INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GSA-19
India: The Village-I

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New Delhi

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Dear Dick,

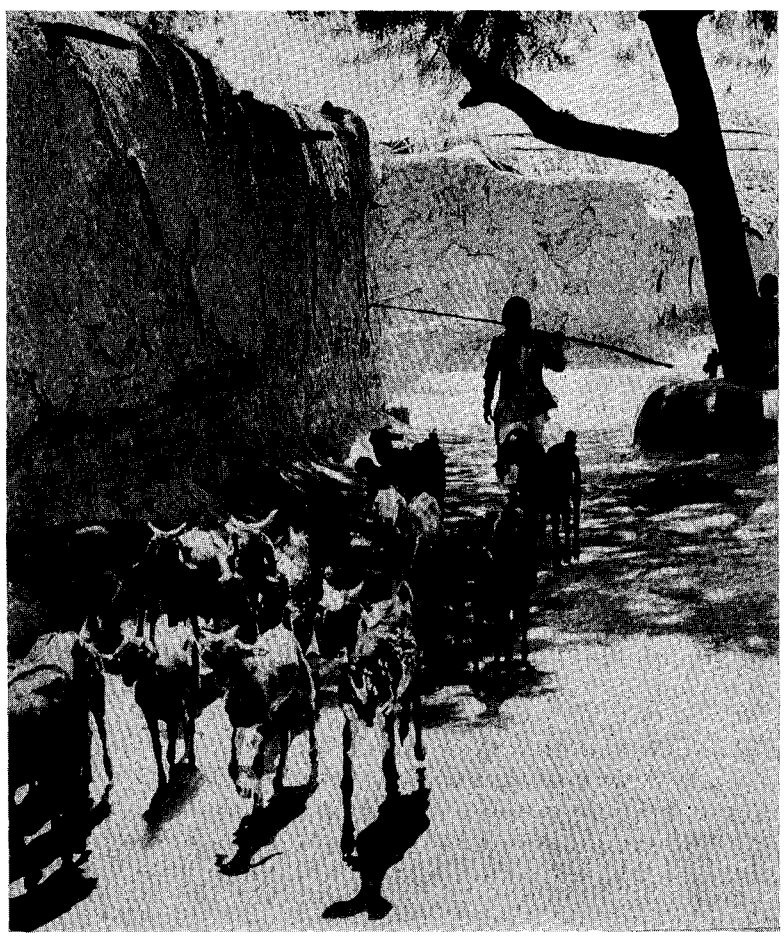
The bus jounced along rattling like a tincan half full of stones. In four hours, with stops for breath, loadings and unloadings, noisy gettings on and off, and after grazing the noses of sublimely trusting cows and buffaloes that lay along the road in the shade of the spreading trees, it covered the seventy miles from Aligarh to Karimganj village. There, although it was not a regular stop, the driver let me off.

