

CHRISTMAS IN INDIA, HARD TO FORGET

By Joe McGowan

Christmas in India, where only 2 percent of the population are Christians, became an ordeal many Westerners resident in New Delhi tried to escape.

The rest of the winter months were cherished because the intense heat of summer was gone and the temperatures were moderate and enjoyable. Government gardens and the homes of upper class Indians had some of the most beautiful roses I have ever seen.

As December 1965 arrived, I would soon be spending my first of three Christmases on the Asian sub-continent. Many of the shops in the downtown area put up Christmas decorations and held special sales aimed at the Christian foreigners and the very few Indian Christians.

Out of curiosity, I asked several shopkeepers what Christmas meant. Only a few had a clue. It was fascinating strolling past the shops in Connaught Place, the heart of the shopping area. There were dolls, toys and Yule decorations.

My young son would be celebrating his first Christmas abroad and I went out shopping for something Santa could leave for him. I found a nice looking pedal car built as a fire truck, complete with two small removable ladders and a battery-operated red light on the hood.

The truck had been copied from a picture in an American toy catalog. But on Christmas Day, when my son tried out the truck, I quickly realized there was a big difference.

My son could not turn the steering wheel or make the pedals work. There were no ball bearings, just iron on iron. I took a file and shaved the axles. I used oil to loosen up parts that didn't want to move.

I never was able to make the truck work so my son could pedal it. So evenings when I got home, I would tie a rope to the truck's front bumper and tow him around the block!

The real shock came VERY early Christmas morning when the doorbell rang. About a dozen men in khaki uniforms snapped to attention and saluted.

I opened the door and asked what was going on. One man said they were from the nearby government cable and telegraph office. He said they would like bakshees (tips). I said I never got any cables at home. He smiled brightly and said, "but, sir, if you ever get a cable, we will deliver it."

The rest of the day was spent answering the doorbell. It was the postman (he got a tip because I wanted service to continue). Then it was a taxi driver I had hired a couple of times. And then my barber, and on and on throughout the day.

About noon, our cook brought his "town wife" and children in. We offered some candies for the children and served tea to the non-English

speaking wife. Our cook was Muslim and his “country wife” lived in his native village.

In mid-afternoon, as we sat down for Christmas dinner, my Indian reporter and his wife arrived. We told the cook to hold dinner and serve tea for our guests. The Hindi-speaking wife sat silently for the hour they stayed.

For dinner, we had managed to find a scrawny chicken, which was served with rice and vegetables. First course was mulligatawny soup, a delicious chicken, vegetable, rice soup that to this day is one of my favorites. A Czech diplomat couple who lived in the apartment above us had given us a bottle of imported wine.

We eventually learned many Westerners would check into a hotel for two or three days around Christmas, thus ensuring a quiet and uninterrupted holiday. However, we spent our Christmases at home and accepted the customs of another culture.

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