

James E. Bristol to Corinne B. Johnson

10 Mar
1959

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Delhi, India

In this report to Johnson, an American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) colleague in Philadelphia, Bristol, who served as King's travel guide in India, suggests that the political and educational goals of King's visit to India were compromised by his traveling party's "fanatical interest in snapshots" and press coverage: "One of the motives clearly appeared to be to build up King as a world figure, and to have this build-up recorded in the US."¹ Despite a divergence of goals and poor communication between King and his Quaker sponsors, Bristol concludes that the trip was overall "a good and positive experience as regards Martin's learning about India, and Indians learning about the non-violent movement in the United States."²

Corinne Johnson
American Friends Service Committee
20 South 12th Street
Philadelphia 7 Pa USA

cc: Allen White
Roderick Ede
Lou Schneider³

1. James Ellery Bristol (1912–1992), born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, received a B.A. (1932) from Gettysburg College and a diploma of the seminary (1935) from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. During World War II, Bristol spent eighteen months in prison for refusing to serve in the armed forces. In 1943 he resigned from the pulpit at Grace Lutheran Church in Camden, New Jersey, to work with several Philadelphia-based peace organizations. Bristol joined the AFSC in 1947 and served as director of its Community Peace Education Program until 1957. He began working for the Friends in Delhi in the fall of 1957. Corinne Benson Johnson (1929–), born in Boston, Massachusetts, received an A.B. (1950) from Smith College. Johnson was a mathematics teacher at Westover School (1950–1952) and an editorial assistant for *Harvard Business Review* (1953–1954) before serving as an administrator for the AFSC's Asia, Refugee, Family Planning and Population Education Programs (1957–1961 and 1968–1973). Johnson later served as the director of AFSC's Latin America/Caribbean Programs (1973–1979) and director of International Programs (1979–1997).

2. Bristol was similarly positive in a 27 March letter to Johnson: "The net effect of the King trip seems to have been very, very good! . . . People were generally impressed by King and by what he said." Bristol reported that Swami Vishwananda, who accompanied King during much of the trip, also felt the visit was a success, although he wondered if "perhaps King had not achieved prominence ~~a bit~~ too early." Bristol surmised that Vishwananda "and some others here wonder whether King can stand the adulation without having it go to his head."

3. White was AFSC business manager; Ede was director of the Asia desk of the Friends Service Council in London; and Schneider was Foreign Service Secretary of AFSC.

10 Mar Dear Corinne,
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Martin Luther King

This will probably be the most disorganised letter on record. The Kings and Dr. Reddick left on the plane at 9.15 this morning. I had three things to take care of in New Delhi and since then I have been straightening up King finances with Arjan, and have had a long conference with Dee. It is already 4 P.M., and I am soon to confer with Philip.⁴ I have had absolutely no time in which to organise my thoughts, but I do want to dash off some lines to you now.

Philip, Arjan, Dee and friends at the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi have insisted that I must take a short rest immediately. Accordingly this morning Dee and I made arrangements to fly to Jaipur tomorrow morning (Wednesday), returning to Delhi on Friday. Apparently I am very tired. I have been embarrassed several times during the past three days in Delhi because I could not keep my eyes open in private conversation. I cannot take more time off because I must plan for Bill Barton's visit, but these two days should prove helpful.⁵

Corinne, I would need to write a small book to report adequately on the King tour. In a way there are still many things I do not understand fully—many things which continue to mystify me. Of one thing, however, I am absolutely certain (I remember pointing this out to you once or twice in correspondence in January): THE KING TRIP WAS ARRANGED AT TOO SHORT NOTICE.⁶ The result was insufficient communication (worse than that, practically no communication) between Kings and AFSC—at least this is what I have been told more than once here.

