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SOME IMPRESSIONS OF INDIA

Address to the Rotary Club of New Delhi, April 18, 1957,
by Mr. ESCOTT REID, High Commissioner for Canada in India.

I find it hard to believe that in only two weeks time I shall be leaving Delhi. In the last four and a half years, I have struck my roots deep in the friendly soil of this city. It is going to be a painful wrench for me to have to uproot myself, to say good-bye to the places I love in Delhi and to my friends here.

Delhi is so ancient and so honourable a city that it would be presumptuous for one who has lived here for so short a time to claim to be a real citizen of Delhi. But may I ask this assembly of distinguished citizens of Delhi for permission to bestow on myself the title, "demi-Dilliwallah".

I have read in Spear's fascinating book on late Mughul Delhi that Delhi in the days of Aurangzeb was reported to have had two million inhabitants, that "it was the largest and most renowned city, not only in India, but of all the East from Constantinople to Canton". Then came Delhi's tragic days. First the sack by Nadir Shah. Then the other sacks and atrocities and civil wars. Finally, the Rebellion of 1857 and its suppression. By 1858 the once great and imperial city of Delhi had shrunk to a town of 50,000.

The history of the world is replete with cities which were once great and imperial like Delhi, and then like Delhi declined to nothing, or almost nothing. But there are only a few great and imperial cities which, having once declined to almost nothing, have risen from their ashes to greatness once again.

Delhi is such a city. It is today a city of about two millions, as it was two hundred and fifty years ago. It is once again a city of political renown. And Delhi's renaissance is just beginning.

I am excited when I read of the possibilities which lie before this city. I do not mean the possibilities of further great growth in population. Cities can grow much too big. I mean the proposals to preserve what is lovely and good in Delhi and to

destroy what is ugly and evil; proposals to create new beauties of river and canal, of footpath, forest and greenbelt; proposals to build more clinics and schools and to staff them with devoted nurses and doctors and teachers.

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I must remember that though I am Canadian representative in Delhi, I am also Canadian representative in India. I must not become so enthusiastic about Delhi that I become parochial and forget India.

I have said that I would speak to you today about some of my impressions of India. There are so many impressions that crowd my mind when I look back today on my four and a half years here, that I am puzzled to know where to begin.

I have gone up and down the length and breadth of India by car, by train, by air and on foot. I have trudged through dusty fields and village lanes in the plains, and have walked along Himalayan footpaths. I have visited factories and schools and dams and community projects.

In the slums of Calcutta and in some villages, I have seen misery that is heartbreaking. In the plains and in the mountains, at ancient monuments and at holy shrines, I have seen beauty that is heartbreaking.

My wife has accompanied me on most of my travels in India. Our two sons and our daughter have also travelled widely in India. Our children travelled the hard way - third class by train and bus. Everywhere the five of us have gone - in Raj Bhavans and in the mud houses of peasants --we have been met with overwhelming kindness and hospitality.

Villagers have welcomed us into their houses, and have not minded our naive questions. Refugees from East Pakistan have shown us all through the spick-and-span settlement they have built for themselves on the outskirts of Calcutta. Workmen in a glass bangle factory got obvious pleasure out of making some especially intricate glass novelties for us.

When I think back on India, I shall remember many individual Indians I have met who are building the new India of their dreams with their sweat and tears.

I shall think of a young Muslim civil servant who is a devoted, overworked official in a community project, who travelled with us for five days, showing us his project, and I shall think of two senior officials of the city of Calcutta who spent one whole morning showing me the Calcutta slums - which must surely be among the worst in the world - and who said good-bye

to me with emotion because of the interest I had taken in what they were trying to do to remove this blot on civilization. I shall think of a saintly Hindu scientist who is devoting his talents to practical agricultural research because of the saying of Vivekananda, "You can't teach religion to people with empty stomachs." I shall think of an old farmer in the Punjab who showed me proudly the twenty acres which he and his sons had cleared and brought under cultivation.

These are some of the pictures which crowd my mind. I ask myself what sort of pattern they make. What shall I say when I go home and try to explain to the people of my country what India is like?

