

## Christmas – Bugles, Bagpipes and Drums

December 16, 2002

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In the late summer of 1964 my wife, Ann, and I together with our four children embarked for India. I was on a sabbatical leave from the University of Cincinnati Medical College to work at the Frances Newton Mission Hospital in India's State of Punjab. The Director was Dr. Dorothy Ferris of Blue Ash. A graduate of The University of Cincinnati Medical College, she was sent out to India by the Presbyterian Missions and would remain there for about fifty years. I was in the Dean's Office of the College and had helped her acquire surplus medical supplies and recruit volunteer physicians for her staff. She urged me to come out and suggested that I bring my family, at our expense of course.

It proved to be an exciting adventure. We arrived in Ferozepore 239 miles northwest of Delhi by train, a hot and dusty 12 hour trip, stopping at many small station platforms where vendors of food, cold drinks, tea and coffee, fruits and flowers, magazines and comic books offered their goods through the open windows of the bogey as there was no air conditioning. We arrived in a pitch dark night to be greeted by Dr. Ferris and her staff. Marigold wreaths were placed around our necks and we were guests of honor at a cookout.

Our quarters were in the principal residential area of the hospital compound. We quickly realized that this was to be a lifestyle totally different from that in Cincinnati. The mission staff was very kind to us and saw to it that our creature comforts were provided for, within the limits of the local supply. Luckily we had been able to send ahead substantial quantities of facial tissues, toilet paper, toothpaste and other personal care items. We were taken to see the local points of interest and to attend the frequent festivals.

With the approach of our festival of Thanksgiving we looked for a way to return the kindnesses and learned that the United States Agency for International Development in conjunction with Ohio State University had set up an experimental farm where turkeys were raised. I contacted them only to learn that all of the frozen ones had been bought by the Ford Foundation for their staff. As it turned out I was able to purchase five live ones. Our son, Bo, and I borrowed the hospital station wagon for the drive to the farm near Ludhiana some sixty miles east. On the way I stopped at the Christian Medical College where I gave a talk on some neurological topic or other. We then collected the turkeys with their legs tied together. Nevertheless they proved to be noisy passengers. On arrival at the hospital we discovered that one had laid an egg. We distributed four to the mission staff and turned the fifth over to our cook-bearer, Muthi, a Muslim who spoke no English, to prepare for our Thanksgiving dinner. On Thanksgiving morning Ann went to the go-down that served as our kitchen only to find the turkey boiling briskly on the kerosene stove. You can imagine her consternation. Practically in tears she sought out the nurse-anesthetist who spoke Hindi to explain that it should be roasted. The problem was that the

stove-top oven wasn't large enough but was assured that it would be "just right". We were called to dinner to find it so brown and crisp, perfectly suited for carving.

We had learned of the Anglican priest who attended as an adjunct chaplain at the hospital through his principal duty was to the local garrison church. Father S. L. Kaul was a Kashmiri Brahmin who had converted to Christianity. He proved to be a charming, well-educated man and we enjoyed his company. His church was a typical brick edifice of Victorian Gothic style. It was built in the middle of the cantonment which under the British had been the Ordnance Depot for the vast Punjab and the Northwest Territory and a major base of the colonial government. The walls of the church were covered with plaques bearing the insignia of the regiments and dedicated to the British officers and men killed in that outpost of the Empire. The front pew on the right had a brass plate inscribed "Senior Military Officer" and that on the left "Senior Civil Officer" and on back by rank for several rows of pews. Fr. Kaul maintained a modest congregation and we attended services from time to time.

In late November I had to go down to our Embassy in New Delhi to work out the details of a trip my role as a consultant on Neurological Education in India for our National Institute of Neurological Disease and Blindness. A trip to Delhi was never easy but did make possible shopping for supplies not locally available. Ann noted in her journal: "Sam returned from Delhi after a successful trip with five kilos of butter and tins of bacon, tuna, salmon etc." The success referring to the food with no mention of having set up a trip that would take us to visit medical schools in Calcutta, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Madras, having previously been to others in Bombay, Srinagar, and New Delhi.

With Thanksgiving over we turned our thoughts to Christmas. If we were to get off presents, cards and notes to family and friends in the states it had to be attended to promptly. To do so meant trips to the Ferozepore Bazaar, always a fascinating experience. The entrance was by way of a massive gate through the city wall onto a long narrow street of buildings and stalls offering goods and services of all sorts from beautifully fashioned silver work to glass beads, colorful yard goods and beautiful sarees, tailors, pharmacies, food shops, doctors and lawyers stalls. Scattered along the way were vendors cooking curries and sweets which gave off wonderful scents to offset the odors rising from the open sewers that flanked the street. And of course hoards of people: turbaned Sikhs, Pathans with long rifles slung over their shoulders, lepers and beggars in tatters trying to get one's attention. Every visit was different.