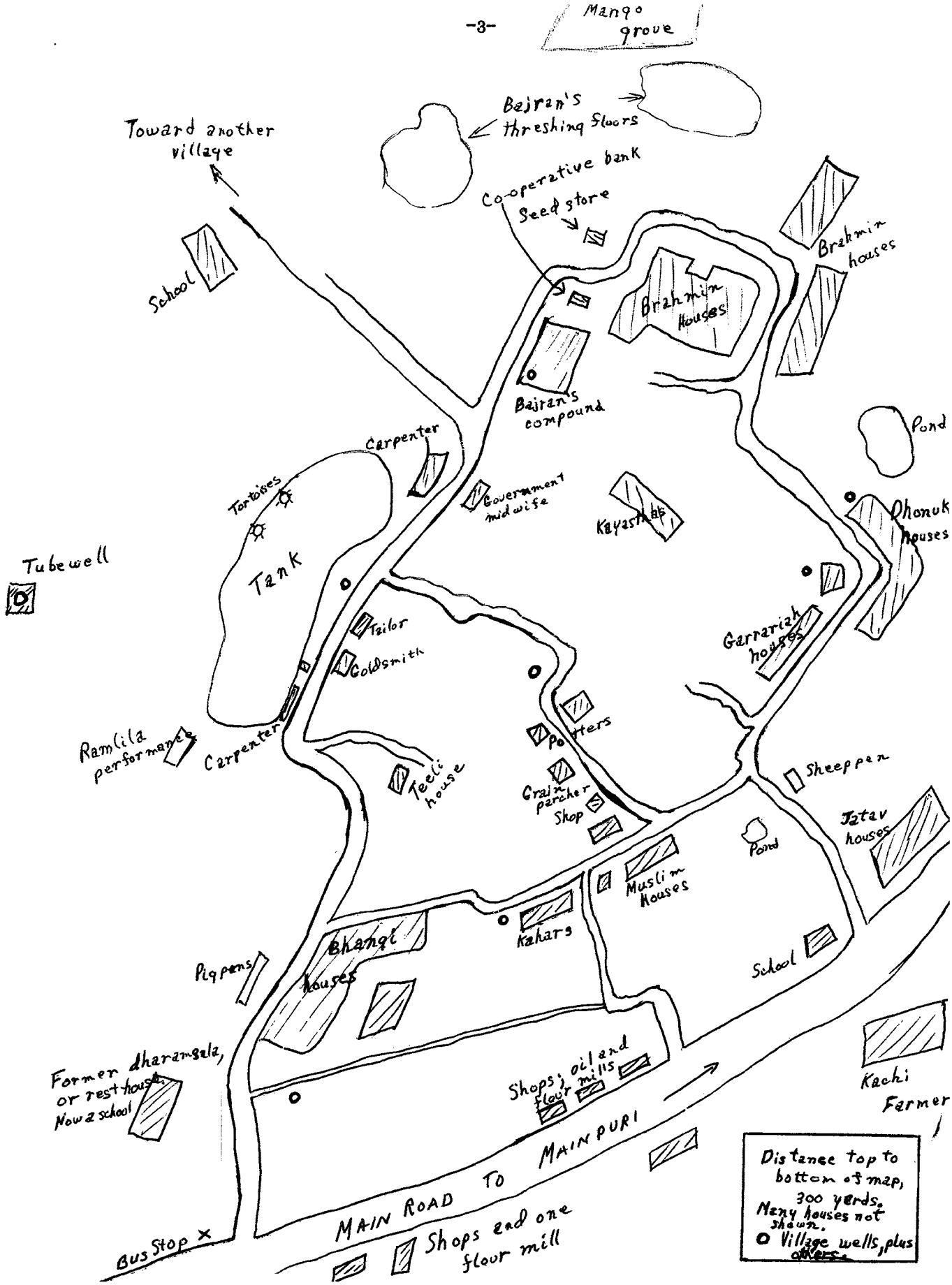
With my bedroll on my shoulder I followed the rambling dusty road to the far end of the village to meet the lady I'd come to see. Charlotte Wiser is a silver-haired woman of seventy-two, at once gallant (I'm sure she'd distrust the word.) and unassuming. In 1925 she and her husband William Wiser went to Karimganj to "make a survey of the social, religious, and economic life of a fairly typical North India village". They intended to collect material by the most direct methods possible. But they found that the only way to gain knowledge was "the leisurely one of friendship". Five years later they'd finished a book and left Karimganj. They didn't go far, spending the next thirty years in districts not far from Karimganj. When the time came for official retirement, they decided to go back to Karimganj and build a house there. William Wiser never had the chance to live in it; he died in 1961. I've seen his picture and I wish I'd known him.

