

## RETURN TO INDIA

(Editors' Note: Thirty years ago a young graduate student in anthropology went to a small south Indian village for 14 months for doctoral research. Twenty years later she returned with her eldest son for two weeks, and this past February she returned again for a two-month stay. In the years since her first visit, Louise Harper raised three sons, taught anthropology courses to scores of pre-college students, and participated in the G.W.U./S.I. Anthropology for Teachers Program. In March Louise sent us the following "Report from the Field" to share with Anthro-Notes readers.)

### The Village

The village is nestled between forested rolling hills that still contain peacocks and wild boars--but all the tigers have gone. It is as beautiful a setting today as the first day I came here. The earth is red, and the areca nut (betel nut) and coconut palms are a lovely soft green. Flowers bloom profusely, and magenta and orange bougainvillea cascade over the front door of the house of the family with whom I am living.

The village is seven miles from a major town where the one-way narrow gauge railway stops, connecting this mountain area with the large city of Bangalore. The Hindu population has almost doubled to 775 people and there are seven castes living here in quite separate hamlets. To simplify, I will describe these castes as the Brahmans, the dominant caste, who own all the areca nut land; the Shudras who farm the paddy or make the clay pots; and the Untouchables, once indentured servants, who are now hired on a daily wage of Rs. 5 (50 cents) for a man and Rs. 3 for a woman.

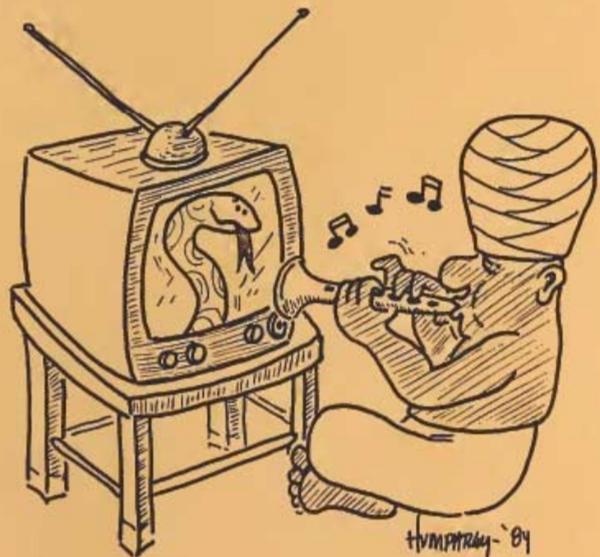
Physically the village has not changed very much. A family or two have moved out, and one has moved in. As large joint families partitioned, three new houses have been built. The houses range from the Brahman palatial two story, tile-roofed houses built around front

and back compounds, to the two-room thatched huts of the lower castes, one room for the family and one room for the goats. All Brahmans own cows and water buffalo for the milk they supply, and the Shudras may also have water buffalo and oxen to work in the fields. Only the lower castes own goats, a source of meat for them.

This short report focuses on the changes that I see for the 30 Brahman households since my first stay here, for it is with this caste that most of my limited time is being spent. What I say might or might not be applicable to the other castes. Today, as before, behavior, customs, and beliefs are often so totally different for each caste that I have come to believe there should be one fieldworker for each caste.

### New Things

Thirty years ago this village was a remote, isolated, and conservative society. Brides were given to villages within approximately a 15 mile radius. Today the village is connected to the



outside world.

Electricity came to the village 25 years ago, and both Brahman hamlets and one Shudra hamlet utilize it. Wealthier Brahmans have installed pumps on their wells so women no longer have to draw all the water. Today each room has one light bulb. Families own radios and perhaps a blender in the kitchen supplementing the mortar and pestle in the back compound. Years ago wood stoves were always on the floor, a common cause of death among children when their clothing caught fire. Now a waist-high stove is a status symbol, and the fuel may be electricity, kerosene, or charcoal.

New crops are being grown. Some grow coffee for their own use and cardamon as a commercial crop. A couple of houses are experimenting with cinnamon, clove, and cocoa. One household grows silkworms, and two have small industries utilizing electrical power. One household is making and packaging areca nut powder, and one is making cups out of areca nut sheaves with a "punch" machine.