Frankly, Corinne, this has been the thorn in everyone's flesh. The trip fortunately has gone better and better, though there were improvements in the last ten day period which I ~~haved~~ pressed for.** {**and which were not accepted by the Kings and Reddick.} Nonetheless, the overall experience has been increasingly good. The reason I did not make certain suggestions and urge certain changes was because of the resentment so evident from the beginning—resentment at having to fit into previously arranged schedules. I am certain that this is not a figment of my imagination I can document it from conversations with the Kings and Reddick, and if I was in any doubt, those doubts were removed by the conversation at breakfast this morning—a conversation which I did not initiate.

The Kings were in Delhi for five days at the end, having cut two days off the time with Vinoba Bhave (they and Dr. Reddick reached this decision alone without consulting me, and told me).⁷ I planned nothing during these five days, except by agree-

4. Arjan Dass was Bristol's longtime assistant and manager of the Quaker Centre. Bristol also refers to his wife, Dorothy "Dee" Bristol, and Philip Zealey, a British Friend who worked for AFSC in India.

5. William Barton was general secretary of the Friends Service Council in London.

6. In a 24 December 1958 letter to Johnson, Bristol expressed his growing frustration with "the last minute nature" of the King visit. Bristol wrote Johnson several additional letters detailing arrangements for the trip (Bristol to Johnson, 16 and 28 January 1959).

7. Bristol later acknowledged that the planned three days with Vinoba were probably too long, but reported that one Indian leader "said quietly to me that he wished King had stayed longer, so that he might have gotten the feel of the Padyatra, and might have had opportunities for informal conversations with Vinoba" (Bristol to Johnson, 22 April 1959).

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ment of the Kings, and even then very little. They filled up the time so that they were just as busy as before, in some cases with inconsequential (I am not thinking here of recreational experiences) appointments after having refused to accept more significant appointments which I put before them. At breakfast Coretta mentioned that they had been so busy and were so tired, but (that) it was their own doing, ~~she said~~; and this made it much better than when planned by someone else.

The second thing that happened was a blast from Reddick against the Quakers. He has made it very clear since the day he arrived that he felt the AFSC had handled the whole trip badly. He has been very careful to pay every penny of his own way and to keep himself absolutely clear of any obligation to the Quakers. He said this morning that he thought the AFSC had been unfair in the publicity they had given to the trip; he felt they had exploited the Kings, and had put the Kings almost in a strait jacket (not his exact words, but this is the idea he was conveying); he said also that the AFSC had not relayed information properly to the Kings. He must be a free agent when he returns to the USA. He plans to write a long report on the trip, and to write several articles for publication (he has kept profuse notes). This report will not be shared with the AFSC, nor will he inform the AFSC of any articles prepared for publication.

Perhaps I said the wrong thing. I said nothing at all for a while, but then I did say that the AFSC would be very unhappy to have him doing all this as though the AFSC did not even exist. Obviously, he is a free agent, but I thought he could be a cooperative agent. I talked with him again at the airport, and there he told me that he was in no sense beholden to the Quakers, and would be a free agent, "but not a hostile agent". I am honestly certain that he has absolutely nothing against me or the Delhi Centre (he is really very appreciative of our help) but he certainly does have it in for Philadelphia. I did finally say to him (when he emphasised his lack of indebtedness to the Quakers) that as the Quaker representative in India I had spent considerable time and effort arranging for his part of the journey. And this is very true, for there were many extra hours required because of Reddick, certain meetings for him, his side trip to Hyderabad, his finances having to be kept separate, his telegrams to be sent, etc. I am afraid, however, that I should not have mentioned this because it produced a bad reaction. I honestly did not care for myself, but it seemed to me he was being unrealistic about the way in which he was involved in this Quaker-sponsorship(ed) trip.⁸

I do not know whether the Kings felt this strongly or not, though it is obvious that they did feel this to a degree. I asked Reddick this morning whether he felt that the Reynolds Foundation had given the money to the Kings because of Libby Holman Reynold's friendship with the Kings.⁹ The money had been given to the

8. In a letter written to Johnson the following day, Bristol elaborated on Reddick's behavior and noted that he "determined to a very great extent" King's schedule: "King leaned heavily on him for advice, with the result that Larry determined in probably 75% of the cases whom King would see or not see, which engagements would be kept or cancelled. Also I recall Larry's telling me that the AFSC did not consider it necessary at all for him to come along on the trip. Perhaps this has been eating him" (Bristol to Johnson, 11 March 1959).

