

## WILLIAM-IN-INDIA NEWSLETTER #8

### Summing Up The Final Phase at Gulmarg June, 1970

#### Introduction

We had two cabins on a high ridge: on one side a 3500 foot drop into the Valley of Kashmir and on the other the rolling graceful green slopes of the Gulmarg Plateau. We were somewhat isolated on that ridge except for the four squawking geese, some grazing cows, a few stray Indian tourists, and some bearded Westerners.

We did want to be alone for Kashmir was the summing up, and that seemed to bring us closer together again. We let go of the present for a time of reflection. We looked back and ahead. It was cool and comfortable enough for thinking and review. And the time was right: the final phase before new travel and the return home. We were quite relaxed: ready to be with each other, ready to reflect and even to write, ready to make a too generous assessment of what had happened to us. There, at the end, on that rolling alpine plateau, in good company, at ease, out of reach of the plains, free from the grasps of India, cooled down to a living temperature, it was inevitable that we would see the past months in the best possible way. We would recall the best of what had happened to us. We would be selective to our own advantage. And that fits. India likes happy endings no matter what.

But you will want something more definitive: celebration of our learning of course but the failures and confusions and questions as well. Our most solid accomplishment was the maintenance of the group, its morale and with it the structure of the program. This may be some sort of an accomplishment in a country where undergraduate groups easily fall apart with resentments and refusals, and an unhappy lingering self-regarding whining. Not for us, but let us look more closely.

We started with 17 students. David left in early March. Steve left just before Kashmir. Bud left Gulmarg on June 16th and Kim on the 22nd. In all our meetings and discussions, we had good if not perfect attendance. There was among the students a lively commonly felt desire to make the program work if not always an interest in the actually scheduled events. Loyalty to the idea of Williams-in-India was pronounced, deeply felt. Most of the exceptions to the program were taken soberly, for reasons of self-assessment and self-education. A good number of the students very much wanted a scheduled core of activities to direct and shape their approach to experience. Only a few really felt the need for experiments, adventures, investigations all of their own making. They were able to found and follow their special lines with some success.

Thus, the structure of the program held. No one fully rejected the main movement of the program. Morale did fluctuate, but never disappeared. There was always a minimum of effort and good intention which was tested but never lost. Certainly personal tensions appeared. And they stayed on in covert ways. All was

not friendship and good will. There were differences of style and judgment very hard to reconcile. But the public ties of a common program and the social fabric of mutual effort were never severed. Conversation was always possible but in several cases not actually pursued. Cooperative consideration was good at this final stage in Gulmarg. There was a sense of mutual esteem and a sense of having been more friends than not. With a few there was a wish that a more thorough and complete communication might have been possible, but no one felt the contacts within the group had been abrasive or unpleasant. Certainly discomfort, irritability, chagrin existed, but the most commonly felt cause was India and Indians rather than other members of the group.

What were the contributing causes of this good morale and decent behavior which appealed so much to many of the people who came in touch with us? Important was the decision to let each student make his own travel arrangements, choose his own route, pace, and traveling companions. A good many preferred small groups or travelling alone. By oneself, one was more open to the adventure and discovery of travel, more able to make contacts with Indians. Free travel made for elbow room, the absence of close quarters except by choice. Some shift in traveling partners took place. Leaving and then coming back prevented association from settling into routine or boredom. Being separate made getting together more an event, something to be learned, experiences to be compared. This free choice in travel and living arrangements prevented strong differences of interest and attitude from rubbing too close into friction and fire. Also, in Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay, home stays provided different people and places to work from. Nearly all of the village stays were in separate locations. It really seems very difficult for a group of undergraduates to work, think, travel and live together amenably and without tension in as trying a situation as India. The normal expectation is that the closer they are pushed together, the more likely is their failure to get along with one another. It is much more healthy for them to stretch out, to separate, to try themselves alone, to move in different ways toward different objects.

Another important ground for the strength of the structure of the program was the opportunity for individuals to choose, plan, execute, and live with the consequences of their own options. But this must be a choice in the context of an already existing program. I am convinced it is essential to have a coherent purpose, plan, and program of action in any effort at using experience for education. It would be chaotic just to turn students loose. Anyway, summer vacation already offers that opportunity. Experience allows the student to form a definite idea of himself and to shape his own alternatives. Thus it is necessary to have a structured program which he resists against which he can work out, defend, carry out his own emerging capacities and interests. Most students definitely need the occasions for experience provided and an ordered series of comings and goings within which to carry on whatever experiments they wish. At a point of very low morale in Hyderabad, it was a structured set of meetings and activities which helped pull us up. But strength of program must coexist with the flexibility for different and more personal educational ends. These free choices of effort came off rather well in this program.

