

WUS Delegates' Glimpses Of Pakistan

From June 28 to August 11 this year, two U of A students were in Pakistan, most of the time on group tours, but partly on their own. John Côté, law 3, and Bentley Le Baron, poli sci 4, were delegates to the World University Service Canadian-Pakistani summer seminar.

Côté and Le Baron insist that their generalizations on Pakistan do not purport to be gospel. We quote from a letter dated August 1, Karachi: "I hesitate to write about the Pakistanis at all because my experiences here are so one-sided that I am sure to distort my images, because Pakistan is such a huge and diverse phenomenon that whatever I say, the opposite also could well be just as true. Nevertheless—as you have asked—I might venture a few tentative glimpses . . ."

Fractured Communications

by Bentley Le Baron

When WE speak of "literacy" we commonly mean a fair fluency in reading and writing; when THEY speak of literacy they may mean ability to recite the Qur'an.

When WE speak of "marriage" we commonly refer to an arrangement primarily between two people, based on individual preference; when THEY speak of marriage they are inclined to think in terms of an arrangement between two families (often involving friends, and possibly a whole community) primarily designed for social permanence.

When WE speak of "religion" we usually mean a segment of life which can be distinguished from the secular; when THEY speak of religion they mean a WAY of life, a totality which includes the secular.



When WE speak of "India" we are likely to envision a basically pacifistic nation, a "valuable ally" against the menace of Mr. Mao; when THEY speak of India they seem all but overpowered by a fire-spitting demon fiercely threatening THEM with imminent invasion.

Since my Pakistani summer I marvel to myself that misunderstandings have not managed yet to mess up our world totally and with dispatch. I account it a minor and pleasant miracle that some real friendships in depth can be established across cultures, despite the odds against them. For communications barriers are such that it is difficult to meet on an intimate intellectual level, and at the same time there are cultural barriers sufficiently formidable to make close emotional attachments between THEM and US distinctly difficult.

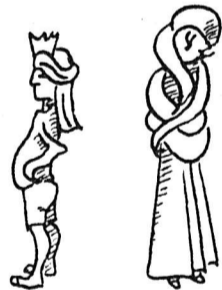
When you study tourist literature from Pakistan you will read: "English is widely spoken in all major centers . . ." Yes—English WORDS are spoken in both directions, but how many MEANINGS are lost or distorted?

It came as a slow shock to me to realize just how much problem we can have in communicating, using

the same words to say different things. At first it was a rather vague feeling of uneasiness with me, for it is hard fully to realize just what is derailing the communications train. As John Côté observed: "It's as if both people were slightly hard of hearing, but neither wants to admit it." Another Canadian student used the simile of attempting to "embroider while wearing boxing gloves."

The facts of the matter are these:

- Very few Pakistanis, on a percentage basis, can speak any English at all.
- Those who do may not speak fluently; English is NOT their native tongue, nor their medium of normal conversation. There is some resultant tendency for a Canadian to feel that something must surely be wrong with a Pakistani's intelligence—which is about as logical as judging me by my inability to make decent conversation in French.
- Those who do speak English often speak with a sufficiently dif-



ferent accent that we cannot easily understand them, nor they us.

• Many familiar words are used by Pakistanis to express ideas differing from those to which we are accustomed.

All of this can be terribly aggravating when you have an urge to talk about something more significant than "How do you like Pakistan?" You miss a crucial word and you've lost a sentence. You confuse the subtleties, the fine distinctions, and presently you are arguing instead of understanding. So seldom is it possible to establish a real flow . . . And we Canadians can be so very impatient!

I have already mentioned the "arranged" marriage as one of many double-sided social questions which ball up communications. Automatically—from our particular value orientation—we see the "restriction of individual choice" and condemn such "feudalistic remnants." But a Pakistani may well see the same custom in terms of its positive functions which we so easily ignore: namely, security and stability. You soon learn—in Pakistan—why Pakistanis will use such a significant tone

of voice when they quote "Western" divorce and illegitimate birth statistics.

I remember a "discussion" with a Karachi gentleman on "individualism." Now this word carries all sorts of attractive connotations for me, but for him it was a word in the vocabulary of hell. For him the word entails selfishness, irresponsibility, immaturity—and destruction.

Or take the concept of "purdah." I thought—in my superficial western wisdom—that purdah meant wearing the burkah (veil) and seclusion and passivity of women. And I was ready to condemn. But I was assured by a charming Punjabi girl that my critique was misplaced, for purdah—to her—is not so much a social practice as a morality, an attitude, of virtue or modesty. I had not understood what she meant to convey by the "purdah" concept.

"Look at me," she said only slightly mocking. "You see that I have no burkah, and here I am talking freely with you." The veil, to her, is incidental, for her "purdah" is a personal standard. I need add however, that by my observation this miss was untypically free.

Pakistani students with whom we socialized were keenly interested in North American "dating" customs.

"Do you have YOUR OWN girl friend?" I was asked. "Do you dance TOGETHER?" "Do fellows and girls go off ALONE with each other?"

"Do you really choose your own wives (or husbands)?"

Our verbal answers to these questions were only marginally meaningful in a Pakistani cultural context.

In Pakistan I felt myself curiously and profoundly restricted by the knowledge that women were out of bounds to me. I speak not only in terms of touch (for in a Muslim community there is a minimum of physical contact between the sexes) and not only of sight (for the women who observe "strict" purdah do in fact segregate themselves)—but in a deeper sense I could only in small part and with difficulty break through the maidenly modesty, the reserve of centuries, to establish some sort of emotional rapport with even the most "westernized" of the women folk.

With the fellows it was easier. My Pakistan male friends had promised to take me to a wedding, and they laugh uproariously when I asked—straight-faced and all innocence—if I would be allowed to kiss the bride. This was fun that brought us together, for it was a joke on western "ignorance" as well as on eastern "abstinence."

As it turned out I went to three weddings and never even SAW a bride—for all three observed strict purdah . . . communications too obviously obstructed . . .



PAKISTANI BRIDE—If she observes (strict) purdah only females and close male relatives will see this silken and jewelled finery.

"Just at the time when the Christian Church was so outrageously trampling on Womanhood, and the rest of the world was treating her no less cruelly, Muhammad came to save the situation. He raised Woman to such a height as she never dreamed of before—a height which leaves her nothing higher to strive for."

—Atawoollah Ali Sarfaraz Khan Joommal Al-Quadiree in "Ramadan Annual of the Muslim Digest" March 1959, reprinted in his *The Path of Islam*

