INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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GSA-21
India: The Village-III

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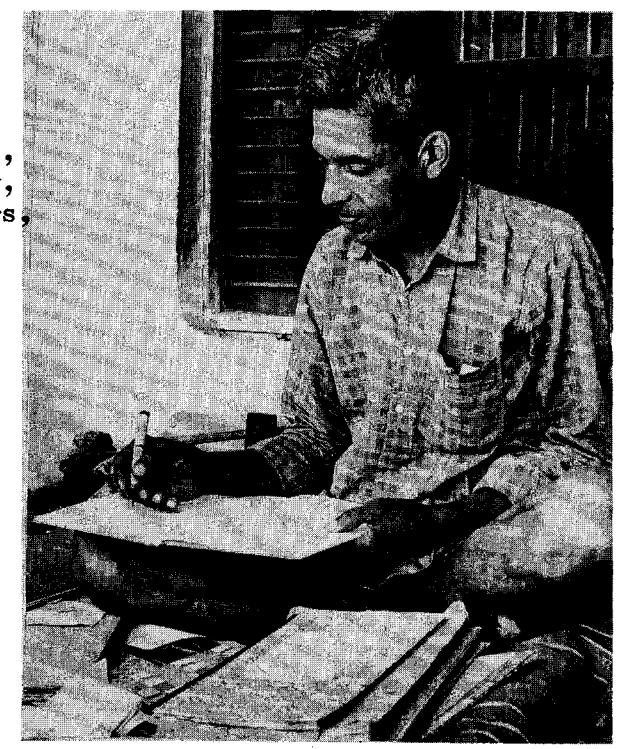
Dear Dick,

Bajran and the more affluent members of Karimganj village, contrary to the lower castes, have both economic power and a political voice. Being the dominant individuals in the village, their favor and that of other members of the dominant caste is sought by politicians who want votes. The Congress, for example, seldom goes beyond a few speeches and vague promises in wooing the lower castes and the lower economic strata of village society. Its alliances are with the powerful who are expected to deliver most of the village's votes at election time. To this end the Congress, in a state where it constitutes the government (every state now except Kerala), will manipulate the bureaucracy, giving licenses, permits, favors, common patronage, and even strong-arm protection to its core of supporters among the dominant of a village. I have been told by politicians and political observers that this is a standard pattern, that the Congress derives its power largely from a rampantly corrupt spoils system. How far this operates in Karimganj I could not find out, especially since there was so much else to learn. But of Bajran's three sons, one, Raj Bahadur, is the Pradhan, or president of the village panchayat or governing council--an elective office--and another Devidayal, is the operator of the recently installed



Raj Bahadur, the Pradhan, at 'the office' on a charpoy in the family courtyard.

Bahenji's granddaughter collecting dung in the family courtyard. Many girls and women wear nose rings and pins for decoration.

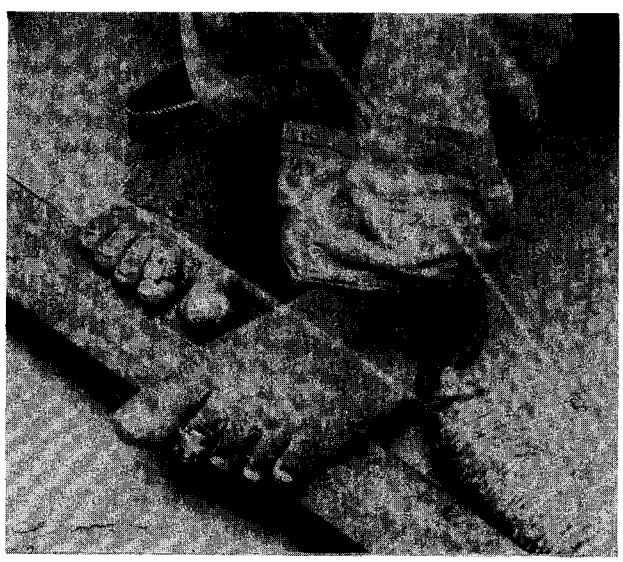
tubewell, which irrigates about 700 acres in the village. Bahenji, according to Mrs. Wiser, did a good deal of astute politicking to bring this job into the family, so ingratiating herself with the wife of the engineer who would make the appointment that the wife supported Bahenji's son and also managed to have a clerk in her husband's office who had been bribed to support another candidate sent away until after the appointment had been made. Although it would be idle to expect that the two sons will not be under pressure from favor-seekers and from the Congress, they may function honestly and effectively. In any case Bajran and the other dominant Brahmin families will maintain their fortunate position. (All is not rosy, however, for the factional strife so frequent in villages exists in Karimganj, making it difficult for the Pradhan to get roads improved and so on. Village government in India possesses little of the power of town meeting government in New England and therefore can be easily stalled by dissension.)

