

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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India's Problems: "A Long Story"

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers,

"If you and I sit down and begin to discuss India's problems, then it will be a long story," Mr. Nehru said to his colleagues in the Congress party at their convention at Nagpur in Central India last January. As a matter of fact, it took three days, and they were just getting started when they broke up and went home.

Having recently returned home from India, I too would like to sit down and discuss India's problems. It's not that I want to pick out and publicize the predicaments. I simply want to try to explain what the problems look like, as the starting-point of another "long story," the efforts to solve them.

India's problems can be expressed in statistics: a population of 390 million people living on incomes averaging \$56 per person a year; a per capita intake of 1750 calories of food per day, and annually inadequate harvests even though seven of every ten people are engaged in farming; an infant mortality rate of 114 per 1000 live births, and a life expectancy of 35 years; a literacy rate of 16%, or less; and a total of 2.5 million persons suffering from tuberculosis, and 1.5 million more from leprosy.

The problems can also be described by the abstract words "poverty, disease, ignorance, stagnancy."

Then there are the real people:

There is a villager, a former Untouchable, living near the bank of the river, in a mud hut, with his wife and five children. For eight weeks they had tended the cornfield of a landowner, and in the last three weeks had watched over the rows all day to frighten away the crows. Now, after the harvest, spread out thinly on five small bench-beds to dry, were yellow kernels of corn, the family's wages for eight weeks' work. How long will the corn last seven people? "Two weeks." Is there any other food, or work? "No." How will you all manage? "We don't know."

A newborn baby had died in the village, and there was a procession of mourning family and friends bearing the tiny wrapped body down to the riverbank for burial.

The young man, with his two-year-old son Nabi in his arms, watched them go past, and after a while said, "Our first son died when he was just the age of this child...We didn't know the cause---some indigestion, something like that. We lost another child, a girl, at birth, and Nabi's mother almost died too." He looked off toward the riverbank, "Go to any family here, and there will be two or three who have died like that."

The old farmer had walked down the trail from his terraced fields on the mountain, carrying the ginger roots on his back to the market in the plain. Now he squatted on the floor of the shop, looking at the new light bulb, then glancing around the room. Someone offered the explanation: Electricity, old man. "Yes," he had heard that. "But will it come to our village also?" he asked. After a while, yes. "Will it be able to cross the river?" Yes, it can travel on the wire. "On that metal string?" Yes. He smiled skeptically and said, "Very difficult."

The three young men, friends from boyhood, had left the village to go to college in the city, and had been back for several years. As on most days, they had arisen in the morning and drunk tea, then met in the house of one to talk. After the mid-day meal there had been a nap and tea and a stroll, and at sundown, supper and then cards. The talk was about "Government's neglect of the villages." All right, what could you yourself do to help? One answered, "No, we are too busy, with the rice." What of between-seasons? Another answered, "Come on, let's play. In this village there are three seasons---spring, autumn and cards."

Sometimes I think the problem is not so much to "reduce poverty," "cut the rate of infant mortality," "provide universal education," or "arouse the youth to help in the task of rural reconstruction," but rather to change the lives of these people, and that is even harder to do.

Why are these people the way they are, embedded in poverty, disease, ignorance, stagnancy? I can make only a sketchy explanation. I don't understand it very well myself.

That family of seven with the eight weeks' work, two weeks' wages of corn---why are they so poor?

Ah, the miserly landlord! Yes---but not really. The family's work was not laborious; the land and the seed were his, not theirs. They were to be paid a small part of the crop. The crop turned out to be small, so their share was small---smaller than they, or he, had expected. Should the landlord have given more? Few in the village, including him, are prosperous.

Why doesn't the family own their own land, in the first place? In this village, as elsewhere in India, there is little land for many people. These seven are among the 60 million former Untouchables, those denied respect and self-respect, kept at the edge of society, permitted only menial work, and unable to share in owning the village land. If land was the means to well-being, they least of all were well-off.

One can see this, but how far back should one go to look for an explanation? The Aryan invasion of North India 3500 years ago and the domination over the aborigines? The perversion of the ideal Hindu caste system with its orderly, functional divisions, into a hierarchy of exclusion, antagonism and injustice?

Whatever the reasons, there they are at the bottom of poverty, the millions of "Untouchables"---or now, this family of seven living near the riverbank---the poorest in food, in shelter, in clothing, in health---and all too poor in spirit.

And that infant, carried in sadness to a riverside grave, while the villagers knew once again that it is often difficult to keep a hold on life---what of that baby, and the more than one in ten who make it to life, to die in infancy?

Many things: the mother, weakened by too frequent pregnancies; the unskilled wives who help at birth in filthy huts. Alive; then the infant's world in that hut, with the heat and the rain, with meals of little food, unclean food, and times of hunger but no food; then undernourished.

The mother may know the necessity of keeping water, food and cooking pot, hut and clothes clean, but the means---even the clean water---may not be available; then unclean.

Undernourished and unclean, the disease that comes---dysentery, small pox, cholera---finds the little body unprotected prey. If a doctor is near and can help, he may not be skillful enough or careful; his medicine may not be adequate or sure. The skillful doctors are few; their medicines most frequently are unknown or unavailable.

It is often difficult to keep a hold on life.

There is nothing greatly deplorable about the ignorance of the old man from the mountain, marvelling about the new light bulb, but why didn't he have this useful knowledge?

His home, in some stifled backcountry village, is lit, when it is lit, by a burning cotton wick laid in a shallow dish of oil. The village lanes are dark at night. He was born in his village and has always stayed there except for those infrequent trips down along the path, down to the trail, down to the road that leads to the market in the plain. There, he has no knowledge of these new things.

What government or company could or would string the line up the mountain, nowhere, to his village? What teacher in what school was there to teach him of these things? What book to inform an illiterate man? What moving picture brought to that place?

What the old man knows are the mountain and his fields, the ginger, the ways of his neighbors, and the ways of God. These other, new things are difficult to understand.

The three young men, trained in college, who returned to their village to live a life of listlessness---why?

They had gone off to college, sent by the goodwill of their families and attracted by the bright road-to-success. They enjoyed the city, with its excitement and freedom and promise of newness. They looked forward to "good positions" in the city, suitable to their training, as a junior official, supervisor, or clerk.

But there were few such jobs, and none for them. Soon they lost heart. Reluctantly they returned to the village. They want to be new but are caught between the city newness they wanted but haven't attained, and the village oldness they had left behind only to return to so unwillingly. They still harbor hopes of getting those "good positions" in the city, yet they can feel themselves becoming their fathers' sons again---the well-off peasant, but a peasant; the fairly prosperous shopkeeper, but a shopkeeper; villagers.

So the three young men are "unsuited" now to turn to the elementary, at-hand challenges to newness their own village offers. They are unwilling to condescend to the uninspiring jobs of teaching illiterates, serving cooperative societies and organizing work parties, lending their intelligence and potential leadership to the job of bringing newness to their fellow-villagers.

The old-style villagers must be led into change. These young leaders do not lead. Things remain pretty much as they are, and newness comes to nobody.

These problems can be considered as personal affairs, as I think they are when you come right down to it. Or, they can be counted by families (and there are 65 million families in India), or by villages (which come to a total of 550,000). Or they can be multiplied, all together, by 390 million, the number of people who make up the population. And these problems---and others unmentioned---have long existed, do exist, and will continue to exist.

Except that now, newly, slowly, gigantically, India is embarked on a great effort to solve its problems, to change itself, as much as it can. The purposes, the progress, the difficulties, the expectations are the sequel to the "long story."