

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

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% American Embassy
New Delhi, India

(written at New Delhi, November 10, 1946)

Dear Mr. Rogers:

British hospitality, I find, presses on the guest three very definite activities: shooting, drinking, and riding. To the first I remain completely unresponsive, as it is really an optional matter. But the latter two are pretty much in the line of duty. Already I have joined in the second on more numerous occasions than I would like to record. And the other day I had my first fling at horsemanship.

Phil Talbot's friend James Fraser, I.C.S., Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar District, Punjab, had assigned me to two of his field officers, Naib-Tehsildar (Sub-Revenue Officer) Mohammad Ismail Khan and Sub-Divisional Inspector of Schools Mohammad Aslam. Our afternoon program contemplated a 'chukker' covering about six villages in a circumference of ten miles. Though I did warn my two hosts that I had never done much riding, I was understating the case. I have never actually been on a horse since the age of twelve, but, feeling ashamed to admit the fact, I valiantly mounted my horse and we set off, at a slow walk. This was fine, until pedestrians started walking past us, when Mohammad Aslam suggested that we wouldn't see many villages at that pace. I at once responded, "Right, please take the lead". He and Ismail Khan moved into what I presume was a canter, and I followed. Suddenly my animal broke into a full gallop, caused either by my considerable bouncing or my loose hold of the rein. He dashed madly between the two riders in front and set out across the Indian countryside with me hanging helplessly to the saddle horn and bumping eight inches upward with each stride. For at least two hundred yards, as we left the road and crossed rough rutted fields, I was sure that a stumble or an extra hard bounce would quickly deposit me on terra firma. Thinking about the prospect, I decided that INCWA would be getting a poor return on its investment if I were laid up with a broken back for three months, so I finally began to get the rhythm of the gallop and some control of the reins. We must have covered a full mile, however, before slowing down at all, and when we were finally stopped by a low masonry wall from a well my partners were five minutes behind and very very perturbed. When they rode up, I was transferred to another horse, and we finished the 'chukker' at a walk, visiting only three villages.

Looking back, I have a suspicion that one factor in the race may have been my frantic use of the good Yankee word, 'Whoa' to a horse which probably thought I was saying in Hindustani, 'Jalo', meaning, 'Go ahead'. At any rate, two days later I persuaded my companions to let me attempt something more than a walk, and eventually I became capable of galloping securely, though with little grace. With that ability tentatively acquired, I now feel equipped to tour India.

Two of my general impressions regarding north Indian village

life received some fortification from incidents during my five days' tour of villages in Amritsar District. These impressions are hardly very profound, but actually witnessing the events and gathering ideas from them seems more interesting and lasting than merely reading about them. The first is the immobility of the cultivator, his inability to leave the land if it fails him. Along the southern bank of the river Ravi, agriculture is entirely dependent on the river's whims. In one season the flood may carry down a fine light silt that is ideal for gram and wheat, but in the next a deposit of sand may nearly ruin the land. Last July the flood was even worse. The river moved its entire course so much to the south that it cut the village of Kamelpur Kalan in half, sweeping away half the houses, half the mosque, and dissolving mud walls of remaining houses. This village was inhabited by some 250 people, who gained their whole livelihood from their 200 cultivatable acres. No lives were lost in the flood, but all the land except 50 poor acres was carried away, the river Ravi remaining in its place.

James Fraser had already told me something of the reaction of these villagers to their calamity. When I talked with them through an interpreter I was able to understand their position a bit more fully. Out of the 250, a very few had other properties or relatives in a canal district 300 miles away, and moved there. The one or two families of Hindu shopkeepers easily transferred their business to Ramdas, a good-sized trading town five miles away, or Amritsar, a city 25 miles distant. The rest did two things. First they salvaged timber from their destroyed homes and hauled it to Ramdas where they sold it at half the market rate of new logs. Second, they petitioned the Deputy Commissioner for new land.

Amritsar District, however, has a density of 720 persons per square mile, and vacant land hardly exists. Nevertheless, Fraser did find them 80 acres not too far away. They did not consider this an adequate improvement over their 50 poor acres, so asked for a bigger area. Absolutely none was available, he told them, and sent them 250 pounds of atta (flour) to keep them going. But now they are not moving, and are apparently endeavoring to outwait him and force him to find them a bigger site. He is not planning to send them more flour, though they are obviously on a stringent diet. They also hope to receive government benefits as victims of this flood, but their only present activity is to repair the walls of their homes in preparation for winter. Beyond that they have no plan of action, and no means of support.

The factor which struck me was their actual inability to change their profession, coupled with their determination to stick to their hereditary source of life, the soil. They are content to be farmers, know no craft such as basket-making or weaving - these are performed by traditional clans -, and they refused to think of moving to Ramdas or Amritsar to find a non-agricultural job. Chances are they couldn't get one anyway, with no training. There was a helplessness and lack of resourcefulness in this society, plus a dependence on government. Government, in turn, could do no more

for their aid than its resources permit. Certainly neither the naib-tehsildar nor I, to whom constant pleas were directed by the villagers, could help a bit. I left with no idea what they would finally do.

The second social condition that has attracted my attention is the existence of caste, or at least of segregation, among these Mohammedan and Sikh villagers in the north. No doubt I shall find a much more acute caste division among the Hindus in the south, but I have been surprised to find it here. Its basis seems in this case to be occupational. Even after northern villagers accepted Islam, the old barrier against the 'sweeper' class remained. These are the scavenger group, the dung-collectors, who are untouchables in the south. The barrier is not as strong here, but the 'sweepers', who now also serve as agricultural laborers, live apart in a separate little settlement, drink from their own well, and generally are not included in the society of the remaining villagers.

This condition has given rise to two curious developments. During the Boer War, when Sikhs were being recruited for the Army, this sweeper class was excluded from recruitment. At that time, therefore, many of the sweepers became Sikhs, and were known as Muzbee Sikhs, muzbee meaning "one who has accepted a religion". Then they were allowed to join the Army. When World War I came, many more followed suit, so that today in several Sikh villages there is a solid body of Muzbees. Those who stayed in service long enough to get a pension have in some cases purchased land and constructed fine brick homes within the main village. But those who have remained sweepers and laborers still retain the stigma of their occupation and its low economic status. They live in their own compound, and are not permitted in orthodox Sikh practice to marry Sikhs of other sub-castes.

A similar situation prevails among those people known as Indian Christians in the Punjab villages. They too are the sweepers, and some fifteen years ago they became tired of being known by the degrading title 'chuhras', so became converts to Christianity and are now so registered in the census. They have their own representatives and separate electorate, though these villagers must be too poor to understand or take advantage of it. Occasionally a missionary worker comes to visit their small church in their secluded portion of the village. They themselves have evidently increased in self-respect as a result of the change, but in the eyes of the village they remain sweepers. Only in the case of Indian Christians who have migrated from their home villages to a new district, where they together can form their own homogeneous community, have they shed their old shell.

Please don't interpret my letters to mean that I'm seeing no good sides to village life. But it is a valuable experience to see as many of these vast hurdles to progress as possible, firsthand. In addition, I've collected a good many economic facts. Now I'm back in New Delhi, and will leave for Bombay tonight on the southern leg of my tour. I'll include its itinerary in my next letter, and also discuss future plans.

Sincerely yours,

Richard Mose