

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Eight weeks ago this afternoon, I left the resthouse of the modern Hindu temple erected by the Birla family at Mathura, where I had been a guest for several days, and set out by bus for Barsana, a large village at the end of the paved road some forty miles north and west. My intention was to stay a few days in Barsana, then move out into a smaller, more representative village, where I would be able to live among cultivators as they harvested their sugar cane, mustard, gram and wheat. Due to my lack of foresight, preparation, and perseverance, and to circumstances encountered in Barsana, that intention has not been fulfilled. Instead, I have had a variety of experiences which have taken me into urban as well as rural homes. The days have been full, for the most part, so full that I have often lacked energy at night to do more than jot down sketchy notes in my journal. But the days have not been orderly, and my observations haven't covered any subject coherently or completely.

Life has many incoherent and incomplete moments or periods, and what I have really been doing is participating in a busy period of the life of an unorthodox Sarasvat Brahmin doctor and his friends: in the marriage of his son, the illness of his wife, the calamities at his rural dispensary, the educational ideas which he has developed after some twenty years of medical work in rural areas. Perhaps in this and one or two later letters, culled from my diary and memory, I can put forth some glimpses of this life.

I had not given Dr. Onkar Nath Jaitly exact notice of my arrival date, and when I reached his Barsana home at 9:30 in the evening, dusty and cramped from the bus, I found him crouched on his rope-strung cot, surrounded on the brick floor by nine youngsters to whom he was teaching the Hindi alphabet. Hardly pausing for formalities of greeting, the doctor drew me down to the cot beside him, and by the flickering oil lamp eagerly showed me the clever devices and rhymes which he has developed to teach the Nagari script in a manner methodical yet appealing to a boy's curiosity. Though at first the boys' eyes bulged at the sight of me, the doctor didn't interrupt the lesson. "Bete, prarthna likho," he demanded, and the lads bent over their slates to chalk out the Hindi word prayer.

"They go after the cows", he explained. "Cowherds, who can not go to school during the day. And so they come to me." Slight and dark in body, each wearing a thread with a metal charm about his neck, clad scantily in two pieces of coarse cloth, the boys truly looked close to the soil. But their bright eyes and willing attention to the doctor showed their pleasure in learning this new art, this new game. For the doctor has made it almost a game, and within five minutes I saw jollity and laughter as well as solemn work. "I can teach anyone Hindi, with jokes instead of punishment", he added. Then one

boy caught his eye, and the doctor drew him up onto the cot. "Except this boy. He has been with me many weeks, but can not learn, can not remember.....And so I love him most of all." The sooty kerosene lamp threw light onto the boy's shining self-conscious face and the doctor's shock of thin grey hair. I thought suddenly eighteen years back to my New Hampshire home, before electricity reached us, and I remembered a family on our road whose second son, my friend, was slow in getting his letters.

Three days later in the fields I met similar boys from Hathiya, a village 3 miles distant. I told them that cowboys in Barsana read at night. To which they replied, "But in Hathiya there is no one to teach us."

By 6:30 on my first morning in Barsana, Dr. Onkar Nath was ready to take me for a walk, out of his walled dispensary yard, past village houses where peasants were already out cutting stalks of barley, mustard, or sugarcane for their buffaloes and bullocks, up onto the rocky outcrop which so strikingly sets off Barsana from the Jamna plain stretching away to the north and east. Despite a slight drizzle of rain and mist, we could see at the top of the low ridge, 400 feet up, the two striking temples which dominate Barsana. I mentioned them, for Barsana is a center of Hindu worship and tradition. "Yes, they are important", replied the doctor, "but I myself do not believe in temples or idols. For me religion means Truth - as it did for Gandhiji. I can have faith only in what I see and reason and think out for myself." And as we stepped up the narrow stony path, he plied me with philosophical questions, to which I was able to reply only sufficiently to elicit his own answers and ideas. The nature of shakti, cosmic power or energy, was the goal of his inquiry, and he opened by relating shakti to sound and by quoting, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Quran, Veda, and Gita provided him with ideas, as well as the Gospel of John, and he also sought hints in psychology and in physical science. By the time we reached an attempted demonstration that energy is primary to matter, the conversation had become a monologue, I remaining the listener.