Another cause of this holding together of the students, though more difficult to assess in its actual effects, was the common program of study in the fall, and also the other activities which provided a closer interaction than is usual at Williams. Not that the students all became good friends and understood each other well in the fall. That did not really happen. It was more a sense of the distinctness of their efforts, a certain uniqueness and special standing of the program. Besides the quality of relations established at Williams did not carry over here in the same way. The nature of association was different in India. The students were able to see each other more fully as human beings, see each

other act and react in a totally different environment. This did not necessarily bring more mutual respect or greater friendship, but it did definitely bring greater respect for the process of seeing and learning in a quite un-academic setting. Nearly everyone enjoyed having the kind of discovery and insight which results from India working its effects on personality and character, no matter how unenjoyable India itself was felt to be. What resulted was not always increased esteem among the students, but nearly always increased perception of other persons and especially of their conditioning environment. It was an augmenting and expanding of one's sensitivity to others if not of positive response to them.

The academic work at Williams was a preparation, a backdrop, a common beginning. It was an initiation which aimed to strengthen the more objective or public grounds of association. But it prepared for something very different from itself. It did not bring into being something like itself. It launched experience which was more private than public, more subjective than objective, more adolescent than middle-aged, more personal than communal, more discovery than dramatic change, more individual awareness than external description, more self than science, more India than Williams. But to understand this takes us from structure to content, from success to failure.

The structure held but not the content. The students kept to program, but appropriated it to their own discoveries. But I guess that is where an education reaching out to experience will end up: among those irritating, upsetting, invigorating, demoralizing, stimulating discoveries one calls one's own. But in the process things become more clear, more definite, more seen in the mind. One begins to come into one's own not by adaption to worthy standards of academic analysis or disciplined study but through perspective on the largely untested self set down in disconcerting, alien, uncomfortable circumstances. The student has to make his own kind of peace with India. It is then that he becomes more definite to himself.

Thus the great failure of the program was the required academic project. It was treated in many ways: postponed, evaded, divorced, abandoned, renounced, circumscribed, and even completed. Most importantly and usually: it was neglected often consciously and on grounds of principle, and in some cases with the pride of doing something worth doing. This final project was intended as a final indication of the academic quality of the effort here. It was important to the academic purposes of the program, to its respectability at Williams. It was one prime ingredient in gaining the faculty's approval of the program: a common ground between India and Williams which provided familiar grounds for the assessment and judgment in keeping with the college's established and worthy idea of what it does. But the fact remains that these projects just did not come off as creditable pieces of academic research.

A good number of the students sat down to write something different. The context which was natural and ready to them was that of their five months in India, not the five months in Williamstown. They wrote about themselves not as scholars but as involved observers, changing in the very act of observing. And some went so far as to argue that Williams-in-India was not only a misnomer but an impossibility. It had to be each one of them in India not the institution. In fact, the institution did not have the rules appropriate to India. Yet on even these ideas, a very articulate minority of students disagree. Their remedy

is simple: select only academically qualified and committed students in order to preserve its academic quality.

Let us look more particularly. Out of the seventeen students in the program, three did not attempt any definition of project in Williamstown. They wanted to let their commitment, direction, learning come out of India itself rather than from books about India. One found a practical project to shape future work; and action; another found increased insight into his own perceptions and desires by a close association with traditional India; another discovered the limits of his sympathies through disassociation with India. None of these three discovered a research project which could hold them. Nor did they really feel a need for one as grounds for the education they received in India.

Eight of the students, almost half of the group and its representative core, worked out fairly regular projects in Williamstown, which they proceeded to consciously and decidedly discard in India. The reasons were commonly felt and offered: academic projects did not represent the students' own and real interests; they were inhibitive of other more varied, vivid, unaccustomed kinds of learning; they promised only limited and specialized kinds of knowledge; they required skills and methods which the student lacked; they required extensive and unfamiliar kinds of investigations in a very chaotic and distracting setting. It is important to emphasize here that the character and approach of the program itself did not authoritatively channel the students into projects. I was not a disciplinarian on this effort. The students were encouraged and questioned but not coerced. The formal requirement was there from the beginning, but latitude was offered to the students' own choice. This was more upsetting to some than if a topic had been assigned. It is hard to take responsibility for something you cannot quite believe in.

