

What India Meant To Me

by LIONEL FIELDEN

TO be asked, as I have been, to write a brief article on "What India Meant to Me" is nearly impossible. It would need three books. India is a huge subcontinent of widely differing races: you cannot treat it—at least I cannot—as a single entity. In my book, *The Natural Bent*, I have described some of my experiences there. But to sum up briefly, what can I say? India gave me anger and depression, admiration and occasional pleasure, hard work and illness, frustration and despondency, and some very good Indian friends. And so on.

I think I must tell you the three silly reasons which made me come to India. The first was Eric Dunstan, the first famous "golden-voiced" announcer of the BBC. A group of Indian business men, fired by the money-making success of the BBC, had built two inadequate stations in Bombay and Calcutta: they knew nothing about broadcasting and soon went bankrupt. Eric Dunstan, for some inscrutable reason (since he was totally unfitted for such a job, though charming and talented), was sent out to remedy them. After a year he returned, a failure.

The Government of India, pressed by the dealers, had to take over the stations: but it did so with ill-will, allowed them little money, and they went from bad to worse. But Eric had formed a passionate love of India, and talked to me at great length about its beauties. I began to want to go there. Second reason—rather worse—was that I was fed up with the BBC, which was turning into an institutional bureaucracy which I loathed. Third reason—even more silly perhaps—I was convinced that, given my head, I could make a better organisation than the BBC. And India—illiterate India—seemed the perfect place for radio. When Willingdon, then Viceroy, decided that something must be done, I got

The India of His Dreams

"I should like to believe in a different destiny for India, a tapestry woven freely by Indian hands from the lovely varied thread of Indian differences and Indian history and Indian thought. I should like to think it possible that India could freely build her own way of life, rejecting the follies which have so manifestly brought Europe to disaster. I should like to see India, not pruned and rootless in the barren soil of materialism, but firmly rooted in her own ancient traditions, bringing from the past a measure of serenity and dignity to grace the graceless present.—from *Beggar My Neighbour*.

His Five Years in India

"The five years which I spent in India were, undoubtedly, the loneliest years of my life. The ache of loneliness was with me always. On the one hand there was the conglomeration of English officials and their wives—the most ignorant, insensitive, arrogant, and stupid conglomeration that the world has ever produced. During my first

"I hated it (India) from the first moment and through all my five years there," writes Fielden. "I never want to see it again."

the job and went to India, knowing almost nothing about it.

On my way to Marseilles to catch the boat I stayed for a few days with Aldous Huxley at Bandol. He said: "You are absolutely mad: India is the most squalid and hateful country in the world and you will be miserable there." If he was not quite right, he was not far wrong. I hated it from the first moment and through all my five years there. I never want to see it again.

Friends and Enemies

But do not get me wrong. You can't hate a place all the time for five years. I certainly hated the British Raj and its ways, with the sole exceptions of Willingdon, Sir James and Lady Grigg, and Lord Brabourne, whose premature death filled me with despair. Under his Viceroyalty I believe—still believe—I could have made All India Radio a first-class institution. But Linlithgow was my enemy from first to last. After my first year in Delhi I avoided all British "parties" and asked only Indians to my house. And thus I made enchanting friends: first Dr Husain, later to be, surprisingly, President of India, and then Mohammed Ali, most cultured and courteous of men; Radhakrishnan; and Minoo and Mehra Masani; Amrit Kaur; Sarojini Naidu; the beloved and beautiful Rama Rau family; and last but not least Rajagopalachari, the wisest and wittiest man in India, whose friendship I still keep with care. And I think I might even add Gandhi and Nehru whom I came to know well, and who were consistently kind to me. All these, and many more, were comforts. And of course I saw (briefly because I was seldom free) many beautiful places which I shall never forget.

In my five years in India we got fourteen well-equipped transmitters built, an ad-

winter in Delhi, I went out to dinner with them almost every night. It was a terrible experience. Not only were their houses and furniture identical—they were built and supplied to the same pattern—but also the food, the guests, and the conversation were identical. There were always twelve people, and usually the same twelve. The dinner was always thin soup, wet fish, tasteless beef, and caramel custard. Since you were forced by etiquette to sit in an order determined by your salary, you sat almost always next to the same people. And, of course, you wore full evening dress. Very soon, I wanted to scream. The extraordinary thing was that any human being could stand it. Not a book was read, or owned, in those trim, respectable bungalows: not a play had been seen: not a note of music was known: never was there even an echo of real laughter. In the similar roads with similar lamp-posts and similar gates, it was as though one was shut up with a crowd of actors in an outdated pageant. It was a sad spectacle of third-rate tyranny.—from *The Natural Bent*.



THE AUTHOR was the man who built up All India Radio—he was its first Director-General (1935-40). He went about in Indian dress, made friends among Indian politicians and possibly enemies among the English Civil Servants.

mirable (though untrained) staff recruited for each, and employed 3,000 artistes. I don't think it was a bad record as a foundation for a radio service, and under the conditions. But only a foundation, and under awful conditions. The Government of India had the vile habit of snapping up all the money from licences and customs duties (the latter quite considerable) and then doling me out a sum which was about one-fifth of what was needed.

I protested and quarrelled and even wrote long articles for *The Times*, all to no avail. Therefore my staff and artistes were grossly underpaid, our studios shabby and inadequate. After two and half years of grilling work I got ill: I had contracted tuberculosis though I did not know it at the time. I flew back for a month to England and on the plane met a soldier cousin and his wife, who thought, from the looks of me, that I would die on the way. My weight had fallen from 11 stone to eight. Well, I got somewhat better and returned but I knew that the game was lost. Despite everything I had done All India Radio was turning into a stuffy bureaucracy, which would never make anything but mediocre programmes and, so far as I know, never has.

I hope you see what I am getting at. What India meant to me was certainly many good friends and lovely places, but also and, overridingly, poverty, apathy, indifference, and hideous overpopulation. So, you see, my answer to the question "What did India mean to you?" must be summed up in a single word—FRUSTRATION. I wonder if it means the same to Mrs Gandhi today.

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