But Charlotte Wiser did go back. Among other things she added new chapters to their first book, explaining some of the changes that had taken place in the intervening years. The University of California Press published it in 1963 and it is called Behind Mud Walls, 1930-1960. It is a gentle and perceptive book. No one, I believe, should even think about India until he has read it. Mrs. Wiser now lives as part of a Hindu joint family, whose head, Bajran, was eighteen years old when they went to Karimganj and one of their first friends in the village. It was "Mrs. Wiser's village" that I saw, and it was her friends who were kind to me.

Karimganj village seems to have risen out of the ground, almost as if it had grown there. The buildings are as much a part of the land as clods in a field--chunky, with khaki-colored, dried-mud walls and roofs. The doors opening on the lanes show cool dusky rooms or a passageway whose turning hides an inner courtyard. The floors of the houses are the earth, hard, smooth, and swept clean. The roofs are horizontal rafters of crooked branches overlaid with brush under the thick layer of dried mud. A few houses are of kiln-dried, red brick, and they are called "pukka" or proper houses. One or two of them have two stories. Lanes wander through the village, several inches deep in dust except where water from a drain or slopped beside a well has stained them brown. The lanes are clean; there is no urban filth or stench. The air smells sometimes of food or of smoke from cooking fires and sometimes of animals. During the day the earth is hot and the air smells thin. In the evening it becomes thicker and richer and there may be a touch of dampness in the breeze.

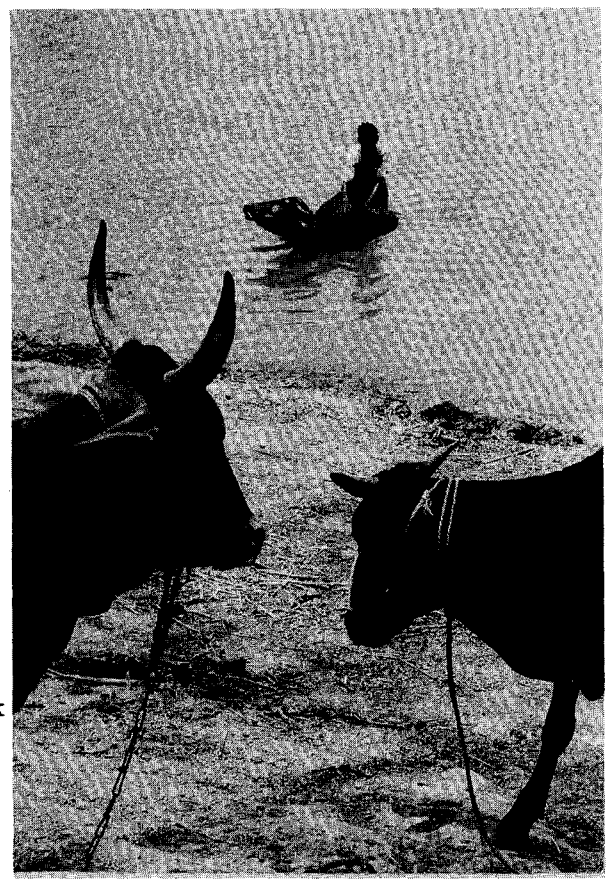
Through the lanes time moves quietly. But boys holler their way home from school. Bullock-carts rattle along, the drivers clucking for speed and when this fails twisting the oxen's tails. Two women shout their disagreement like dogs shaking a bone.




Mango grove
Toward another village
Bajran's threshing floors
Co-operative bank
Seed store
School
Brahmin houses
Brahmin houses
Bajran's compound
Pond
Carpenter
Tortoises
Government midwife
Kayasth
Dhonuk houses
Tubewell
Tank
Tailor
Goldsmith
Garrarish houses
Ramila performance
Carpenter
Potters
Teeli house
Grain parcher
Shop
Sheep pen
Jatav houses
Pond
Muslim houses
Bhangi houses
Kahars
School
Pigpens
Former dharamsala, or rest-house. Now a school
Shops; oil and flour mills
Kachi Farmer
MAIN ROAD TO MAINPURI
Bus Stop
Shops and one flour mill
Distance top to bottom of map, 300 yards.
Many houses not shown.
O Village wells, plus others.