9. Singer and philanthropist Libby Holman Reynolds was likely introduced to King by civil rights attorney Harris Wofford (Stanley Levison to Lawrence Dunbar Reddick, 27 November 1969). The Christopher Reynolds Foundation contributed \$4,000 to King's trip to India (Jack Clareman to A. Philip

10 Mar AFSC for ~~ei~~ income tax purposes, and then the AFSC which was in reality only
1959 serving as a channel for the money proceeded to take over. He agreed that I had stated the case correctly.

Our rapport had been ~~going~~ (growing) better and better as the trip went on and as we had all sorts of experiences (together,) both pleasant and arduous. ~~together~~. I certainly was sad that this conversation took place this morning just prior to departure. I still feel as though someone had kicked me in the stomach. I do not know whether you wish to go into all this with the Kings or just forget it. I must report this to you, yet I hate to have it appear that I am tale-bearing. At the plane this morning, the Kings were most cordial and warm and friendly, and I am sure my relations with them are good. Reddick, however, was not cordial. Incidentally,—and this is important, Coretta overheard Dee asked Reddick, “Are you happy?” She asked Dee about the question, and Dee told her about much of this conversation. Coretta made no comment, but she seemed friendly to Dee.

Corinne, can you sort this all out? In a way the whole experience has been a nightmare since we met a plane at the airport on February 8 with no Kings on it and absolutely no explanation.¹⁰ As far as the public is concerned, the trip was a huge success. Fortunately, it was also a rich and valuable experience for both Martin and Coretta, and clearly also for Lawrence Reddick. How I wish that matters could have been clear and understood before they left Philadelphia. This was like ~~the~~ {a} festering [~~strikeout illegible~~] {wound} through so much of the journey.

Both Kings and Reddick commented on the fact that they ~~made~~ met so many important and genuinely significant people. They said both publicly and privately that probably never before in India had any non-official guests met so many people of such high calibre. If I may pat myself on the back, we really made it possible for them to see the cream of India from one end of the land to the other. Newspaper coverage was excellent. It was really a triumphal tour, and King’s speeches were good throughout, and on two occasions genuinely inspired.

Unfortunately, they were dead tired before they left the U.S. and this was a handicap throughout.¹¹ It meant tardiness in keeping many appointments (a King trait in the US also, I am now told from two reliable sources), and on occasions it meant the cancelling of appointments. ~~And~~ The lack of understanding with the AFSC, as well as a total lack of orientation about India, were also very serious handicaps.

Randolph, 5 February 1957, King to The Christopher Reynolds Foundation, 7 March 1958, and The Christopher Reynolds Foundation to Stephen Cary, 9 January 1959).

10. The Kings’ arrival in Delhi was delayed by two days because they missed a flight in Zurich, Switzerland.

11. Bristol had commented on King’s fatigue in an earlier report to his wife: “Both the Kings (especially King himself) are **JUST PLAIN EXHAUSTED** and very understandably have been so for months before coming to India. I know what Corinne means by their seeming to be ‘bewildered’. I think they are drained terribly ~~seriously~~ (nervously) and emotionally as result of past few years, and the way Martin must drive himself in the States. What they both want to do is to get to their room and rest as much as possible—and Martin certainly so often wants to be left alone (very easy to understand and appreciate). He will even pick up a newspaper or magazine and read it in someone’s home or some place else when a person (or persons) is (or are) talking to him, even when he is their guest. Reddick and Mrs. K then carry on the conversation with Martin hidden behind the newspaper” (James E. Bristol to Dorothy Bristol, 25 February 1959).

