

15. INDIA WITH J.B.S.HALDANE, CALCUTTA, 1956

The DBS released me for three months to work in the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta in 1956. Strictly it is not in the city at all, but considerably north of the city on the Barrackpore Trunk Road. The Institute, that Professor Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis (1893-1972) founded and still headed, was set up like a research university, with buildings splayed over a large campus. Mahalanobis was close to Prime Minister Nehru, and seemingly could get anything he wanted. It seems safe to attribute some of Nehru's planning to Mahalanobis, planning that has not always worked out.

Wanting to be as self-contained as possible Mahalanobis established his own guest house (in which I was comfortably lodged), a print shop, and a farm on which much of its food was raised. I used to go up on the guest-house roof with a portable typewriter and type my daily letter to Beatrice back in Ottawa.

I often went for a walk of exploration through the surrounding countryside. One day I was rewarded by seeing twenty or so vultures, each two to three feet high, grimly standing in a circle. Apparently a sheep had fallen dead, and its body was being torn apart by wild dogs. Vultures are not built for fighting and they awaited their turn on the carcass at a respectful distance. Once the dogs were sated they left the scene, and the vultures closed in.

On another occasion I passed a peasant woman of the lowest caste efficiently carrying on her head a basket of dung cakes. I stopped her and by means of signs asked the price. I didn't know the market price of dung cakes and she undoubtedly did; in any case we negotiated by signs and came to an agreement; I paid her: she took down the basket and motioned to me to take it. There was nothing I wanted less than those dung cakes, so I motioned her to take it back, and she went happily on her way to sell it again.

It so happened the great English biologist J. B. S. Haldane (1892-1964) was also in the Institute. It was 1956; the Egyptians had taken over the Suez Canal, and Prime Minister Anthony Eden, then being coached as the successor to Winston Churchill as head of the Conservative Party, tried to retake it by force. The United States, backed by France, reminded him forcefully that the colonial epoch was now past, and the British Empire could no longer enforce its historic domination. Eden resigned, his political career finished. Eden came of the best family, had gone to the best schools; neither of these weighed in the democratic temper of those years.

Haldane made a public declaration that he couldn't live in a country that would try such a thing, and on the invitation of Mahalanobis moved out to the Barrackpore Trunk Road along with his companion Helen. He had been invited and was now warmly welcomed by Mahalanobis.

But by the time I got there the two men were not speaking to one another. Neither saw any virtue in being diplomatic. Both were uncompromising academics, guided by immutable principles.

One of the matters on which friction developed was the Journal of Genetics, founded and at the time edited by Haldane. His vast ego was bound up with the Journal, and in accord with the agreement made before he came he brought it with him. It had to be printed on proper paper-- paper not available in India, so Mahalanobis had to go to the trouble and expense of importing the paper at a time when foreign exchange control made this no easy matter. The first issue was to be printed in the little print shop in the Institute. It was one of the facilities that Mahalanobis to make his Institute self-sufficient.

The type setting was by a method that must have gone back five centuries to Gutenberg. Type bars for individual letters were selected from trays and when the page was complete a string was put around it and it was ready to be inked and the paper pressed on it. The trouble in this case was that one evening an unlucky type-setter dropped the type for one of the pages and it scattered over the floor. He spent the whole night reassembling it and made a fair but not perfect restoration, a considerable achievement considering that he knew no English. When the issue of the journal loaded on an office truck was wheeled in to Haldane, he looked it over carefully, found the few misprints, and rejected the whole issue.

That was bad enough. But Haldane, after making some insulting remarks like "We don't want this to be Indian work--we want it to be right," started all over again, but not in the ISI print shop. He went into Calcutta and found a commercial printer and insisted that Mahalanobis contract with him. This time the work turned out to be acceptable, but one can imagine the rancor that it left behind, not to mention the expense.

With the two men no longer on speaking terms Haldane found ways of annoying Mahalanobis. Once when the latter had a party, which I attended, we guests saw Haldane, dressed in a quite inappropriate dirty white Indian costume, carrying books on his head, striding through the crowd of guests.

Beatrice had a biologist cousin living in England, Ursula Philip, at Cambridge where she collaborated with Haldane, and who suffered greatly from his treatment of her. For him, as for some other upper class Englishmen I have known, the lower orders were fair game for the scornful treatment that comes naturally to the scions of Empire. In the end Ursula could stand it no longer and gave up a good prospect at Cambridge to go to Newcastle.

Yet quite aside from his scientific achievements, Haldane was enormously talented. He translated a piece of Persian poetry for me; told me the biology of wild flowers we encountered in a walk through the countryside and never ceased to be informative and entertaining.

My three month leave came to an end and I returned to my family and the DBS. Haldane left the Institute and went to Bihar Province, where soon after he was diagnosed with cancer, lived courageously through a painful illness, and died in 1964.