

(Written at Aligarh, March 22, 1947).

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Holidays, among both Hindus and Muslims, are one of the chief features of Indian life. Of the nine weeks I spent in Benares, about ten days were full holidays, festivals based either on religious or mythological tradition, on change of season, or on political events -- such as January 26, Independence Day, commemorating the pledge taken by Congressmen, originally in 1930, pledging themselves to non-violent struggle until Complete Independence be attained. But the gayest and most universal festival at this season of year is Holi, early in March, which marks both the lunar New Year and the approaching harvest of the winter crop. All my student friends insisted that I see the celebration in a real Indian setting, rather than in the modern New Delhi, so I prolonged my stay in Benares for a couple of days and joined in the fun.

On "New Year's Eve", after a banquet at the vegetarian inn where a dozen students and I were living, Dinesh Dwivedi and I walked out to see the bonfires of the city, symbolically burning the bad deeds and petty hatreds of the past year. In Benares, the custom is for several households to cooperate in collecting scrap wood, straw, and paper for a small joint fire. All along the streets the flames flickered. Children scampered here and there lighting firecrackers and sparklers which threatened the passerby, while old men with staffs preserved the honored tradition by walking seven times around the fire, in slow even pace. The full moon, shining on the silvery sand banks of the Ganges, was as lovely as always, but the festivities, Dinesh told me, were somewhat subdued this year by fear of the Plague which has prevailed a month longer than usual, by the threat of communal riots which hangs over every occasion, and by the shortages of food and other necessities which have tried the patience of everybody and caused great hardship.

The New Year truly awakes on the following morning. Everyone carries in his pocket a package of red powder, and when friends meet they rub a little red dust on each other's forehead, and then embrace. This is a solemn greeting, symbolizing the renewal of old friendship for the coming year. But Holi is a day when all people are supposed to forget their troubles, their enmities or quarrels: love and goodwill are to prevail. Symbolizing this carefree spirit is the more rambunctious water festival, the spraying of colored water on all and sundry. This abandonment to horseplay was what I wanted to see, so I put on old clothes and with Ram Chandra Singh - a quiet farm boy, the first person from his village to attend college - I walked into the bazaar. Passing under a balcony we were showered with the first pot full of water - from then on, as we proceeded, there was no stopping the small boys and young men who rushed towards us squirting multicolored sprays from pumplike water guns. On Holi day they felt only momentary hesitation in attacking a white man: and with red water running over my head and glasses, yellow on my shirt, and violet soaking into my trousers, I didn't feel very white anyway. But I felt conscious of the factor of race. For the first half mile Ram Chandra Singh received not a drop of aimed spray while I was repeatedly being drenched. A bit of racial feeling was being released, a gleeful satisfaction in being able to play rough with a foreigner in impunity. I didn't mind one bit the fact that I was not upholding the dignity of the "pukka sahibs", but I did regret the element of racial antagonism entering into friendly play, even though I knew the white race had earned such malice. So to one of the onslaughts of youth I pointed smilingly to Ram

Chandra and said, "Aim at him". Thenceforth we had it jointly. He thought better of walking, so we got on his bicycle and rode the gauntlet together. Often we were stopped by gangs of young men who smeared us with colored paste; at other times we ourselves paused to watch dancing or wrestling. After an hour or so, saturated with water and color, we had had enough; we returned to our residence, scrubbed out the varied hues, and ruefully looked at our clothes which would probably not be suitable to wear until the next Holi day !

Vestiges of ancient crudity and vulgarity, stimulated perhaps by liquor, had occasionally crept into the speech and action of the crowd. For the great majority, however, it was merely a lighthearted morning of harmless play and innocent jokes. An unsympathetic observer might over-emphasize the primitive instincts represented in the few cruder moments. To me they served only as a rejoinder to Dinesh, who had recently seen a Life picture of sailors kissing girls in front of the White House on V-J Day, and had asked me, disapprovingly, "Is this common in your cities ?" Holi, externally, is a men's day. To avoid the stray taunts and insults which might come to them from men and children roaming in the streets, the women remain indoors during the morning, preparing the meal and splashing themselves. What would shock Dinesh - public participation of women in the gait - would not be unusual to me; and vice versa. I am learning that the job of a foreigner is to judge carefully the allowance that must be made for different outlooks, caused by the different traditions of custom and standard of different peoples. Especially he must be careful not to jump on what is an abnormality or extreme manifestation of the different culture, such as the one or two incidents which I observed on Holi morning, for it would be as incorrect to say that they fully represent the culture as to say that naked girls swimming in the fountain on Lafayette Square typify American standards. Perhaps it is in better taste, even, not to mention the extremes; on the other hand, perhaps the observer should report what he sees, emphasizing that it is an extreme.

My overall impression of Holi, then, was the goodwill and disregard of social position which prevailed. Traditionally, the sweeper in the street is on this day supposed to mingle with the well-to-do merchant - outlets in such brotherliness on festive occasions mitigate the social inequality, perhaps by design of the upper strata, for they may serve to keep the sweeper content with his lot. But the day's atmosphere is a pleasant one. Dinesh and I joined at the end of the morning, to greet and say goodbye to some of the professors with whom I had been working, and finally to join a group of students gathered in the room of a poet, to hear him sing his latest compositions. His poems about nature derived from the Hindu belief in the oneness of the universe, and revealed an insight and appreciation of nature's beauty much akin to that of Tagore. His poems about man, really inseparable from the others, united the Hindu belief with the communistic ideal of man's equality and brotherhood. Although most of the words had to be translated for me, I enjoyed the beauty of the songs in his singing thereof, while the response of his audience showed me that his words were stirring and inspiring. The good spirit of Holi permeated the room, and I was glad I had stayed.