I was sufficiently engrossed so that I hardly paid attention when we walked within ten yards of the first peacock I had ever seen in natural setting. Then several of the brilliant green-breasted birds caught my eye, their huge bodies and spreading tails amazingly balanced on thin, awkward legs. The practical thought crossed my mind that both peacocks and monkeys, which scamper unharmed by Hindus over walls and roofs of Barsana, bring damage to crops and property; yet their dignity and brilliance made me appreciate why Hindus worship them. When we rose finally to a small promontory where one small building commands the valley, I was hardly surprised to find it a shrine named "Moor Koti", "Peacock's Home". Here sat an aged man, its keeper, just in from his early morning bath. As we put two pice on the altar, he drew back a rich green curtain to show us a bright, formalized painting, two centuries old, of the dance of Lord Krishna and his mate Radha. Fresh flower garlands and green peacock feathers bordered this painting, the only object of devotion in the shrine. I judged that this special temple, though tiny and remote, must attract outside pilgrims as well as residents of Barsana: the number of heavy quilts and household utensils indicated that enough pies and annas are received to maintain the shrine-keeper in fair comfort.

Barsana is famous as the birthplace of Radha, beloved of the Lord Krishna, and countless are the stories and songs of the love of the divine couple. "Nandgaon-Barsana?" I had repeatedly been asked by Mathura folk when I told them I was moving to Barsana. Barsana seemed meaningless to them without its neighboring village Nandgaon, which mounts a parallel ridge two miles to the north. Dr. Onkar Nath explained that in Nandgaon, temple songsters and pandits exalt male shakti, while Barsana, home of Radha, is naturally associated with female shakti. To millions of devotees of the Radhakrishna tradition, numerous in the Mathura area but present throughout India, the names Nandgaon-Barsana are inseparable. Each year during the rains, when plant and animal life are lush and flowering, thousands of pilgrims come to Nandgaon-Barsana to observe the eternal love of Radha and Krishna, renewed in ceremonies and songs. Amid Nature's profuse greenery, wonder and homage is then paid to the powerful mystery of union, birth, and life.

But there are no marriages, Dr. Onkar Nath tells me, between villagers of Nandgaon and Barsana. Nandgaon-Barsana symbolize the divine union between Radha and Krishna, which is considered immortal, unceasing, perfect. The tragedies involved in human marriage - the sorrow at separation from parents, the grief of death, the bitterness of quarrels - would mar and blemish the eternal bliss of divine love which radiates through Nandgaon-Barsana. And so by common popular agreement, no mortals have wed between these two villages.

So, at least, is Dr. Onkar Nath's poetic interpretation. We walked on from Moor Koti, stopping briefly to interview two aged sādhus, living cloistered lives of study and contemplation near a dark green temple tank behind the hill. Then up to the largest temples crowning the ridge, whence we could look down on the jumble of old mud brick walls of Barsana, almost overrunning the gleaming, spacious new buildings which house the government dispensary and the government police force. Beyond lay the ripening fields, glistening as the warm sun drove off the mist. I wondered whether Dr. Onkar Nath had forgotten his medical duties, in his hospitality, for it was already 10:00 o'clock. After meeting temple pandits and devotees, we descended, and by 10:30, in the home of the doctor's friend, local overseer of canals, a cup of hot tea broke the fast which I had been rather involuntarily observing since the noon meal of the day before. (Though the doctor is an enthusiastic and generous host, his own self-detachment in material considerations like food and clothing made him at first a bit insensitive to my dietary wants. Since noticing my general fatigue when not eating regularly, however, he has gone much out of his way to provide me with hot milk and with a sufficiency of our daily fare: unleavened bread, potato or dal stew, curd, and vegetables when available.)

In that first day at Barsana, I sat for a time with the doctor in his dispensary, where eye and ear ailments, ulcerative sores, malarial fevers, and minor injuries are so common that diagnosis and treatment seem to take less time than does recording of their cases in the elaborate logbook. With a shrug, the doctor showed me the separate enumeration: "Europeans, Christians, Anglo-Indians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Others", inherited with the records from a foreign rule he wondered its relevance to illness. Then I took lunch at the home of his compounder, a musical individual, also a Brahmin, with a volatile mind and a highly-strung temper. In the heat of the day, I wit-

nessed a quarrel wherein the local school headmaster struck the cattle-pound keeper with a shoe, the highest insult to a Brahmin. Dr. Onkar Nath and his other guest, a 68-year old retired Sub-Inspector of Police, now a refugee from Pakistan West Punjab, tried to soothe the sensitive nerves of the troubled parties - but it was a long process and I stepped indoors for an after-lunch rest.

The question I asked myself, after that morning so intensely full of religion, was, "Are cultivators and laborers here, as well as Brahmin pandits, steeped in a religious mood?" Two weeks later, a part answer came. Walking home in the evening from a field where ox-press and pit-fire were transforming sugar cane into brown sugar, the dispensary compounder and I met his friend, a hard-working and successful peasant proprietor, Thakur by caste. I commented on the fine crop this year in his fields. "All comes from God, from Ishwar", he replied. "It is not our accomplishment. He is the Creator and Provider of all. We do our daily part, but in the end this life is in His control."