I think I shall start by saying that in one way it is like Canada in its size and its diversity. India, I shall say, is not a land like Western Europe where, if you travel for more than a day's journey by train you find yourself in another country. India, like Canada, is a spacious land in which you travel by train for three whole days in order to reach Trivandrum from Amritsar.

Here in India I shall say there is not only space, but kaleidoscopic diversity - diversity of landscapes and of peoples. The massive Himalayas, the fertile plain of the Ganges, the deserts, the table land of Maharashtra, the semi-tropical Travancore. The hillman, who looks first cousin to our Canadian Eskimo. The peoples of Rajasthan and of Assam, of the Punjab and of the Malabar Coast. Here is no dull uniformity. Here in one country is a large part of the family of mankind.

I shall say that India is not a nation state in the sense in which that term is used in the sub-continent of Western Europe. It is a nation which itself covers a whole sub-continent. It is in many ways more comparable to a group of states which share a common culture such as those of Western Europe, than it is to a relatively small, relatively homogeneous nation state such as France, Germany or Italy.

I had read before I came here of the revolution - largely peaceful - by which India secured its independence and integrated into itself the five hundred or so princely states. After I had been here a while, I realized that the important thing about India is not so much that you have had a revolution as that you are having a revolution. You have had your political revolution. You are at the beginning of your social and economic revolution against feudalism, social inequality, casteism, communalism, and those other evils Dr. Radhakrishnan recently listed, "the evils of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, ignorance, superstition and obscurantism!"

My experience is that the longer a westerner stays in India, the more conscious he becomes of the almost overpowering weight of the burden which India has undertaken to shoulder in

its efforts to crown its political revolution with an economic and social revolution.

It is partly the number of problems; it is partly the toughness of each individual problem, some of them rooted in traditions of millenia, not centuries. It is partly the number of people or things involved in the solution of an individual problem.

I am not thinking so much of the size of the whole population of India, though a figure of almost 400 million is staggering. I am thinking of what this total population means when translated into the terms of individual problems.

I remember, for example, how astounded I was when I first learned that there are about twelve million babies born every year in India, and that this means that the problem of providing adequate maternal care in India means providing adequate care to as many people as make up three-quarters of the whole population of Canada, which is about 16 million people.

When I found that there are in India about 80 million boys and girls of the ages of six to fourteen, I realized something of the size of the task of giving adequate schooling to all these children.

I know you want to improve the breed of your livestock, and that artificial insemination is one of the methods. But it must be a staggering number of artificial insemination centres which will be required to deal with your 160 million cattle alone, and I suppose you will also want to improve the breed of your 45 million water buffaloes, your 40 million sheep and your 50 million goats.

Your problems are so numerous, so intractable, so immense, so varied, covering so many fields - political, economic and social - that a people less courageous than the people of India would give up hope.

India in 1957 reminds me in some ways of Britain in 1940. In the summer of 1940, the cause of Britain appeared hopeless to almost everybody except the British. Britain refused to acknowledge the possibility of defeat, and Britain fought through to victory. It was courage that did it, and blood and sweat and tears.

I sense when I travel through India the same sort of courage which won Britain her victory. I have found it in talking to a supervisory engineer of a great dam, to a director of a community project, to a doctor in charge of a small hospital, to a school teacher in one of the new industrial towns. They know the strength of the enemies they are fighting - poverty, disease and ignorance, corruption and casteism. They know that the fight

against these enemies cannot be won in five years or in ten years. But they intend to go on fighting, and they are confident of ultimate victory.

My conviction is that, just because there are enough people like this in India, the odds against India are not so great as they seem. My conviction is that India can succeed because the hearts of the people of India are brave. And the kind of success India can achieve will not be merely material. "The secret of happiness is freedom, and the secret of freedom is a brave heart." Since India's heart is brave, it can crown its political freedom with economic and social freedom, and the freedoms it gains can bring happiness.

My conviction of India's ultimate success is bolstered every day I travel through India. I sense that things in India are moving - here fast, there slowly, there almost imperceptibly. But they are moving..