The decision not to do the project, in varying degrees a decision of all eight students, was a conscious one. It was a choice, an educational decision with certain consequences for the students' own understanding of himself and his continuing education. Each student seemed to make a distinction uncommon in this time of the now and here: a distinction between the requirement itself and students' acceptance of it without real commitment. The student did not turn against the system of discipline and its academic logic which allows such unfelt projects. Rather, he questioned himself about what really did interest or hold him. He did not assault the impersonality and irrelevance of the methods of education at Williams, but sought those things which appealed to him and could, at the same time, relate him back to the Williams education. The students are going back to Williams more definitive about what they need and expect, more demanding from the definite grounds of their interests and limits. It is my judgment that they will choose a variety of life styles, but only one of them is ever likely to choose scholarship or disciplined study as a vocation. Starting from the needs of the academic disciplines themselves, an academic project is both necessary and worthwhile, but it is much less so when seen from the perspective from the student's own life style and possible vocational choices. More than this, the decision not to do a project was a creative one. Creative in the specific sense of the discovery of what they would like to do. Action may not necessarily follow, but they do now know more of what they would like to do. All look forward to this remaining time at Williams, or wherever they choose to go. They feel it will be different, more worthwhile, more relevant, and the change is more in themselves than in Williams.

There is a third cluster of four students. These are students with definite academic interests who have pursued their projects steadily throughout their stay. They do not believe the study and observation and questioning which they do inhibits other kinds of learning but rather complements it. All four are at home in an academic milieu and at peace with analytical methods. Any one of them might go into advanced research or college teaching, but it is not likely that all four will. Though they have the interest and commitment, they lack the skills, methods, and disciplined controls which competent research requires.

That leaves two students. These two can be considered successful in terms of what they set out to do. Neither is a conventional paper. One student concerned himself with the very practical and complex questions of the needs for and uses of tube wells in rural communities. He worked out some plans and questions relating to future work in this field. The other student worked out his own ideas on the meaning, strategy, and leadership of community development efforts. He used his experience and observation in India to test and expand these ideas.

And so, through these exciting, trying, irritating, stimulating, weary months of discovery and withdrawal, we have begun to work out some ideas about the meaning of and place of experience in education, about its proper conditions and its consequences for the student, about its correct relation to the more traditional pursuits of Williams College. The students make an approach to these problems in the papers which follow. These are excerpts from the papers which were completed in our last days together on the Gulmarg plateau.

There is a second main theme which runs through these essays. This is the theme of the like or dislike of India and its people. The students are split in a variety of ways on the continuum from approval to disapproval. The challenging questions here are the grounds on which each student makes his judgment or forms his reaction. One thing is certain: there are solid reasons for American college students of very good intelligence and a well-meaning tolerance of disliking to the point of contempt educated, partially westernized Indians, especially college students close to their own age. There is no natural, easy, open basis of association. It is a struggle all the way. Some never get beyond the struggle to respect and friendship. It must be evident by our correspondence and news letters that our encounter with Indians has been uneven and troubled. We have disliked much more than we have liked, especially those who try to be most like us. Some few of us have really flourished here but that is not the ordinary response. Understanding, the actual act of seeing, cannot control either feeling or action. To see another is not to like or respect him. To see a new course of action or commitment is not to follow it. Here, we have only tried the seeing. Now the judgment and action rests with each student. And that can have a wild variety of results. . .

This "Summing Up" is a conclusion only as it completes our story in India. We go away now. We end our semester of experience. But we have just begun our reflection on it. That must go on. And so it will: first at home with family and friends, and then back at Williams with friends and the institution. So after you have gone through this first assessment of what happened to us, we would like to have you join in the dialogue with us.

Robert L. Gaudino

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Here are some comments by Mr. K. S. Nair, our program officer at USEFI:

Whenever I heard of an undergraduate program for foreigners in India I used to remember about a story in 'kantha Sant Sagara', a Buddhist collection of stories. The story is about a group of four blind persons who have heard so much about an elephant and wanted to learn at firsthand about the animal. When they actually came across an elephant one touched a leg, another the ear, a third the tail and the fourth the tusk, and each one described the elephant based on his own experience, but differently.

My reaction to Williams College project in the beginning was not much different. But I was attracted by the program idea, and by the students when I met them in February. Each one in the Williams group exhibits more of individual traits and I therefore wish to remember it as a collection of individuals.

By the time the third month was on, almost everyone was tired and were ready to get irritated. This was natural. Some have liked India, some hate it, some have mixed feelings. But everyone has learnt how to look at himself from a different viewpoint than he was accustomed to so far. This outcome, in my opinion, is very important.

I enjoyed talking to them or hearing about them and their activities. Their faults were the faults of any human beings. If some were sensitive, others were matter-of-fact. Some saw things as they are. A few tried to understand and see beyond. But even then the experience was very trying as it would be for any foreigner. A few believe -- like the blind men in the story -- that they have experienced and understood India. Some still are open minded.

Unlike the usual undergraduate groups, the Williams College boys refused to be spoon fed. They had the opportunity to see and experience on their own, a lot of places and people in India. Within a period of 5 months they have learnt and experienced what is usually done in 8 or 9 months.

To me it was a pleasure to be associated with the group and its leader Dr. Gaudino. I hope I will meet a few of them again in India in the next 10 years.

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