Decorating a wagon wheel. While one man kicks the wheel around, the other holds a chisel to cut lines on the face of the wheel.

On a 'baitak', or raised sitting platform, in the cool shade of a tree beside the lane some men sit on string beds and chat, quietly smoking a hookah while they watch a carpenter across the way fashion a wheel for a cart. Babies toddle along. An older boy unhooks a chain from a stake and leads a water buffalo down the bank to the tank, or village pond, for an afternoon drink and a bath. A man, wearing only a cloth roughly tied as a turban and his dhoti tucked up like shorts drives in a pair of bullocks, ties them under a tree and puts some feed in their large clay bowls. Then he unhitches another pair, good-looking, nearly white, not dirty, ribby, and poor-looking lik city animals, and drives them out a hundred yards to the threshing ground to plod their circle on the wheat. Two peacocks mew loudly at each other and jump a wall to stalk another farmyard for scraps.



Buffalo Bath

Making dung pies for fires. A pile the size of the one partially shown will provide fuel for about two months.

This day had begun, progressed, and would end like many others. At about five o'clock the sky began to pale and the sparrows to chatter. The peacocks mewed from the trees and the crows returned from their roosting place. Men sleeping on platforms near me rose from their charpoys and hawked and spat and blew their noses through their fingers. Some measured out feed for the cows and buffaloes, about five pounds, largely of chopped wheat chaff with a little grain and perhaps some oil-seed cake--a meal that would be repeated in the evening. Other men hauled up buckets of water from wells for the animals. In their courtyard the women and children of "my" family were also getting up. In one corner of the courtyard they replastered the cooking area and the chula—the village stove of India, a mud cylinder about eight inches high and open on the top and one side--to the accompaniment of prayers. The area then became sacred and no one could enter except the woman doing the cooking and the head of the family. The girls, later joined by the wife of the head of the family, Bahenji, or respected sister as Mrs. Wiser calls her, collected the cow and buffalo dung in baskets and swept the cattle courtyard clean. They emptied the baskets onto a pile in another courtyard where later in the day they would knead and pat the dung into pies, set them out to dry, and finally stack them in conical mounds as fuel for cooking fires. Then many of them joined other women of the village, with saris over their heads and lotas, or small brass vessels, of water in their hands to form a shrouded parade to a select field outside the village where they relieved themselves. Children could be seen squatting uninhibited around the edges of the tank.

The men, the farmers themselves, the hired labor, and the sharecroppers, headed toward the threshing floors around the village, some of which were in the sun and some in the shade of huge trees. The carpenter, tailor, potter, goldsmith, and washerman began work. Where the point of the village touches the main road, three shopkeepers

Pounding grain

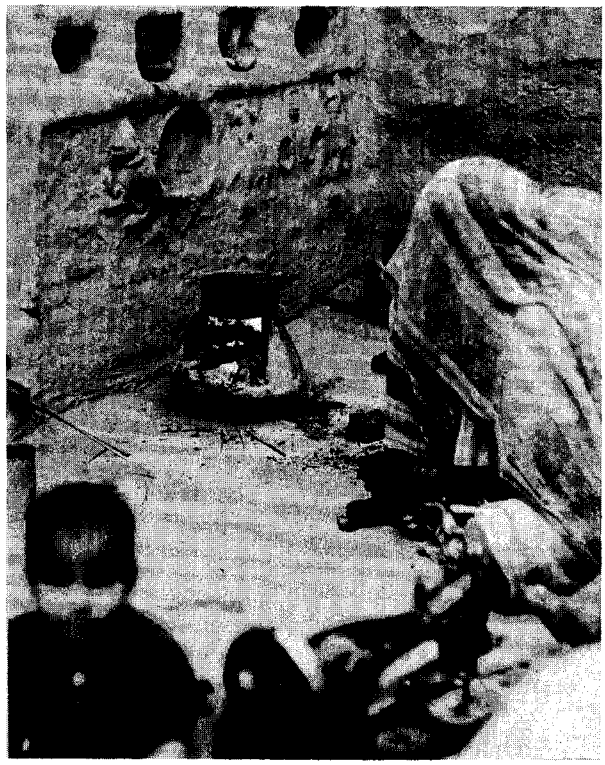
opened their shops and the men in the recently established flour grinding and oil-seed pressing mills greased the machinery. Inside many houses women measured out the exact amount of wheat for the noon meal and ground it into atta between millstones. As mid-day approached they added water to the atta, patted the cakes, and tossed them from palm to palm until they became chappaties, not the crepe-susette-like ones of the city, but thick, peasant pancakes. Then they cooked the bread over a dung fire on a slightly concave metal disk. Some men came home from the fields and ate and rested. Sometimes women took the chappaties and perhaps a tidbit to their men at the threshing floor, wrapped in a rag to keep off the dust swirled about by the increasing wind.

