

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GSA-20
India: The Village-II

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Dear Dick,

Karimganj is dominated by Brahmins. They own the largest farms and they have the power. In another village it might be another caste. The Brahmins of Karimganj are mostly of the Pandey sub-caste. Although some Brahmins will not work the land and others will work on the land but will not plow, the Pandeyes are all-around working farmers. Bajran, the head of Mrs. Wiser's family is a Pandey Brahmin and he farms a sizeable holding of 400 bigas. (A biga is a standard measure of land, and in that area there are five bigas to an acre.)

There are other landowning farmers in Karimganj--Kachis of the Sudra varna--and several are quite prosperous. The other people in the village are of a variety of castes, which mostly follow occupational lines. There are the Mahajans, or shopkeepers and money-lenders, the Sunnars, or goldsmiths, the mistries (loosely, workmen) like the Burhais, or carpenters, the Kumhars, or potters, the Kahars, or water-carriers, the Garariahs, or herdsmen, the Teelis, or oil pressers, and there is a Misra Brahmin, a Pandey Brahmin, and a member of one other Brahmin sub-caste who perform their traditional function as priests. Below these caste Hindus in the village come the casteless or untouchables--the Harijans (children of god) of Gandhi. They are the Dhobi, or washerman, the Dhonuks, or mat-makers (a mid-wife is often a Dhonuk), the Chamars (also called Jatavs), or leather-workers, and lowest of all the Bhangis, or sweepers, who sweep, clean, handle carcasses, and herd the pigs that eat the human excrement around the village. Some of the Bhangis families also make and sell baskets.

The members of these castes usually have a family to family service and economic relationship. One carpenter, for example, will make carts, repair implements, etc. for a regular clientele of perhaps twenty or twenty-five families. Other families will go to another carpenter. The carpenter is expected to serve these families and he is paid in cash or in grain at harvest time. If he has time he may make something for a man not of his clientele. This is somewhat like Vermont families "taking their trade" to one or another blacksmith or general store in their town. And as the lower, and artisan, castes

serve Brahmin families like Bajran's, they also serve each other. Among the families a carpenter is supposed to serve will be a potter, and the potter will provide jugs and saucers for oil lamps for the carpenter as he does for Bajran's family. And so on. In addition to this economic relationship there is a kind of paternal relationship between the higher and more powerful caste families and the artisans and other serving castes. Bajran may help his potter or carpenter or washerman with protection or advice or use his influence with village or government functionaries to get him just treatment or a favor. Because village society is still fairly tightly organized and there is not much opportunity to break away, this traditional relationship gives the upper castes, and particularly the dominant caste in a village, a good deal of influence over the lower castes.

Although many of the more obvious caste inhibitions and distinctions are disappearing in villages like Karimganj, the basic ones still exist. Caste-members only marry one another and there is little inter-caste dining. Mrs. Wiser and I ate our meals separately, for example. And although Bajran and Bahenji are remarkably easy-going after long exposure to outside influences, I almost caused them to throw away a brass goblet and tray because I touched them (It slipped my mind; I'd been warned.) when posing Bahenji for a picture. Fortunately no one from outside the family happened to be present and the incident was laughed off because of my ignorance. I thought of Kim's



aphorism that where there is no eye there is no caste. Mrs. Wiser and I questioned Bajran about this. Why, I asked, could I shake his hand and if necessary share a charpoy with him, but not touch a brass drinking goblet. He answered that in my case the ritual purity had to do with food and little else. I asked him if he and I were working in the fields and had one chapatty between us could we share it. He said yes, if he divided it and gave my half to me. He also said that in a village or town where he wasn't known he'd eat with another caste, but that he couldn't do it among his own people. I'd heard before that politicians will behave quite freely away from home but will follow caste strictures when in their own village.

Bahenji—and the brass goblet and tray I oughtn't have touched.

When Mrs. Wiser and I visited a Kachi farmer these rules didn't seem to apply.

I was given a tin plate of dal, a chappati, and a tin cup of water for washing my hands after eating. I doubt that the cup and plate were "purified", much less thrown away, when we left.