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I might also mention that ~~they~~ all three had ~~an~~ almost fanatical interest in snapshots, pictures and newspaper publicity. Many Indians noticed this and even commented on it. Almost before greeting a person or group they were posing for {the} camera (they carried three wherever they went). You would have to see this to believe it. Constantly they had their eyes on the USA and the impact the trip would be making there. And so much of their conversation as we were travelling about concerned this same subject. I regret this paragraph, but in all honesty I must write it.

Now I must stop. This report is off the top of my mind, but it is all true, and it is obviously uppermost in my mind as I review the trip. Trust this will reach you in ample time for study and thought before the Kings arrive on March 20.

Best always.

Sincerely,
[*signed*] Jim
James E. Bristol
Director.

P.S. Philip, Dee and I have just spent an hour discussing the King trip. Four things to mention: 1) On the whole it was a good and positive experience as regards Martin's learning about India, and Indians learning about the non-violent movement in the United States. Excellent also that Martin challenged so many audiences to practice non-violence in today's conflict situations.¹² 2) Very many things that I shall never have time to report that could fill you in and document much of what I have written. 3) I should attempt next week to write an account, give you some idea of significant experiences, conversations, etc along the way. 4) A question: Whose idea was it for King to come to India? Was it Bayard Rustin's, Reddick's, the AFSC's, or Kings'? One of the motives clearly appeared to be to build up King as a world figure, and to have this build-up recorded in the US. Again we have just talked about the abnormal interest in the pictures and publicity, even to the extent of having Absalom Peters take movies of them boarding the plane this morning.¹³ He took the pictures with their own camera and handed it into them just before the plane door closed. Actually, they delayed the departure of the plane with the motion picture and the still picture taking.

12. In a follow-up letter to Johnson, Bristol observed that King was consistently greeted by Indians "as the champion of the oppressed peoples of the world—in America, Asia and Africa, and never . . . thought of as an American." Bristol noted that "all the questions with which Americans are bombarded were missing in King's case, both in our public meetings and in private conversation" (Bristol to Johnson, 11 March 1959).

13. These observations echo Bristol's comments from an earlier report: "The Kings seem almost totally disinterested in sight-seeing, and shopping, and the remarkable art and craft work of India (I would say just about 100% disinterested). Our hosts and Indian friends get so discouraged receiving negative answers to all suggestions. Like going through India wearing BLINDERS. Ser{n}ap-shots, picture post-cards, newspaper clippings and news stories, any pictures taken by other photographers—here it all begins and ends. This whole trip is being thought of in terms of the return to U.S.A. and what will make an impact and produces an effect there" (Bristol to Bristol, 25 February 1959). Peters was an employee of the Quaker Centre in Delhi.

18 Mar 1959 PPS. We also wondered how the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi felt about the whole experience. I think they were unhappy at certain points, but my impression now is {that} they feel satisfied with the over-all experience. They gave the Kings and Reddick a reception on Sunday evening and all the appropriate words were certainly uttered.

Incidentally, they certainly have gotten a lot of publicity from the visit. Ranjit sent me a letter a day ago in which he mentioned the fact that all the publicity mentioned the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi as sponsoring organisation, and not one word was ever said about the American Friends Service Committee or the Quaker Centre in Delhi. Unfortunately, this is true. I was fully aware of this, but was not able to alter the situation. It seems to me the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi should have done something about this, but they did not.

PPPS. Reddick will not be coming to Philadelphia on March 20. He wants to keep as far away from the AFSC as possible.¹⁴

[*signed*] Jim
James E. Bristol
Director

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14. King was similarly unable to attend the scheduled meeting in Philadelphia (see King to Corinne B. Johnson, 23 March 1959, pp. 159-160 in this volume).