Seven years ago, I was told, Mohammedans freely joined with Hindus in this water festival. Today they remained secluded, or if they had to come into the street the Hindu revellers were careful not to let any drop of colored water fall on them to give offense. There had been no disturbance in Benares during my two month stay; but in the late morning of

Holi day, goondas of one community attacked a group of the others: three or four men were seriously injured by flying brickbats, twenty-five had to be arrested. That afternoon I left for New Delhi, but from the newspaper reports from Benares during the following week, I began to realize how quickly the chain of reprisals and riots starts. Apparently as a sequel to the Holi incident, raiding gangs have killed sixteen people in Benares, by official reports; over six hundred arrests have been made, either of raiders, of men violating the curfew or gathering in crowds. As Mohammedans are in a small minority in Benares, they must have been the victims. I have written to my Benares friends, asking their reactions. It is obvious, both from Benares reports and from the uneasiness which exists in Aligarh district in the western United Provinces, where I now am, that the long disturbances in the Punjab, culminating in more than two thousand deaths, have created considerable tension in this province as well. The tension will be heightened tomorrow, which the Muslim League observes as "Pakistan Day". Perhaps if this day passes peacefully, throughout the land, the tension will subside.

In trying to describe, in this letter and my last, the people among whom I have been living and working, I have neglected to explain what is, after all, the central theme of my present work: the study of Indian history. At the Hindu University in Benares I studied Ancient India; at the Muslim University here in Aligarh I am working on the period of Muslim conquest and rule and the resulting "Indo-Muslim" culture; and when I finish my work here early in May, I plan to transfer to still another university - as yet unchosen - to devote three or four months to the period of British rule and to Indian economic history. This study is being made in accordance with a general working hypothesis of the Institute of Current World Affairs, namely, that proper understanding of the contemporary forces working within a nation can not be attained without knowledge of the nation's past and of the influence of that past on the present. The enclosed syllabus of the reading I did at Benares will give an idea of the subjects I have been surveying. How much of what I have read has sunk in is yet another matter, but I am at least becoming more and more aware of the validity of the Institute's hypothesis. The study reveals not only the ancient social, cultural, and political institutions of the land - many of which have evolved through three millenia into the present, without sharp breaks - but also the origin and strength of the ideals, traditions, myths, and prejudices which the Indian people today have inherited either from historical or legendary past, and which have considerable influence on their present lives.

My presence in the midst of the present forces of course sharpens the consciousness of the influence of the past. I'll try to give examples in future letters. Yet I feel that for final correlation of what I have learned, and for the purpose of strengthening it with further information, I will eventually be tempted to accept the kind offer of Mr. C. Lesley Ames, of St. Paul, which you mentioned in a letter sometime back; namely, to spend a number of months in his library on India, away from the stress of immediate events. This is a thought for the future: for a considerable period to come I'll have plenty to learn here!

This afternoon I am going up to spend a couple of days at the Inter-Asian Conference at New Delhi, and will return to the Muslim University early next week to continue my studies.

Sincerely yours,

Richard Moore

The following syllabus lists the books which I have read on Ancient India (roughly to the 11th century A.D.) during my stay at Benares Hindu University. Many of them I have read thoroughly, making careful notes and comments; others I have scanned more hastily. Most of the following books were recommended by one of these members of the University staff, with whom I have also had discussions from time to time about the work:

Dr. A.S.Altekar, Professor of Ancient History
Dr. R.S.Tripathi, Professor of History
Dr. P. Nagaraja Rao, Professor of Philosophy
Mr. S. R. Ranganathan, Librarian of the University

General History:

Moreland and Chatterjee	A Short History of India
Havell, E.B.	A History of Aryan Rule in India
Saletore, R.N.	The Gupta Age
Tripathi, R.S.	The History of Kanauj to the Muslim Conquest
MacCrindle, J.W.	India as seen by Arrian and Megasthenes.
The Cambridge History of India, Volume I.	

Literature:

Dutt, R.C.	The Mahabharata, condensed into English verse.
Dutt, R.C.	The Ramayana, condensed into English verse.
Vaidya, C.V.	The Mahabharata, a Criticism.
Roy, P.C., trans.	The Mahabharata. Selected Readings.

Religion or philosophy:

Griswold	The Religion of the Rig Veda
Griffith, trans.	Hymns of the Rig Veda. Selected Readings.
	The Bhagavad Gita
	Selected readings from the Upanishads
Tagore, R.	Sadhana
Sankara's	Viveka Chudamani.
Sarma, D.S.	What is Hinduism ?
Guenon, Rene	Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrine
Atreya, B.L.	Yogavasistha
Carpenter, J.E.	Theism in Medieval India

Political and Social:

Shama Sastri, trans.	Kautilya's Arthasastra
K.V. Rangaswami Aiyengar	Some Aspects of Ancient Indian Polity
K.V. Rangaswami Aiyengar	Rajadharma
K.V. Rangaswami Aiyengar	Ancient Indian Economic Thought.
Ghoshal	History of Hindu Political Theories
Jolly, J.	Hindu Law and Custom
Ghurye, D.S.	Caste and Race in India
Keay, F.E.	Ancient Indian Education
Majumdar, R.C.	Corporate Life in Ancient India
Dutt, B.B.	Town Planning in Ancient India.

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