

## 5 India--Cultural Potpourri

Birganj, Nepal, to Gorakhpur, India  
Saturday, March 6

7 A.M. found us on the road again, this time in our compact but roomy yellow and green modern bus. Most of us had had a sound night's sleep except Jen, who had spent the entire night making trips to the loo, and her five roommates who had slept poorly, if at all. I was beginning to wonder if Jen could last the trip. She was stretched out in the front seats designated for sick passengers and Neil.

My roommates, all in their mid-20s, were quite well and energetic. Elizabeth, a matronly type in appearance and conviction, and her close friend, Myra, the more outgoing of the two, were musically inclined and enjoyed composing poetry, especially about individuals in the group. They were very keen and had been observing the group closely.

While packing in our room before breakfast, Elizabeth and Myra speculated about romances that might develop on the trip. It was obvious that the fellows were pleased at the ratio of girls

to guys, nearly four to one. Neil and Graeme were especially popular with us girls, for they were in charge and could become heroes in our eyes as the trip progressed. Kathy and I kept thoughts about the romantic aspects of the trip to ourselves; time would reveal those stories.

Before breakfast, the bus detail had packed our cases in the boot at the rear of the bus. (Cases would always be packed before breakfast, a rule of the road.) Next to the boot in the center was a large compartment for the cooking and future camping equipment.

Boarding the bus with our shoulder and sleeping bags, we deposited them in the wooden pen located at the center of the bus. The guitars were also kept here as well as two large plastic bottles of water for emergencies. Here the seats on both sides were reversed so that two portable tables could be assembled for playing cards, writing and preparing food. The upholstered seats were comfortable though immovable and were smaller than those in commercial buses of the United States. Fresh air entered the bus through four roof vents, and the expansive shadeless windows proved excellent for viewing the passing world.

Driving through Birganj, Neil faced us and, with the bus microphone, began to brief us on bus procedure. He pointed out the cassette player and its six speakers that Graeme had recently installed and the box of cassettes on the overhead shelf at the front. Neil Diamond, Wings, the Beattles, the Bee Gees, Elton John, Abba, the Carpenters and other popular singing groups would

be entertaining us. We would not have access to a radio during the trip. To provide shade, Graeme had tied two bus length cords between the windows and the overhead shelves on which we could hang towels. Borrowing the mike from Neil, Graeme interjected that he did not want his bus looking like a Chinese laundry, so no washing could be hung from these cords, towels only! Neil showed us the first aid kit next to the cassette box, then called our attention to the box of paperbacks on the back seat, our portable library. Unless otherwise instructed, we were free to move about the bus; it would be "our home" for the next two and a half months.

Again we traveled over dirt and gravel roads, but now interspersed with asphalt. The bus had been spotless, but soon a thin layer of dust settled over everything including us. My powder blue parka was now gray and the collar and cuffs were brown. What a poor choice of color!

After two and a half hours of traveling in a southwesterly direction at 25 MPH, we took our morning loo stop. Graeme parked the bus beside a field of bamboo. The procedure would usually be the same, the girls finding facilities to the right side of the road and the fellows to the left. We girls, disappearing into a high stand of bamboo, were completely hidden. The bamboo was so dense we could barely see the sky. Still very modest, we spaced ourselves at twenty to thirty foot intervals.

Following another two and a half hours of slow travel, the old dusty border town appeared. It bustled with activity. Un-

like Nepal, there were more trucks, cars, buses and even tractors. Also there were more pedestrians, thousands of them. Women in saris, some wearing scarves, were being driven in tri-shaws and buggies. Oxen or water buffalo pulled wooden carts, some with wooden wheels others with tires. Here, as in Katmandu, life moved at a lethargic pace as portrayed by one ox-pulled cart in which a sleeping man sprawled, apparently trusting his animal to deliver him to his destination. Bulls and cows kept pace with the masses.

As we waited in the bus to be called individually into an unkempt cement block customs building, dozens of men, some in traditional white cotton garb, some in loincloths and others in a mixture of western and local dress, stood around our bus gaping at us. A bus containing white-skinned women in T-shirts, jeans or skirts must have been an oddity to them. We girls were still in shock when some of these gapers relieved themselves beside our bus. Would we ever get used to this?

Soon a couple of Indian boys balancing large flat baskets of raisins, nuts and oranges on their heads motioned to us to buy their produce. It was safe to eat fruit that could be peeled, so we bought fresh oranges and nuts adding them to our leftover breakfast of hardboiled eggs and bread for lunch.

We were not allowed to wander from the bus, but either stood outside in its cool shadow or bore its inside heat while eating, reading, writing, sleeping, singing or visiting.

