

## INDIA 32

My husband and I were very young when we went to India with the Peace Corps. Our group was the 32<sup>nd</sup> group of Volunteers in India. Terry was 22 years old; and I had my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday during the first month after we arrived - September 1966. This experience has stayed in our hearts, minds and souls throughout our lives and will continue to do so till we die. Would I have ever thought that when I was 20 years old and applied for volunteering? I knew it was an opportunity of a lifetime, but I had no idea the magnitude of this experience.

The Peace Corps experience gave me so much more than the benefits I was able to give back to India and all the individuals I encountered while there. All the children and their parents I have known in my thirty-two years of teaching in American public school benefited as well. I feel quite confident that this experience had an impact on my marriage of 46 years and the raising of our two successful sons. This experience leaves you a very different person than you were before.

I acquired a loving tolerance for the citizens of India. Indians are some of the most loving, generous and hospitable human beings in our world while at the same time some of the most misunderstood in Western Culture. Indian Culture is thousands of years old and there is an atmosphere of "no need to get in a rush" - where we Western folks behave like there is no tomorrow and patience is not a virtue. There is a lot to be learned from the Indian culture. They take more time for each other, and relationships are the most important thing. Deciding to love others by listening and speaking lovingly is almost like a spiritual discipline in their culture. I learned that all of humanity is one family - a community of brothers and sisters whether or not they are the same nationality, the same race, or the same religion. I learned a lot about tolerance and overcoming barriers that divide people - about being able to decide what really needs to be changed and what does not. This is all about putting priorities in place.

When we were placed in a small town Nilokheri, in the state of Haryana, India, Peace Corps provided bicycles for us to ride to neighboring villages within a ten mile radius. We were given UNICEF seeds to distribute to the village women for

vegetable gardens, and sewing machines were placed in the villages. We were to help the women learn how to plant vegetable gardens so they, in the mild climate, could have a variety of vegetables throughout the year to supplement their diet with more vitamins and minerals. We were to help the ladies learn how to use the sewing machines so they could sew their clothes easier and faster than by hand.

However, when Pat, another female Volunteer, and I visited the village, the ladies and children just wanted to sit and look at us with our pale skin, yellow-brownish hair and blue eyes. They would touch our skin and point to airplanes in the sky and ask us about where we came from. They were not interested in our sewing machines or vegetable seeds. They were interested in us - who we were - where we came from - what our life had been and what it would be. They asked: did we have children, where was our family - parents, siblings etc. Pat and I did the best we could to demonstrate to the village women how to plant vegetable gardens, and how to use and clean the sewing machines, but it was definitely a challenge to focus the women on those assignments when they were so much more interested in our cultural differences.

I had completed three years toward an Elementary Education degree from a Teacher's College in Indiana at the time I went into the Peace Corps. However, Peace Corps placed me in an agricultural assignment because I had been born and raised on farms in rural Indiana. I was not assigned in Education because I had not completed my degree yet.

In our little town of Nilokheri, we became friends with the Butt Family. Dr. Butt, was Indian who had studied in the United States. Mrs. Butt was an American whom he met while studying in the USA. They had two young children three and five years of age. Nilokheri had several Technical Colleges, and Dr. Butt was the President of one of those. When Dr. and Mrs. Butt realized that I had studied Elementary Education for three years they asked me if I would consider teaching an English Speaking Preschool for the children of the instructors of the Technical Colleges. Most of the instructors' children would attend English Speaking Boarding Schools for their Primary and Secondary Education. They thought it would be a privilege for their children to get a head start in a preschool environment to learn the English alphabet, to have the opportunity to learn by playing freely with other

children, and to learn how to interact and to also practice speaking English. They wanted me to speak only English so the children would learn English. The Butt children were fluent in both English and Hindi. They had a nanny whom only spoke Hindi, and their parents only spoke English to them, so they were fluent in both languages. The Butt children would be able to translate, and also encouraged the other children to use English in their play. Dr. Butt contacted the Peace Corps officials to get permission to use me in that role, and offered to provide the classroom and supplies if Peace Corps would provide the teacher. Peace Corps cooperated of course. A classroom was provided on one of the technical campuses. I was able to go to Delhi and purchase books, wooden puzzles, pencils, crayons, paper, modeling clay, paints, building blocks, and flannel for flannel graph stories. A local carpenter came to the school and measured to make toddler size tables and chairs as in pictures I showed him from preschools in America. The carpenter also made wooden trucks that were perfect replicas of the trucks used in India. He also constructed a Flannel Board. The Technical College provided a young girl, Usha, from the town to be my Aid.

There we were, Nilokheri had a preschool, and I had the dream of my young life - the opportunity to create my own school in India. I wrote to one of my professors at Manchester College in Indiana, and she sent me an excellent resource book for creating and operating a preschool. It helped me with any questions I had such as scheduling the day and providing well-rounded experiences for the three, four, and five year olds. We opened school, and enrolled seventeen preschool aged children. When they came to school, they were bathed, dressed in their best, and smelled so sweet, which I can still smell today. I read stories to them in English with much expression and sound effects. They sat giving me their undivided attention. They had free play with the new trucks, blocks, puzzles, crayons, paints, modeling clay all of which they had never experienced before. We had snacks which they brought from their homes in little tin containers. Soon the children were reciting the stories with me and singing in English songs I taught them.

When I returned to America, we kept in touch with the Butalia family which to this day they credit me as their daughter's first teacher that made her successful

learning in school possible. I am thankful for the Butalia Family that we still communicate with letter writing and cell phones today.

We loved our home in Nilokheri, Haryana, India. We had a three room brick home. The town was new because it had been built for refugees from Pakistan after India gained independence in 1947. We enjoyed letting our neighbors visit us in our home, and they were surprised to see that we had a local carpenter build us a "Double Charpoy." The charpoy is their bed. It is made of hemp rope and only wide enough for one individual. It resembles a cot. We had one built so Terry and I could both sleep in it together similar to a double bed. We had a very extensive vegetable garden. I also made curtains for our windows from some of their beautiful 'India' cloth which was so plentiful in the market places. Most homes did not have coverings on their windows. Our neighbors learned from us to plant many different vegetables and to create a more aesthetic living environment in their home.

We had a full time cook, Umad Singh, who shopped and cooked delicious Indian food every day. Peace Corps required that we hire a cook because otherwise we would have spent nearly all day shopping and preparing our food. We loved Umad Singh, and we think he became a cook in a fine restaurant in Delhi after we left.

A couple inconveniences that we eventually became accustomed to were bathing with lukewarm water from a bucket, and limited electricity. We had running water one hour each day, which meant we had to save water in a large tub. Of course Umad Singh was instructed to boil all the water for us before we drank it. Therefore we learned to love Indian Chai! We also became accustomed to having only about one hour of electricity in the evenings as well. We kept a kerosene lantern lit most nights while visiting with our Indian friends, reading or writing letters home, and kept early bedtimes.

The peacocks would awake us in the morning, and I can still hear them as if it was only yesterday. What an awesome awakening - and the memory is worth a million dollars.

Joann Runkle      PCV INDIA-32      1966-67