I have not been here long, but I have been here long enough to see the face of India changing. I have seen how what was jungle has become a modern industrial town, how land that was brown has become green, how valleys have become lakes, and above all, I have seen in some community projects the beginnings of a social and economic revolution in village life and in peasant agriculture.

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The time has come for me to say, through you, my farewell to Delhi. There are many things I shall remember Delhi by.

I shall remember the colours in the sky which come with the dust storms in June. I shall remember calling on the Secretary-General in the External Affairs Ministry in the middle of one of the worst dust storms I have ever seen. I said to him, "It looks like the last day of judgment". He said, "How strange to describe the known by the unknown".

I shall remember the heat of June. Two years ago, two Canadian destroyers paid a good will visit to India. I travelled on one of them from Cochin to Bombay. One morning I was taken on a tour of the ship. The young officer who was showing me around tried to dissuade me from going down to the engine room. He said it would be too uncomfortably hot. I insisted. It was hot - very hot. I felt as if I was standing in front of an open furnace door. I pretended, however, not to mind, and I said to the officer, "What is the temperature?". He replied "118". Remembering my responsibility as a resident of Delhi, I commented coolly, "Oh, yes; I thought it must be about that. That's the temperature we get every day in Delhi in June."

But I shall not only remember Delhi by the dust and heat of June. I shall remember the perfect weather of winter; the lovely haze of early morning on the Red Fort, Jama Masjid and the Secretariat; the riot of colour in the Rashtrapati Bhavan gardens; the Republic Day Parade, which must surely be the most colourful national day parade in the world; the Beating of the Retreat in Great Place; walking in Chandni Chowk on election day; walks along the river bank from Humayun's Tomb to Okla.

There are two things I shall remember most vividly. The first are the visits I have made so often when the moon is full to Humayun's Tomb, Khab Minar and Tughlakabad. The second, the walks which I have taken so many mornings before I start work. Along Aurangzeb Road, down Janpath to York Place, and up York Road to Aurangzeb Road again. The children going to school, the bicycles, the bullock carts and, above all, the Rajasthan coolie women walking from their hovels to their hard work of building the new Delhi. Walking with magnificent carriage in their gaily coloured clothes, chattering, laughing, sometimes singing.

The Rajasthan coolie women of Delhi are to me a symbol, not only of Delhi, but of India. They come from the heart of India, its villages. They are those villagers whom Rabindranath Tagore described as "eternal tenants in an extortionate world, having nothing of their own". But they are not broken by their poverty or their hard work. They go from their hovels to their work in dignity and in gaiety. It is this dignity and gaiety that make them rich in spite of their poverty.

And it is the dignity and gaiety of the mass of the people of India which make India rich - not just the wisdom of its teachers and saints and scholars, and the beauty of its landscapes, its monuments and its shrines.

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When I was home in Canada two years ago, I spoke about the voyage of discovery of India which I had been making for the previous two and a half years. I shall conclude this speech with some of the words I then spoke.

I said: "Today the mind and the spirit of India are cabbined, cribbed, confined, by grinding poverty - poverty deeper and more pervasive than can be imagined by anyone who has not seen it with his own eyes."

I spoke of the interest of the whole world in the preservation of the culture of India and in its flowering. I said, "It is an ancient and a rich culture, a culture with a tolerant and a humane tradition. It has contributed to the

world great saints and philosophers, great poets and dramatists and artists and architects, two of the world's greatest emperors, two of the world's great religions. It is a culture which continues to produce great men."

I was putting the case for Canada giving economic assistance to India. I went on to say, "The culture of the whole world would be impoverished if India, the vessel of an ancient, lovely and living culture, were to dissolve into anarchy, or if to save itself from anarchy it were to adopt totalitarian rule and thus be false to its traditions of tolerance and humanity."

"On the other hand, the culture of the whole world will be enriched if India succeeds in its programme of economic and social development. For success in that programme will release tremendous latent energies in India, and those energies will produce not only things of the hand but things of the mind and the spirit."

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In a short time I shall be saying a final farewell to India. My good-bye will mean "God be with you in the great work you have undertaken". My farewell will mean, "May you fare well in your high adventure of national development."

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