

Current Trends

THE INDIAN CATHOLIC STUDENT AND THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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THE American universities attract annually a large number of students from foreign countries. The total figure which amounted to only a few hundreds before the second World War has swelled to over forty thousand in recent years. The annual rate of increase has been most noticeable among students from the Asiatic countries. After Canada which is the large country just across the frontier and has always accounted for the highest percentage of the foreign students, the two countries which at present have the next largest student population in the United States are both Asiatic countries, China and India. The trend in recent years has been a steady decrease in the number of the Chinese students and a very rapid increase in the number of the Indian students. The decrease in the number of the Chinese students has an obvious explanation; those from the Chinese mainland have ceased coming. The increase in the case of India reflects fairly well the fact that in cultural, technical and economic fields the contacts of India with the United States are becoming steadily closer and more significant. This fact is often ignored because in the political field divergent views find unduly strong expression and a great number of public statements and newspaper editorials in both countries create the

false impression of a widening gulf. As the Indians form a sizeable proportion of the foreign student population in the United States, United States citizens form a large percentage of the foreigners in India; they are there for business or industry or for the projects sponsored by the technical co-operation plans; their sojourn may extend for a few weeks or for several years. All this is no fortuitous development but the result of a policy mutually developed by the two democratic countries, one which is the strongest and the most advanced in the world today, one which has the consciousness and obligations of leadership, and the other which is newly free, newly hopeful, and has the largest population among the nations of the free world.

India as is well known is not a Christian country. A spotlight on history would be illuminating. While the ancient Graeco-Roman religion was wholly supplanted in Europe by Christianity, another branch of the Indo-Aryan peoples which had crossed the high passes of the Himalayas retained the common heritage of belief and worship through millennia of turmoil and migration. One finds even to this day in popular Hinduism a pantheon with many names and a mythology with many intrigues which suggest close parallels in the Greek and Latin classics. That Christianity came to India through the apostle St. Thomas in the first century A. D. has been a constant tradition among a small group of Christians on the Malabar coast of India, and historical scholar-

ship in recent times has found a great deal to substantiate that tradition, nothing to disprove it. The St. Thomas Christians, as they are called, numbering around two million today, always remained a small group immune from persecution, but without spreading itself, and that was due partially to the protective ramparts which the Hindu caste system threw around that group. The contacts of India with Western Christian culture and civilization began when the Portuguese established themselves as a colonizing power on the west coast of India, about the same time as Columbus tried a new sea route to India and came upon his historic discovery. The progress of Christianity in India has always remained slow though the missionary effort has been immense and though the greatest of modern missionaries, St. Francis Xavier, had India as the chief field of his labors. Beside the 330 million Hindus and the 50 million Mohammedans, the Christians form a relatively small minority, roughly six million Catholics and four million Protestants.

Catholic Missions

The work of the Catholic missions in India had been until the outbreak of the second World War almost entirely in the hands of the Catholic countries of western Europe. Except for the American Jesuits in the two mission areas in North India, the Catholic foreign missionaries belonged mostly to four countries, France, Italy, Spain and Belgium. Among the Protestant missionaries, the Americans formed a considerably larger proportion. The situation has changed entirely during recent years,

since the independence of India. Missionary personnel had to be recruited indigenously at a pace too rapid for safety and progress, and as for funds new sources had to be made available. The government of India created a new policy of restricting visas to missionaries, and in spite of continued protests from the Catholic community and many representations made to the federal government, there is no sign that the restrictions will be removed in the foreseeable future. The new policy was enforced at a time when the considerable expansion in the social and educational work of the Church in India calls for more outside help, when due to the closing down of the Chinese missions and the political unrest in many other parts of the mission world, those volunteering to work in India are more numerous than ever before. If the Catholic Church in India is not sufficient unto itself for missionary personnel, it is even less so for funds wherewith to carry on its work. A study of the reports published by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith shows that the Catholics of the United States have taken upon themselves a responsibility which the older Catholic countries of Europe can no more fulfill in sufficient measure, and that today India is one of the most important among the countries to which mission help is being directed.