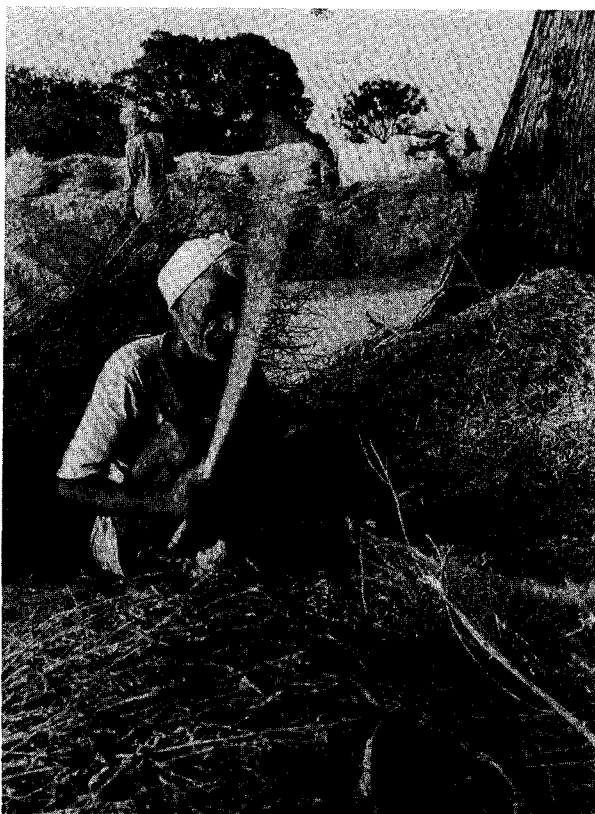
The houses in Karimganj are loosely grouped according to caste, although there are several exceptions. The Brahmins tend to live in one area, but among the Brahmin courtyards on the lane beside the tank also live a carpenter, the goldsmith, a tailor, and the government-recognized midwife. On the other side of the village, however, the Dhonuk, Garariah, and several other lower caste families, plus the village's four Muslim families, live on one lane. The Jatav houses are grouped together across a wide field from the village, but the Bhangis, on the other hand, live on one edge of the village proper. The Bhangi courtyards I saw were as clean as any in the village and some of the houses had been newly repaired. I have been told that in some areas all the untouchables live apart from the main village in a colony of their own, where the houses are again grouped according to caste.

There must be at least a dozen wells along the lanes of the village as well as those in some family courtyards. I was told that anyone could draw water from any well in the village. If so, this is a great change from the days when the use of a Brahmin well by an untouchable resulted in the untouchable being beaten or in a small scale riot. In Karimganj I suspect the free use of wells is more theoretical than actual, if only because it is more convenient to use one's own well or the caste well near the house.

During the threshing of the harvest proved a good time to visit the village. Not only was there much to see, but the men had more time to answer questions; and talk of crops, food, and the economic and social aspects of farming seemed appropriate. In much of northern India, and in Karimganj, farmers grow a spring and a fall crop. There



Bajran



Bajran threshing arhar.

may also be supplemental crops such as rice during the monsoon months of July to September and cash crops like vegetables and melons when irrigation makes this possible. Two of Bajran's sons, Srinivas and Devidayal, had a little land of their own and were growing melons. Some farmers also grow sugar cane. The spring crop provides most of India's food grains, wheat, barley, field peas, and several kinds of lentils--the fall crop is predominantly millet. Bajran's spring crop consisted primarily of wheat and arhar, a small bean, several in a pod, that grows on waist-high bushes. Arhar is threshed by beating the bushes with a stick. The broken pods and the beans fall into a pile and winnowing separates the beans from the pods. Generally the wind is strong enough for winnowing, but when it fails, as on my

first day in the village, two men will flap a length of cloth to blow the chaff from the grain. Wheat is still almost exclusively threshed by driving cattle round and round over it to knock the grain from the stems. Bajran, however, has acquired two machines. They are like disk harrows except that the disks have saw-teeth. Because the machines are pulled by bullocks and are themselves more efficient than cattle alone, they more than halve the former threshing time. Nevertheless, the number of man-hours of work per bushel of wheat must be terribly high. Winnowing is a far more efficient process than I had thought. When I examined piles of wheat and arhar, I found almost no grain had been wasted.