This day, too, two brides arrived in the courtyard of the teeli family, low-caste oil pressers who were mostly out of work because farmers now take their mustard seed to the new mills beside the road. One young girl, brought clay water pots, a big tinned jug, lotas, and a big brass tray. I don't know if this was the extent of the dowry, but at a pre-marriage ceremony several weeks before the girl's father had paid 300 rupees to the prospective groom, Mrs. Wiser said--possibly half a year's wages. Several courtyards away a Brahim farmer had died and his three brothers had united to meet the cost of the feast they had to offer much of the village on the 13th day after the death. They also shaved their heads and Bahenji reported to Mrs. Wiser that "they were doing things right". Bajran was invited to eat and this was extended to me, but I declined because being non-caste they'd have to feed me separately and it might cause some embarrassment.

As the sun stopped burning and the air grew soft with evening, small boys and girls drove in herds of cows and buffaloes that had spent the day nosing in barren fields for occasional bits of grass--about as rewarding as grazing in an ashtray. (Grass is better feed, men told me, but there isn't much, and wheat chaff and lentil pods are nearly all there is to feed the animals. In the spring crop--the harvest I was watching--some farmers raise green fodder, but it seems that this can not be dried and saved and is thus quickly eaten. In

Brides, their faces deferentially
covered, with their effects.
Mother-in-law pulls her nose.

the autumn crop sometimes a feed that can be dried like hay is raised, but the amount is never large and by Iowa or Vermont standards animals get little nutritious food.) With the animals in from fields and threshing floors, the few nightly chores begin. Smoke rises from cooking fires, more chappaties are made, and in a wealthier homes a pot of lentils flavored with green mangoes may bubble—a delicious dish—and perhaps a pot of vegetables. Charpoys are dragged out and childrem go off to sleep when they will, curled up together like kittens. Normally almost everyone would be asleep by about ten o'clock, but for several days before I came to the village and while I was there a



Evening Meal

The daughter-in-law boiling lentils and mangoes in the courtyard of the Kachi farmer. Daughters-in-law are "drudges", says Mrs. Wiser, and serve the entire family. The sewing machine, a prized possession from Delhi, had been brought out for Mrs. Wiser and me to admire.

company from Kanpur played the Ramayana, the lengthy religious epic that is as familiar to Indians as the Christmas story is to Americans. Although the Ramayana is usually performed furing the Dussehra festival in October, no villager would quibble when offered such excitement. I knew the story but could follow little of the dialogue, and unfortunately I couldn't understand a word of the broad jokes told by the 'barber' and his partner between the acts. A four-hour show merely whets the villager's appetite and long after I had sneaked away to bed I could hear the groan of the harmonium, the intricate rhythm of the drum, the laughter, and the shouts of Long Live Rama, "Ram Chandra Ki Jai".

Yours sincerely,

Red Austin

Granville S. Austin

Received in New York May 19, 1965.