On my second day in Barsana, I learned how important government officials, westernized in manner and education, are strongly exposed to the rustic faith and elaborate religious tradition of a place like Barsana. The Deputy Inspector-General of Police, responsible for the western division of the United Provinces, came to Barsana on inspection tour. The D.I.G. is Dr. Onkar Nath's distant cousin, and as his shining blue sedan nosed to a stop in the narrow village lane, the doctor stepped forward to greet the party. I was also introduced, and could not fail to note the contrast between the doctor's simple khadi clothes - he has sympathized with the Congress since 1921 - and the western suit of his official relative. With the D.I.G. and the district Superintendent of Police were women and children of their families, dressed in their picnic best, which meant shorts and white shirts for the little boys. A jeep behind the sedan carried constables and a cook who were to set up camp 3 miles outside Barsana for preparation of the noon meal.

The police officials and their families almost duplicated my entire temple tour of the previous day, escorted by local pandits who explained aspects of their local tradition. In the largest temple, they stopped for nearly an hour, listening to ardent and colorful songs by eight or ten devotees. Sometimes the local dialect had to be interpreted for the visitors - and of course I could not follow any of the songs - but they listened with interest. It seemed to me a strange use of time for a police inspector in days when security in the country was unsettled. But it served the purpose of revealing the mind and mood of local people to their sophisticated officials, whose cosmopolitan and educational background makes them almost of another world. The official aspect of the visit, contact with Barsana's police force, took place later on.

An awkward, yet amusing incident closed that day. Dr. Onkar Nath had invited Pandit Tirath Ram, his Punjab refugee guest, and me to accompany him to the marriage of his son, Romesh, to a girl in a village some 80 miles away. We accepted; the marriage party itself, lasting several days, is a tale too long for this letter; but our mode of departure from Barsana deserves mention.

We could have taken the morning bus to Mathura. Dr. Onkar Nath chose, however, to await the arrival of his prominent relative. After

the D.I.G.'s sightseeing was finished, the doctor approached him with a request for a jeep ride out to Mathura. The D.I.G. quietly consented, gestured assent to the constable driving the jeep, and drove away in the sedan to his luncheon camp. The doctor, Pt. Tirath Ram and I climbed into the jeep. The constable, however, had other plans. He refused to start. More equipment and other constables were to be picked up at Nandgaon, he said. Reluctant to be further party to what I considered interference with official duty, I at once got out of the jeep. Pt. Tirath Ram followed, after a moment. But the doctor insistently stayed in, and drove away.

Pt. Tirath Ram and I prepared together our potato and chapatti lunch. He is a strikingly erect 6-foot figure, full of the dignity and integrity and confidence of the old time Indian police. His service outlook, shaped by the disciplinary tradition of thirty years' participation in the "steel frame", came forth in rich vigour when he suddenly declaimed, two hours after the doctor's departure: "In my opinion, neither India nor Pakistan can stand." This mildly stirred my curiosity, but I said nothing. Deliberately, he continued: "You say that constable. He was ordered by his superior, a big officer, to take us. He openly disobeyed, and acted on his own initiative. This lack of discipline runs through all the services today, in both dominions. You could not have found it in my day. It means the government can not be sure of its authority."

In the present case, I had rather admired the constable for upholding official necessity above the family favor granted by his superior. Nepotism is a weakness as well as indiscipline, though more insidious. And I respected the constable's independence of judgement. But I found Pt. Tirath Ram's comment well worth noting, both in revealing the attitude of the past and in its evaluation, the product of an observant and experienced mind, of the police services today.

However, I was not surprised when the doctor suddenly returned, with the jeep, after another hour. He had persuaded his relative, in their lunch time camp, to confirm his order to the driver. Pt. Tirath Ram and I loaded our bedding and joined the doctor, I highly embarrassed at what seemed interference with government business. I had to choose between offending my host and committing what seemed to me an imposition on the visiting official and his duty. Piled high with us three civilians, four constables, and unlimited equipment, the jeep bounced us quickly toward Mathura, with American-like speed. The doctor's justifying sentence closed the incident, and incidentally demonstrated how family loyalty runs through the Indian scene, still more important than one's obligations or individual status as a citizen to whom no special favors are due. "He is a high officer", said the doctor, "and it would have been an insult if he had refused me this aid."

Yours sincerely,

Richard Morse

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