

Experiences of an Indian Nurse in the United States

by Henrietta Theodore

It is a great pleasure to write about my nursing experience in America. I will try to be brief, and I hope readers will enjoy hearing about it.

I left India in October 1958, on a Norwegian ship, the "Hoeg Silver Wave". Since it was a cargo boat, the passengers were only eight in number.....an American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Parker, an American lady, Miss Anne Carmouche (later to become my dear friend), three Indian boys, Miss Massu Ram and myself.

Being on a boat for the first time was very exciting. As we left Bombay's shore, we all stood on deck watching the ship float majestically away like a new bride coming graciously out of church. After an hour's time, however, the excitement for me turned into a terrible sick feeling! This continued to be my miserable condition all the long way to New York. Miss Ram too was ill. We had to stay most of the time in our cabin, which by the way was beautifully furnished. During the long journey nothing helped the terrible sea-sickness. The captain did his best for us with pills, music, ginger ale, ammonia, and so on. Reading didn't help either. The good captain took us out on deck for fresh air, putting us in deck chairs as comfortably as possible. We had some good days, and at Port Said and Halifa we were able to watch the loading and unloading of the ship. At last, on November 3rd, our ship entered New York harbour quietly in the dark, at 2 a.m.

Again we were all very excited, and for me it was something very big and important to be in the United States. Going through the Customs was, to my surprise, very quick. A friend from the office of Dr. Forman came to receive us.

We were taken to the office on Fifth Avenue (which has since been moved to a modern building on Riverside Drive) where I met my dear friends, Dr. Forman, Dr. MacLaughlin and Dr. Madison. They were all so kind, I felt welcome and happy.

We stayed two and a half days in New York, Miss Ram and I. Even though I was very tired from my uncomfortable journey I nevertheless enjoyed New York, my dream city, with its gigantic sky-high buildings and its many beautiful places to see. Dr. MacLaughlin showed us several places, such as the Empire State Building (the world's tallest), St. Patrick's Cathedral, and other places. On November 6th, I said goodbye to New York and took the train for Louisville, Kentucky.

Several nurses from the Louisville Children's Hospital came to the railway station to meet me. Being quite homesick just then, I at once felt happier and at home. Miss Mary Lynn Dickenson, a sister tutor, brought me to the Children's Hospital Nurses Home. It was a beautiful place and my room was well furnished. The House Mother, a very nice lady, explained to me all the rules, and gave me some general ideas about the place. After this I rested in my room for the rest of the day. Next day I went to see the Nursing Director, who took me on a tour of the hospital, explaining things to me. During my whole stay at the hospital, she was a wonderful help to me.

On November 17th I started working. For the first three months I attended classes in addition to working on the wards. After finishing my three months course, my work became regular on the wards.

Let me tell you something about

this Children's Hospital. It is a six storey building, having two hundred and fifty beds. Part of the building is air conditioned, namely the nurseries and operating rooms. In the basement, the cafeteria may be found, where doctors, nurses and hospital employees eat together; also the Cardiac Clinic, Physiotherapy Department, the Maintenance Department, and the Nurses' Rest Rooms.

On the first floor are the Lobby where patients' relatives wait, the Nursing Office, Hospital Administration Office, Admitting Rooms, a Library and a Laboratory.

The second floor is devoted mostly to medical and surgical cases. The third floor contains operating rooms, ENT patients and Recovery Rooms. The fourth floor has the Isolation Department for contagious diseases, and the Diarrhoea Nursery, some doctor rooms and the Play Room—an attractive place for the children, to play and forget about their illness. In the Play Room children find fish in glass bowls, rabbits, parakeets, mice and all kinds of games. Thrice a week movies are shown to them. Always they have so much fun...especially on Christmas Day and Easter. I was always glad when I saw the children being made happy with toys, cards and gifts.

The sixth and last floor holds the research laboratories and offices.

Many things were new to me during the first six months, and I learned much. On all floors a procedure book was kept for our guidance. I attended patients, gave medicines, was nurse-in-charge, worked on split shifts, and had all kinds of experience on different floors. The children in our hospital ranged in age from one-day

old babies to sixteen-year old children, male and female.

On each floor there was a staff of a Registered Nurse, a Ward Clerk, one or two Student Nurses, a Practical Nurse, Nurses' Aides and Orderlies, as well as maids. The system was so well organized that no one was overburdened with work. The Nurse in-charge of the floor was responsible for routine rounds, desk work, and for supply of equipment. The Ward Clerk was responsible for making a list of duties under supervision of the Head Nurse, for keeping all records of lab. work to be done, for bringing up supplies and taking specimens to the lab. She daily checked all supplies, kept treatment rooms clean and handled paper work and phone calls. I especially liked the practice of having the Ward Clerk.

Maids kept the floors spic and span at all times, while the orderlies helped lift patients or take them to X-ray, did errands and attended the male patients.

The Staff consisted of private doctors, those in residence and others. Three of the residents were from India. Medical and surgical residents were available around the clock.

Every three months new students, from all over Kentucky, were admitted to our residence hall. We had use of electric washing machines as well as coke and cookie machines. Our private living room had a TV and there was a nice music room, as well as a big drawing room for entertaining our guests. My uniforms were done by the laundry, but I washed and ironed my own saris.

Friendships which I made during the year in Louisville have given me much encouragement. I feel that I really became a part of several families. I gained more understanding as time went on, and I can say this, wherever in the world you may go, after knowing people a while, you will find that they give you their love and understanding if you do your part to understand them leaving all prejudices behind. It has worked well for me.

At the Cosmopolitan Club I met boys and girls from all countries. We ate snacks, danced and talked together. We felt most welcome and made many friends. My eighteen months in America have passed very quickly, mainly because people were so friendly to me.

After my application to the American Nurses' Association for an extension, it was granted, and arrangements were made for me to serve for a short time at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan. The Nursing Staff of Children's Hospital gave me a nice farewell party, expressing their affection with gifts.

I came to Detroit on June 13th after two restful weeks spent in the woods of Northern Michigan with my family from Louisville. It was a horrible rainy day in Detroit, the city was large, and I felt lonely. But soon I was settled in a private house near the hospital, where I learned more independence, and how to live in a strange country "on my own". I had to do all my own work, including shopping, cooking, washing and ironing, after hours at the hospital. But the place was friendly, and I was independent.

The great Henry Ford Hospital

is seventeen storeys high. Investments in land, building, and equipment have come from the Ford family, and the Ford Foundation. There is a full time medical staff of nearly four hundred doctors trained in every specialty. Over two thousand people are needed to man jobs of every description. It is a private hospital.

You can imagine my lost feeling at first, amongst corridors, tunnels, and floors, but there too I found people helpful, so that I didn't have much difficulty.

I worked first on a Surgical Floor where we had every kind of surgery. It was an exceedingly busy floor, work was heavy, but I enjoyed it. After two and a half months on that floor I was transferred to the second floor, devoted to medicine and dermatology. In the three months of my stay at Henry Ford, I had a thorough orientation of the hospital. I enjoyed my stay there, and wished there had been more time to work on other floors. I specially appreciated the great help I received from the nursing personnel.

In the last week of September I left Detroit, going back to Louisville to stay with friends, until time to sail for home.

We sailed from New York on the "Queen Elizabeth", arriving in England on October tenth. From there I was scheduled to take the "Canton" on October fourteenth, and reach Bombay at the end of the month.

I will start working again at my own hospital of Ludhiana Christian Medical College in due course.

My love of nationalism is not for my country as a nation. I want my country to become free so that if necessary, it may die to serve the cause of humanity.

—Gandhiji