Plastic has invaded the village. Plastic buckets are used in the bathing area and plastic trays have replaced the gorgeous brass ones. Lower castes use plastic water jugs to draw water from the well. I wonder what this will mean for the potter caste.

Besides radio communication, some families subscribe to daily newspapers. While visiting one house yesterday, I was completely astounded to have a 30 year old man ask me, "Louise-amma, what do you think about the Reagan administration?"

The transportation system for the village is quite different. Before, the only way to travel was by bullock cart moving three miles an hour. Now practically every Brahman house has a bicycle, five have motor scooters or motorcycles, and a bus stops in the

village four times a day. The bus is often given as the reason why social change has come.

#### Agents of Change

Although the bus is considered the agent of change, it has not been the major force. (It has, however, changed one traditional behavior. Since all castes ride the bus, Brahmans may now come into contact with Untouchables. When Brahmans return from town, they do not take a ritual bath to cleanse themselves from this pollution before they touch other members of the family.) In my opinion, the major changes affecting the Brahmans stem from two simultaneous developments. The limited amount of available land became insufficient to support the growing Brahman population, and, at the same time, public education became available. Men could then train in alternative occupations. There are now two school teachers, a doctor, one man working for the army, and another in a bank. Thirty years ago Brahman boys and only a few girls attended elementary school. Since then a high school was built two miles away, and a college was founded in the town seven miles away. Today girls with only a high school education are having difficulty finding grooms since many suitors are asking for women with a B.A. degree.

This education shift has changed marriage patterns. During my first field trip, the first post-puberty marriages were just being performed, and a bride of 15 was considered old. Older people can still remember brides of six years and grooms of eleven. The appropriate ages now seem to be 18 to 25 years for women and 25 to 30 years for men. Since women are so much older and educated, they are given much more choice in deciding on their future husbands. Although there may be an occasional "love" marriage (and the English word is used), almost all marriages are still arranged by a girl's father. He searches for the groom, but the girl can veto his choice. Women

are also adding their own qualifications and prefer men who work in the city. This means that they will live in a nuclear family without a mother-in-law in the house.

In fact, the nuclear family has become more common in the village. Of the 30 Brahman households, 18 are now nuclear. Couples are deciding that two children are enough, even if two girls are born, and after that the wife will have the "operation." This seems to be the most accepted method of birth control, but other methods are known.

### Pollution

Because so many villagers have had contact with city life, patterns of pollution have changed. Girls in the city do not observe the menstrual taboos. When girls return to the village they adapt to the old rules of "sitting outside" the sacred part of the house. No one should touch them, they must not cook, and they sleep separately. At the end of three days, all women may now bathe in the family bathroom rather than in the small pool in the areca nut garden.

Patterns of pollution from saliva have also changed. When I first came to this village, I had to remove my own banana leaves on which all meals were served, but now someone in the family will do this. Before, where meals had been eaten, all areas had to be washed with a small amount of purifying cow-dung. Now a damp rag will suffice.

Within the village the pattern of pollution from Untouchables has not altered to a great degree. Low caste villagers are not allowed in the Brahman houses nor in one of the temples. When giving some item to Untouchables, one still places that item on the ground, because earth does not pass pollution, and then they pick it up. Even today while I was washing my hands in the back compound, the Untouchable servant with a heavy load on her head did not pass me for fear we would touch.

### Status of Women

With the assurance that comes with education and wider contacts, women are no longer shy in public. Modern couples will walk side by side and even touch. Women no longer eat off their husbands' used plates. Brahman women can now earn a small amount of money by husking areca nuts or sewing blouses on a sewing machine for others to wear. Although older husbands still choose saris for their wives, younger women go to town to select their own. Thirty years ago women remained in the rear of the house and back compound or hid behind the front door if they wanted to know what was happening. Today, in the late afternoon one can now see women sitting by the street "watching the world go by."

### Attitudes Toward Change

It is very interesting to me that such rapid change within a single generation is not condemned. One does not hear the elders talking about "the good old days" nor criticizing the younger people. Several times, in fact, I have heard it said:

"What was good for the olden days was fine; but what is new for today is also fine."

Or as one older informant explained:

"When my father was alive he went to town three times in his life. When his younger brother became head of the household he went twice a year.  
I used to go once a week.  
My son may now go every day."

Louise Harper  
Former anthropology teacher  
Washington International  
School, Washington, D.C.