We were learning quickly that the Indians, like the Nepalese, were not in a hurry nor did they have deadlines. One uniformed of-

ficer interviewed each of us at his leisure, taking time out for lunch and tea. The sooner we relaxed and adapted to this tempo, the more we would enjoy the trip.

Some of the girls left the bus to use the public facilities next to the customs building. But the stonping blocks were so vile that they returned. Hearing about a better men's facility, they approached it only to be chased away by an irate officer. Consequently, using a blanket and a plastic pail, they devised their own facility aboard the bus.

My turn eventually came to be interviewed. Neil had collected our passports and had handed them over to a customs officer as he boarded our bus to inspect it. The stack of passports was now piled on the interviewer's old scarred desk. He was holding mine as I walked into the room. Offering me a seat, he asked me some routine questions. He was surprised that I was an American and in an unnerving manner queried me more about my background. He stamped my passport and returned it to me. I left with the impression that he did not like Americans.

The last person in our group was processed through customs five hours after our arrival in the border town. We continued on to Gorakhpur arriving there around 7 P.M. Neil told us that our hotel had been headquarters for British officers during the colonial period. He then read our room assignments.

Elizabeth and I shared a second-story room entered by way of a balcony overlooking various crude dwellings. Another cement type structure, the hotel had been freshly painted white and was clean.

How pleasant! Our spacious white room with a shiny red bare floor was furnished with a dresser and two beds draped with mosquito nets. A bathroom containing a sink, its tap providing only cold water, and a flushing porcelain slab raised on a platform was in an adjoining room. There was no toilet paper.

It wasn't long until we all met in the hotel dining room. We were hungry and tired and hoped for an early night. Neil had given the cooks our order of meatballs, boiled potatoes and cooked vegetables. Seated on benches at tables, we drank Coke and waited while Neil expounded on the formative years of India's colonial era.

It was during the Mogul rule that the British East India Company was able to secure trading posts at Surat in 1613, Bombay in 1661 and Calcutta in 1691. These posts gained Britain command of the sea, driving former Dutch and Portuguese commerce out. In the mid-18th century, with a weakening Mogul Empire, India became a battleground between France and Britain for its domination.

Britain ultimately won, the British Empire in India being recognized in the Treaty of Paris of 1763.

The history lesson over, Nino, I and several others joined in a table game of tiddlywinks using the Coke bottle caps. Others played a game of miniature soccer with the caps. The games became loud with much laughter and yelling. It seemed as though we had become kids again, letting go.

An hour had passed without a sign of food. Apparently we were in for another long wait, so I returned to my room to wash my hair. Since the door had no lock, I barred it with the dresser.

In the bathroom I filled a large tin pitcher with cold water and wet my hair. Applying the shampoo, I scrubbed my head while two lizards scurried about the walls snapping at mosquitoes. After rinsing my hair, I took a sponge bath and returned to the dining room just in time for a delicious dinner.

We were back in our rooms by 10:30 P.M. and lights were out at 11:00. In my comfortable bed under the protection of the mosquito net, I reflected on the day. It had been full of people, differences and challenges; and it had been long, seven hours of slow travel, five hours of border procedures and two hours of waiting for a simple meal. Outside the hum of Gorakhpur continued as we spent our first night on the vast subcontinent of India.

Gorakhpur to Varanasi  
Sunday, March 7

We were on the road by 8 A.M. for a drive across part of the great alluvial plain. We saw our first camels loaded with goods plodding along the road. Some of their drivers rode while others walked beside them. The shoulder of the road was used by a staggering number of pedestrians and animals on their journeys between towns and villages.

To our delight the drive had been faster, over better roads, and we entered Varanasi in the early afternoon. This city, formerly called Banaras, located on the banks of the sacred Ganges River, is the Hindus' holiest city.

The large elegant colonial Hotel de Paris, which had served

as barracks for the British, would be our home for the next two days. Our large rooms were furnished with writing desks as well as the basics. We had a standard toilet which worked, toilet paper and a sink and shower with both hot and cold water. A houseboy, stationed outside our door, was available to wash our laundry and do errands for a small fee. He was also responsible for cleaning our room.

After unloading our belongings in our rooms, most of us met in the spacious lounge with floor to ceiling windows. Here we sat on cushioned bamboo furniture and looked out on a sprawling lawn and a circular driveway bordered by low hedges and flowers as a tall dark waiter in a white uniform took our cool drink orders. The weather today had been as lovely as it had been the previous days. This, added to the attractive surroundings we were now enjoying, gave us the break that several of us longed for.

That evening in the high ceilinged dining room, sitting at round linen covered tables, we were formally served a seven course meal of traditional Indian food loaded with curry powder and other hot spices. As we ate, American pop music of the 50s and 60s emanated from a speaker on a wall. Though Jen appeared to be improving, this meal set her off with yet another attack of the Delhi-belly.