The Christmas Season of course is not an Indian festival and I found that it overlapped the dates of the Annual Meeting of the Neurological Society of India which I was expected to attend. This called for some tight scheduling for me to get back from Bombay. In researching the period I found that there was to be a full moon a few days before I would leave. So as a Christmas treat for Anne we took the two older children to Delhi where we hired a car and driver for a trip to Agra. In Ann's journal I found: "We saw the Taj (Mahal) by moonlight. Don't think I should try to describe it as it is so perfect that no adjective could describe it adequately." We parted in Delhi. I flew on to

Bombay, Ann and the children staying in Delhi for a couple of days of sightseeing and shopping.

On her return to Ferozepore Ann set to preparing for Christmas. She found a branch of Scotch pine which she set in an ornamental Delhi ceramic pot and strung it with silver twine, tinsel and paper roses that she had made. A small carved crèche was put under the tree, the figures of course were clearly Indian. But she also found time for “important” things for in her journal of 22 December she noted: “. . . sitting on the roof drying hair and hearing singing in the next compound”; December is a pleasantly warm month in Punjab.

Miraculously my connections worked and I arrived at the station in Ferozepore at 6:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve to be greeted by Ann, the children and some of the hospital staff. One, dressed as Santa Claus, was a youngster who had been found next to the body of his dead mother. She had been killed in the violence of partition in 1947. He was adopted by the staff and given the Christian name John and the surname Newton. There were many orphans of that terrible time but John was fortunate for he was being educated. Also at the station were nurses in their caps and capes, carrying candles and singing hymns as a greeting to arriving passengers.

On the lawn of the hospital a colorful large tent, a shamayana, had been erected to accommodate the Christmas festivities. A friend, Major Myadas, Indian Army (retired) and a large landowner had brought us a beautiful white goose. Of course it had to be dispatched and our youngest daughter, eight year-old Michelle, watched the proceedings only to treat us to a description in more detail than we needed.

India is predominately Hindu with its various sects such as the Sikhs, and many Muslims. Christianity is accepted but its adherents are relatively few in the northwest, and Christmas is only a small festival. The hospital chaplain had organized a program for lower grade pupils of the local boys’ school which included a Miracle Play in Punjabi. The Principal responded, in English, with a speech of appreciation for the Frances Newton Hospital and other mission hospitals in India. Later the Christian Endeavour Group visited the compound singing hymns accompanied by a harmonium to entertain the patients while raising money for scholarships.

On Christmas morning we awoke to the sound of bugles, bagpipes and drums from the local army barracks and bells from the church. After exchanging presents and having breakfast we went to the Anglican church. Bo, and Cade our eldest daughter, had been there several days earlier and he had managed to put the organ in working condition and she had developed several appropriate hymns. The congregation was surprisingly large, nearly filling the pews. The service was opened by Fr. Kaul praying: “Homage To Lord Christ.” Thereafter it was conducted in Punjabi but interspersed with English at critical parts of the liturgy. Bo served as an acolyte and also pumped the organ while Cade played. It was a very touching celebration to the birth of Christ.

We returned to the compound to an open-house luncheon for about 200 people including all of the hospital staff of sweepers, bearers, cooks, guards, nurses and doctors and some local friends of the hospital. Among the guests was a pleasant elderly Scottish missionary lady, Miss Maitland, who had been in Ferozepore longer than anyone could remember. When the time came to retire she had renounced her scotch citizenship and remained in the native city, occupying a small room with no electricity, pictures or decorations of any sort. She could be seen on the city streets passing out religious tracts. Beggars came in droves, including a blind one who kept falling over things. All were welcomed, fed and treated with kindness. The food was served Indian fashion on the lawn with large leaves sewn together for plates and small sticks for utensils though mostly eaten with fingers of the right hand. It consisted of vegetarian curry, various flatbreads and sticky sweets.

It was then off to the garrison Officers Club for tea. The men were in their dress uniforms and the women wore their most colorful sarees or Punjabi outfits of sulwar, kamise and duphatta (trousers, shirt and scarf) which were equally brilliant. We sat with chairs against the wall of the large room balancing teacups and plates of cookies on our laps; when finished putting them under our chairs. Entertainment was provided by performances of singers, musicians and dance groups in one of which our middle daughter, Ridgely, took part.

A tonga took us home for a later supper.

It had been a long, eventful and Happy Christmas, completely different from any before – or since.

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