Indian Students in U. S. Universities

Thus in the fields of the missionary apostolate of the Church, a close link has been established between the United States and India, one which was almost non-existent twenty years ago. Viewed in this context,

Interest shown by a large number of young Catholic Indians to pursue their higher studies in the American universities is of special significance. Since only one in every eighty Indians is a Catholic and the Indian Catholics are on the average no richer or poorer than the rest of their countrymen, one might expect the total number of Indian Catholics in the United States to be around thirty. Actually there are about eight times that number. It is true that among the foreign Catholic students in the United States, those from India form but a small percentage; the vast majority are from the South American countries. But practically all the Indians are at the graduate level, either working toward a doctoral degree or undergoing special training as doctors, engineers or research men. Thus among foreign Catholics in the graduate schools and fields of specialized training those from India form a sizeable percentage. The training which they take away with them is proportionately more valuable. All of them are alumni of Catholic colleges in India. Nearly three-fourths of them are on Catholic campuses in this country. Even those on non-Catholic campuses have many opportunities for gaining a first-hand knowledge of the richness and variety of Catholic life in this country. Though they are here strictly for academic pursuits, they will necessarily imbibe along with their specialized learning or skills a sense of Catholic life and culture which will be to them an abiding influence. Lay apostolate in the Church is a subject which in recent years has attracted considerable interest and study. Though it is plain that the problem of missionary personnel

caused by visa restriction will not adequately be solved in the near future, one would venture to think that the present large number of Indian Catholics studying in American universities is a hopeful sign for the future of the Church in India.

Difficulties Encountered by the Indian Students in U. S.

The circumstances which made it possible for the Indian Catholics to come to the United States in increasing numbers deserve some attention. It is obvious that they have to face heavy odds as also the rest of their countrymen. The climate is entirely different. The distance is half way round the world. The difference in standards of living reflects a similar disparity in the purchasing power of the respective currencies and hence the same education is relatively more expensive to an Indian than to an American. The graduate school is admittedly a drain on the financial resources of a university, and since the American public has contributed heavily to establish the existing facilities which are not by any means unlimited, the question might justly be raised why foreign students are so readily welcomed. On the other hand international co-operation in education is a policy sponsored by the government of the United States and willingly carried out by many universities. It is based on the conviction that foreign students experiencing the hospitality of this country and learning at first hand the American way of life are likely to be the best ambassadors of good will. This argument has a special force when applied to a so-called neutralist country like India. The "open-door policy" in the field of higher educa-

tion has the same wide objectives as foreign aid to under-developed countries and is part of the American effort to enhance the strength and unity of the free world. It is a policy which ensures those objectives with more certainty and at proportionately less cost, since as it is well known, foreign aid has heavy operating expenses, and when it ultimately reaches down to the common man in the foreign country, the American contribution is almost forgotten besides the highly advertised contributions of the local governments. The student who comes over to this country does so often at his own expense or he meets the cost of his education through services rendered.

He learns about the American people and American institutions through personal contacts and not through the distortions of the printed page or of the makers of foreign policy. Nor is it difficult to see that a Catholic, or in general a Christian student from a country like India is likely to build up more intimate contacts, more lasting friendships than the rest of his countrymen. He already knows Western culture more or less for what it is; he is not handicapped by taboos as those of a vegetarian diet or caste distinctions; he is more readily accepted as a member of the religious and social organizations of the campus and the parish.

Responsibility of the American Catholics

Thus the hand of welcome extended to the foreign student has an obvious explanation. All humanitarian work calls for some sacrifice. In an age of narrowing distances and

vanishing frontiers, such sacrifice would extend well beyond one's people and nation. Education and culture are the strongest factors for unity and mutual understanding. The academic atmosphere of a university is a stifling one for economic rivalries and political feuds. This would explain the vast amount of organized effort sponsored by Protestant church groups to extend hospitality to foreign students. In comparison the Catholics may seem to be lagging. In fact when those working with Catholic foreign students get together for meetings or seminars, complaints are often voiced that little is being done by the Church and that there is not even an awareness of the problem. This is not strictly true. The proportionately large number of Catholic foreign students in this country and the readiness of many Catholic colleges and universities to extend scholarship aid to foreign Catholics are clear proof of a conviction that this work of higher education among the elite is vitally important for the missionary apostolate of the Church. It is only in recent years that the Indian Catholics have begun to come to American universities. The number coming in yearly is increasing rapidly. As the American Catholics begin to take increasing responsibilities for the world missions of the Church, this program of higher education begins to take on a new aspect. It is leadership training of the laity and it is all the more necessary in a country like India where higher education forms a major part of the Church's apostolate. Thus they co-operate, the scholars and the centers of scholarship, for "the building up of the body of Christ which is the Church."