Bajran owns about 400 bigas of land. One or two other Brahmin families own an equal amount. Of the approximately eighty households in the village, about forty own sixty bigas or more--quite a reasonable amount of land. About twenty households own less than sixty bigas and another twenty, or one-fourth of the village, own no land at all. A landholding of thirty bigas (a rough average of landholdings in the state) will barely feed a family of six--and I mean 'feed' in Indian-peasant not American-farmer terms. Thus half of Karimganj lives at just about subsistence level and

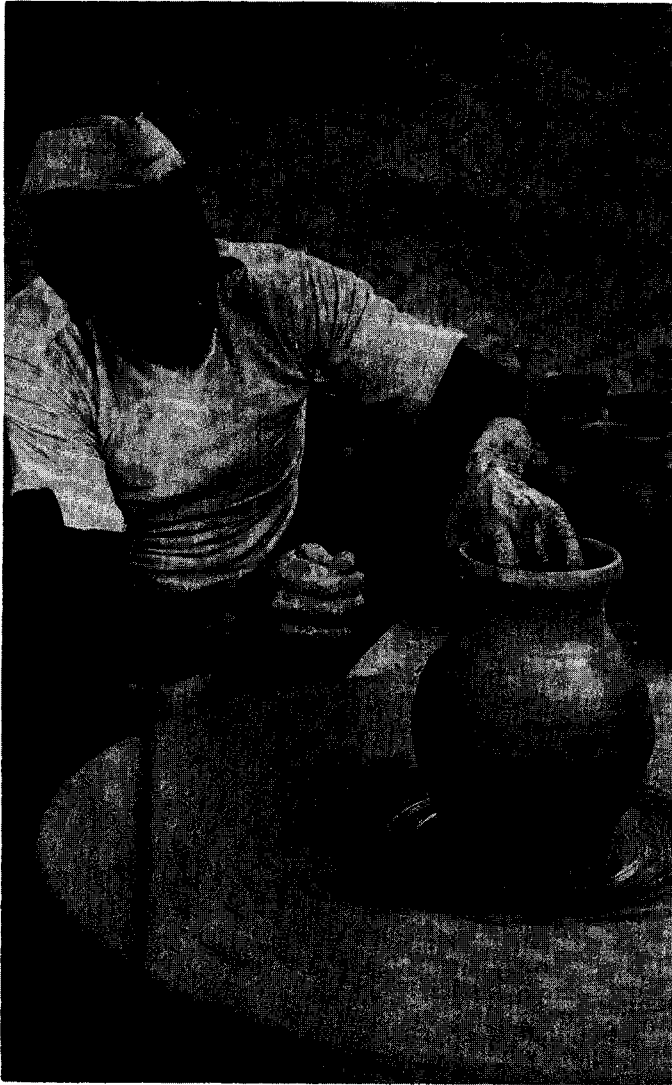
THRESHING



THE OLD

AND THE NEW
(with Srinivas driving)





The Potter.

His wheel turns on one point like a top. It is so heavy and he can set it turning so fast that it doesn't wobble and he can make a pot before it runs down.

some lentils, some millet from the fall crop, and a little other grain. But this crop is not all his. If he uses his own bullocks, and few among the landless own farm animals, he will get half the crop. Otherwise he gets only one-fourth the crop minus what he has to pay back to the landowner for seed and fertilizer. Thus at a maximum he will take home 3200 pounds of wheat, perhaps 800 pounds of barley or lentils and

one-fourth of the village well below this. Let's take the case of the landless. Some of them, like the carpenters and potters, can live by their trade. Most can not. They have to work by the day when work is available or be sharecroppers. If they work by the day, as does the Teeli now that the new mills by the road have taken away his business, their daily wage will be one and a half rupees (32 cents) or four pounds of grain. A pound of grain will make about six, thick peasant chappaties. So the Teeli and his wife eat two meals a day, six chappaties at each meal. That's all there is unless someone gives him lentils or he brings in wild vegetables or fruits from the fields. Fortunately the Teeli's baby is still nursing.

