible in Indian trains to order tea and food at one station and have it brought aboard at some major station ahead. The man in white enquired about food from an attendant, asking if vegetarian and non-vegetarian food were cooked in the same kitchen. When told yes, he showed himself a strict vegetarian by not ordering lunch. Maybe I looked contemplative or morose, but no one asked me any questions, although it is rare for a foreigner to remain unquizzed.

Less than a hundred miles and two and a half hours from Delhi, the train stopped at Aligarh, a place in two parts: a crowded, dirty,



Evening prayer in Mosque

partly industrial, partly market city of 200,000, and a peaceful university campus. Aligarh Muslim University grounds are tree-dotted, flower-filled, with cool, plastered, British-colonial bungalows, and Oxford-type college quadrangles built of brick in an Islamic-Romanesque style.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan founded the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875 so that India's Muslims could imbibe 'Western' education and thus compete more favorably with Hindus, who had begun this process several decades earlier and had thus pre-empted Muslims from positions in British colonial bureaucracy. He also wished to modernize his own community and to erase the stigma of Muslim disloyalty that had arisen from the belief, then held by the British, that the Muslims had fomented the mutiny of 1857. In 1920 the name was changed to Aligarh Muslim University. Today Aligarh has 5000 male students, 3000 of them Muslim and the remainder of other persuasions. There is also a women's college whose founder died at age 91 a few days ago. More than 30% of all Muslim university students in India today are at Aligarh.

Leaving the train, I changed to a cycle rickshaw, perching with my luggage on a seat that would have been filled by two narrow bottoms. Ten minutes later I arrived at the home of my temporary hosts, a remarkable couple in any society. He is a professor of medieval Indian history at the university, an archaeologist, a leader in the educational field, and a member of a family prominent in the politics of the last 40 years. She is also a historian, a teacher in a Hindu college in the city, and the daughter of a well-known princely family of the area. Both are Shia Muslims. After husband Nural came home for dinner, we soon began a long discussion of my main topic of interest in Aligarh, the role of Muslims in recent Indian history and of communalism, India's basically religious counterpart of racialism.

The next morning I went to meet Professor Mohammed Habib, now retired from being the head of the history department at the university, who was Phil Talbot's and Dick Morse's mentor in their INCWA days. Again

we talked about Muslims then and now and about the politics of Untouchable groups and about theology. Prof. Habib, soft-spoken, rubbing his head, scratching a cheek, polishing his glasses, is a free-thinker to shock the cassock from a priest or the beard off a mullah. He talked of the decreased power of the ulema (body of Muslim divines and scholars) over the behavior of Muslim society and of the aims of Hindu and Muslim communal groups. We were served tea. A mongoose looked in from the verandah and I pointed him out. "He's a pest," said Prof. Habib. "He drinks my tea when I'm not looking."

Cycle rickshaw

I've talked with perhaps a dozen persons since I've been here, mostly Muslims--not more because conversations of this sort cannot be hurried. Generally we've spoken about the position of the Muslim community in India today and about Hindu-Muslim and other communal relationships past and present. Occupying somewhat less time have been subjects like the state of university education and intellectual and physical conditions in the villages, where many persons I've met still have strong roots. What I've learned will leaven future newsletters, but opinions on the various topics could be summed up this way. Muslims in India today, the speakers included, feel insecure and think that they are discriminated against when competing for jobs and in various other ways. One man, by no means wild-eyed, exclaimed that Muslims were "fourth class citizens and hostages of the government" in the cold-war with Pakistan.

Most I spoke with believed that thinking in terms of one's own local, caste, or religious group was an endemic disease in India. Yet they thought that there was no fundamental, unbridgeable gap between

Hindus and Muslims, as the largest school of British writers on India and Pakistan-minded Muslims have long claimed. In support, they pointed out the predominantly amicable relations of Hindus and Muslims in villages ("Muslims are treated like another caste. Communal riots are an urban phenomenon."), and said that historical evidence indicated that before the end of the 17th century wars and alliances here had as much a political as a religious basis. Most blamed the growth of Hindu-Muslim enmity primarily on the presence and policies of the British, dating its rapid rise from 1857--when the power to rule India was officially transferred from the East India Company to the Queen. Others, however, mentioned the dislike and distrust produced by years of political and social competition, the social separateness of Hindus and Muslims (little intermarriage or interdining--something equally true of castes within Hinduism), and that Islam itself is predicated on being the majority, not the minority, religion in a state. An orthodox Muslim, therefore, should be loyal to Islam first and the Government of India second. (This aspect of Islam has an immensely strong rooting in tradition, but does not, I think, have the sanction of either the Koran or of the Hadith.) But everyone I talked with pointed out that Islam in India is almost a religion unto itself. There is no reason why we shouldn't all live happily together, they said. On the other hand, most also believed that the Central Government and some state governments were coming increasingly under the influence of fanatical Hindu groups, and they feared for the future. There can be no doubt, I think, that within Indian Muslims is a feeling of unease, a self searching, an unhealed wound. Partition opened the wound and only time and Hindu patience and truly secular government can heal it.