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Varanasi  
Monday, March 8

After enjoying a leisurely breakfast, we boarded the bus around 9 A.M. Jen stayed behind in bed, reading and resting. En route to the center of town, Neil told us of an invitation we had received from the Maharaja. Tomorrow we would be taken on his launch up the Ganges to the palace grounds, ride elephants to his palace and breakfast with him. Now we really had something to write home about!

Our first stop of the day was the Durga Temple, Durga being the fierce form of Shiva's consort. This temple was another refuge for sacred monkeys, so Neil warned us to keep our distance from these animals; they could be rabid.

We climbed at least twenty steep steps to the top of the wall surrounding the temple which gave us a good view of the grounds and the temple where the monkeys and their young moved freely. Near the temple, a stake marked the site for animal sacrifices. A humble caretaker in tunic and pantaloons poured several buckets of water on the temple's porch and proceeded to sweep away the water and monkey refuse using a large primitive broom made of long reeds and bound with rope. An unpleasant odor pervaded the complex.

From the Durga Temple we walked to the Shiva Temple which was nearby on the same street. We noticed a poor old man in white lying at the side of the street. He observed us with doleful eyes. He appeared to be dying, yet life continued all

around him. Like the natives, we passed him without stopping. Yet his need and the needs of others like him in India and elsewhere made a strong impact on us.

Bordered by palms and tropical plants, a wide sidewalk led us to the entrance of a streamlined marble temple dedicated to Shiva. Slipping off our shoes, we entered a large clean unfurnished sanctuary where worshipers in clean garments paid a priest for a few drops of holy Ganges water. Fragrant flower petals covered the floor and flower leis adorned some of the worshipers. We all studied the walls where murals depicting stories of Shiva had been painted. Shiva and his consort were represented by numerous gods and goddesses, part animal and part man, some with ten arms and some with six heads. Every posture, gesture and attribute of these deities had meaning to followers of the faith.

We walked back to the bus. Graeme then drove us to Banaras Hindu University, noted for its Sanskrit studies. Contrary to my expectations, the campus was quite modern with well kept grounds.

As Neil led us to a temple on campus, three students began talking with a couple of our girls. Seeing a smooth sculptured bull near the temple prompted me to ask one of the students about the cow's significance to Hindus. He explained that these "sacred" cows roam the streets freely for Shiva's transport. Indians depend on the cow for milk, farming, transporting people and goods and use its dung for fuel. To eat meat is a

sacrilege, so, many Hindus are vegetarians.

The campus temple was divided into several rooms, one in which a healthy well-fed bull chewed lazily on the hay surrounding it. **Worshippers** came to pay tribute to the animal. Every room undoubtedly had significance, but I was in the dark. The Hindu faith was baffling with its various forms of worship and its rituals. It was impossible to understand in its totality; my only hope was that I would be able to grasp some of its concepts.

Within thirty minutes, we were back on the bus traveling to a silk factory, our last stop. Varanasi was known for its fine silks and brocades. At the factory we saw natives weaving the rich threads into cloth. The silk cloth was then made into saris. A tourist shop next to the factory displayed a selection of elegant saris of various colors. We girls were only too happy to try on the beautiful coverings. Eileen and several others bought them for gifts and souvenirs.

We returned to the hotel in the afternoon to relax as most of us were exhausted. Many of us were beginning to feel run down and colds were spreading. Jen was still sick and drank chicken broth and tea in her room that evening.

After another lovely meal, we witnessed the **beginning of an elaborate** Indian wedding in front of the hotel. The groom was dressed in a uniform of brocade and silk. He wore a white turban and scarf and rode a white stallion. A procession of family and friends carrying candles and lanterns followed him

into the country where the bride was waiting.

Varanasi  
Tuesday, March 9

By 6 A.M. we were on our way to the Ganges River, first to tour the river; then, we thought, to visit the Maharaja. However, Neil regretfully announced that the Maharaja had cancelled his invitation due to an unexpected emergency.

The rising sun's reflection on the river caused many of us to stop for pictures before we walked down the ghat through squatting lepers and beggars to the rowboats. Here we met two guides who helped us into four boats. Before rowing away from shore, each chose the two boats that he would be responsible for, boarded one and began telling us about the Ganges' significance to Hindus.

According to our guide, Hindus, who comprise 84 percent of India's 610,080,000 population, try to make at least one pilgrimage to this sacred river. They believe that its waters will wash away their sins and release them from repeated incarnations. Their souls will then be free to enter into union with Brahman. Because of this belief, death is the biggest event in a Hindu's life. We had already witnessed the constant influx of worshipers in this city. Our guide said that many of them were sick and near death and had come to immerse themselves in the cleansing waters of the river. Perhaps the old man we had seen the day before had come for this very purpose, to be cleansed by the river before his death. Not only would holy Ganges water be