If a man is a sharecropper he is only a little better off. Say he is given forty bigas to farm by Bajran or some other large landholder. A better than average crop will be 12,800 pounds of wheat, plus

half this in other grains. This will provide a man, his wife, and four children four to six chappaties each at two meals daily, plus a small portion of lentils. There may be a little grain left over to sell for cash to buy some cloth or meet a few additional expenses. If there is a marriage or a death or some other major expense, chances are the man will go to the money lender and contract a debt that will hound him to his grave. And if he lives in a village not so fortunate as Karimganj where there is no irrigation, and therefore fertilizer cannot be used, or if he has to sharecrop on inferior land, his crop will be yet smaller than this. The peasant with, say, forty bigas of land of his own is not four times better off than the sharecropper. For he must own bullocks and implements, buy seed and fertilizer, pay taxes, pay for irrigation water, and hire labor at harvest time. The postmaster of the village, who owns a little land that he farms on shares with another man, and who Mrs. Wiser thinks is a reliable source of information, claims that it takes sixty bigas of land to feed a family of six. If he is not exaggerating and if my arithmetic is right, small peasants and the landless in the village live a very precarious existence.

Can this group, and more especially the landless one-fourth of the village, do anything to improve their lot?, one asks. And if not, why not? Certainly humans should not live so ill-nourished and on the edge of starvation. And agricultural authorities here think that sharecropping is a relatively unproductive system of farming: the sharecropper has little incentive to increase his crop when most of it goes to someone else. There are several answers to these questions, none of them encouraging. In the first place there isn't enough land to go around. Economists say that only large-scale

industrialization can drain the excess manpower from the countryside. These days the number of landless who take daily, catch-as-catch-can jobs in the big town of Mainpuri, seven miles from Karimganj, is increasing. There is often local work in brickyards. The standard wage, one and a half rupees a day, is very low, but better than nothing. Second, the zamindari abolition and various other "land reform" acts that have been passed since independence have not



A sweeper in front of his house making a basket of arhar branches. Behind him is a charpoy or string bed—both cool and comfortable.



Winnowing

greatly broadened the pattern of landholding. The man who was poor and landless before remains so now: when land expropriated from large landholders was up for sale he had neither the cash nor the credit to buy any.

But equally important are the attitudes of these people. They are fatalistic and resigned, if not apathetic, about their condition. They have been underprivileged for centuries not only economically but socially. When American farmers wanted change they banded together as an interest group, forming the Grange and bringing pressure on government and society in other ways. Such a "revolt" is at present unthinkable here. The rural landless (who constitute about one-

fourth of the population throughout the state of Uttar Pradesh as they do in Karimganj) are the lower castes and the casteless; they are at the bottom of society. To doubt the justice of the social position into which they were born, to challenge the authority of the upper castes, would be to doubt the wisdom and the will of god. When I suggested that all the farm laborers and sharecroppers might band together at harvest time and refuse to gather the harvest unless they got better terms, people looked at me as if I had predicted the second coming. And, of course, a group of people on the edge of starvation are not in a good bargaining position.

As if these impediments to action were not enough, there is one yet more serious: the casteism among the lower castes and untouchables themselves. The desire to challenge the upper castes, to confront the government and demand a better deal is slowly growing, but there is no class solidarity among the landless and the casteless, among the economically underprivileged. If the Chamars produce a leader, for example, the Dhonuks, Dhobis, and Bhangis won't follow him, or at least not very far. And the landless among the lower castes will be even less likely to support him. Even the great Dr. Ambedkar, the prophet of the untouchables, had a much greater following in his own caste and allied castes than he did among the untouchables generally. When Dr. Ambedkar died in the mid-fifties,

the Scheduled Castes Federation that he had so long led became the Republican Party of India. On paper this could be a very powerful organization, rivalling the Congress Party, for it is the party of the untouchables and the untouchables number 65 millions out of India's population of 450 millions. In some areas of Uttar Pradesh, especially around Aligarh, the party also had strong Muslim support in the last election. For several months last year the Republicans mounted a civil disobedience campaign against the government, succeeding in having more of its members arrested than did the Congress



One of the garariahs or shepherds. This man is also the village bone-setter.

in its heyday fighting the British. Still, the Republicans have no power. "We can't find the leaders," a senior Muslim member of the party told me in Aligarh. "Until you've lived in it you can't imagine the depth of these caste divisions. We've even tried getting a leader from each caste and getting them all together, but this hasn't worked either." So it appears that for many reasons the untouchables in the rural areas will for a long time be without a voice and therefore remain landless and hungry.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Red Austin".

Granville S. Austin

Received in New York May 20, 1965.