My enquiries about university education have been limited pretty much to one point, the attitude of students toward learning. What I've been told bears out what I've heard often before: that students want to be spoon-fed information that they can parrot back in examinations and that a critical, analytical approach to information is almost entirely lacking. An Indian friend in Delhi calls this the

Blind Beggar

'Brahmanic tradition', meaning that the Hindu scriptures can be restated, paraphrased, elaborated, and to some extent interpreted, but that basic premises are never to be critically analyzed, let alone doubted or attacked. In Indian public life this attitude produces an uncritical acceptance of what the textbook, the professor, or the public figure says. Nehru's ideas, or what are claimed to have been his ideas, are rapidly being given the status of scripture. To question them will soon be heresy. Until university teachers themselves attempt to destroy this habit of mind and make the students into critical thinkers, much of the innate intellectual talent of the country will be wasted and much needed changes in 'the system' in India will not be made.

Villagers, their condition, their thoughts and feelings about India today, are the nation's greatest enigma. My information about them is so far all too second hand. Conversations here in the last few days, however, have led me to think very provisionally that in this state they are badly off for food, often with only one meal a day. But it also seems that this plight, the empty promises of politicians, bad government, and the rise of expectations that is gradually reaching the countryside have not yet roused them from their traditional attitudes and centuries-old resignation.

Today, 13 April, is Id ul adha, the time for the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca, called in India Bakhr Id, the day of sacrifice. Today Muslims, following a Koranic injunction and a tradition descending from Abraham and Isaac, attend special prayers and often sacrifice sheep and goats. At one time they sacrificed cows, a practice that sparked off more than one riot with Hindus. Today friends call on friends and embrace each other when they meet in the street. Relatives may exchange gifts. The principal prayers are in the morning. Men and boys well-scrubbed and spotless in white and a few little girls in gay dresses--no women--began assembling about 7:30 at the university mosque. Just outside they ran a gauntlet of drab Hindu women and children begging--for it is propitious to give to the poor on such a day. When they entered the mosque gates, they took off their sandals and sat neatly in rows facing westward on the mats provided. First the mosque filled, then the plaza before it, and later comers ranked themselves under trees in the dormitory quadrangle outside the gates. No one minded my moving about and taking pictures. There was none of the suspicion or

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resentment that a camera often arouses in Arab areas. A large awning had been hung across the plaza, however, to keep the sun from the worshippers but without thought of my interests, and it prevented me from getting the pictures I wanted.

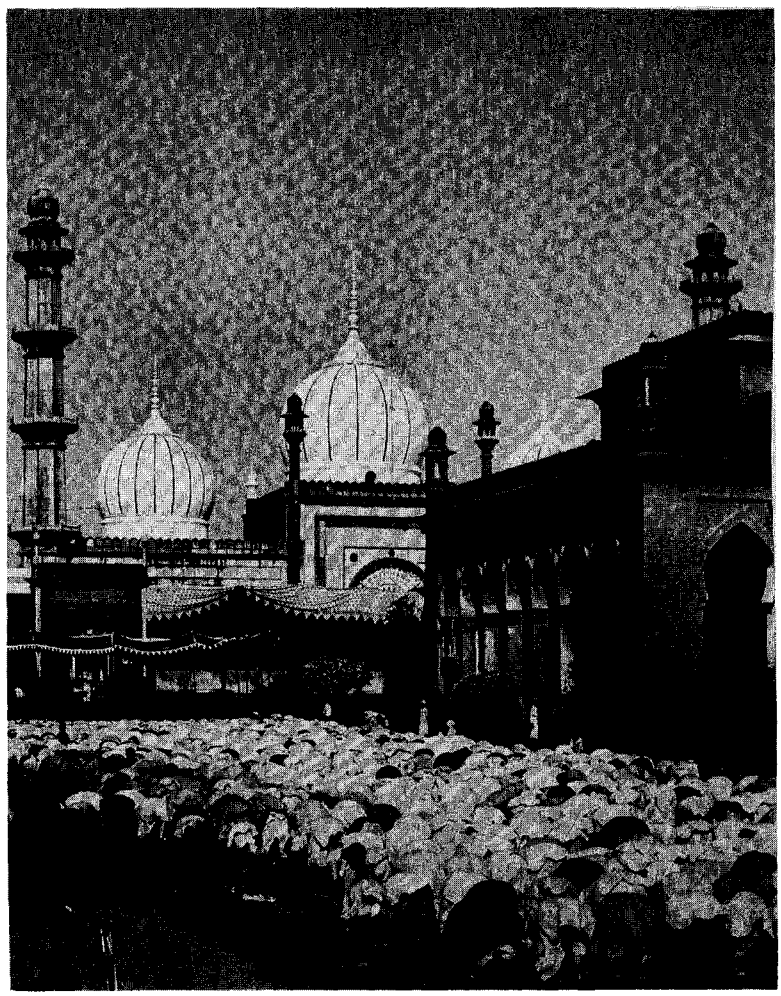
The sermon, in Urdu, began at 8:15. Half an hour later the crowd rose to its feet almost as a man and through the loudspeakers--but not tinny or distorted--came the minor and haunting and wild and thrilling Arabic chant to prayer: Laa ilaaha llahoo, Wa Muhammad rasooloo llah; There is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet. The crowd raised its hands to its ears and put them down. Up and down again. The chant went on. The crowd stood silent; it bowed. The call came and all went down. Sitting on their legs doubled beneath them, all placed their foreheads on the mats and remained still, thousands of backs arched like bows pointed toward the sky. Above all, two vultures sat silent on a cornice, and on the highest cupola of Strachey Hall a monkey, possibly Hanuman himself straight from some Hindu heaven, scratched his chin and watched.

Yours sincerely,

Red Austin

Granville Austin

Received in New York April 26, 1965.



Prayers at Id