Bajran and the other wealthier farmers have a relatively comfortable economic position. Their harvests provide them enough to eat and a sizeable surplus to sell. Several farmers told me that they were eating better (more) than in times past. Their diet is also more varied, both in relation to what they used to eat and to what the poor eat today. Bajran's family eats the staple chappaties, plus one of several varieties of lentils at nearly every meal. Once a day they eat vegetables. Bajran eats onions (very nutritious, but Bahenji doesn't like them, Mrs. Wiser says). Some Brahmins will eat neither onions nor garlic for religious reasons--they are considered aphrodisiacs, I think; something many Indians don't want or don't need. The family eats no meat and no eggs(because they are also considered non-vegetarian), and there is very little milk available. They eat little fruit. When challenged about this by Mrs. Wiser, Bajran had several groundless excuses and ended up by saying that they were simple people and simple food sufficed. The basic lacks in this kind of diet, according to Mrs. Wiser, are Vitamin C, calcium, and to some extent easily absorbable protein. She cited the case of a man whose teeth looked beautiful but wiggled in his gums. Men and children, who go into the fields, have a slightly better diet than women, who stay close to home, for they sometimes eat raw carrots, field peas, and one kind of lentils, as well as certain kinds

of leaves. Both men and children also chew sugar, cane, which is rich in Vitamin C. Eating habits are changing, though. An increasing number of peasants grow tomatoes as a cash crop and to eat--although there is a tendency to take the cash and let the diet suffer. Cultivation of fruit trees is also increasing. And in one town the bus passed through I saw people buying and eating newly washed raw carrots from shining orange mounds on push carts. The result of poor diet, according to doctors I've met, seems primarily to be a very low resistance to disease, wounds heal slowly, and so on. At a superficial level, however, Indian peasants have an amazing amount of stamina despite their meagre fare.

WOMAN SPINNING

There is no weaver in the village now and the raw cotton thread will be taken to Mainpuri for weaving into rugs.

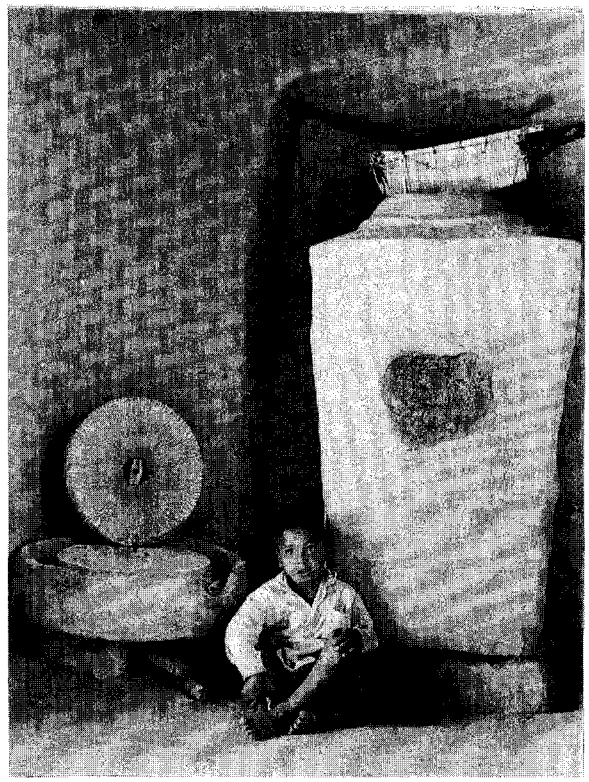


Rings not bells on her toes, plus her anklets--the feet of a spinning woman.

Changes in the dietary and other habits of peasants appear to have something to do with the question of food supply and prices, a matter central to the viability of the Indian economy. Some farmers, as I have said, are eating better than they used to. One man, for example, told Mrs. Wiser and me that ten or fifteen years ago there was very little wheat flour in his chappaties, but now they are largely made of atta. Presumably this is true on a wide scale, and the poorer the peasant used to eat, the more of his increased production he probably consumes now. Thus some of what may be recorded in statistics as an increase in production never reaches the market. This emphasizes the effect of the most basic fact about India: the country cannot yet feed itself; when one man eats more, another eats less. Traditionally in India the grain market at harvest-time has been glutted: the peasant has sold much of his drop for cash to pay taxes (which fall due after the harvest), to pay rent to the landlord, to pay for weddings, and to reimburse the moneylender. He would then often have to buy grain in the market to feed himself before the new crop came in, often going into debt to do so. In some measure this pattern may be nearly inevitable, but I was told both by villagers in Karimganj and by agricultural experts in Aligarh that the disparity between harvest-time prices in the spring and market prices of grain in the fall and winter during the past few years has been so great that peasants no longer dare do this. A year ago wheat sold at about eighteen or twenty rupees for eighty pounds (a "maund", a common unit like our hundred-weight), but last fall and winter the price went to forty-five rupees and more. For this reason, peasants appear to be converting less grain into cash after the harvest and instead are storing it to feed themselves. Storage space is a big problem for small peasants, but I have heard that they are sometimes digging underground pits in their houses and that they rent storage space from a grain merchant, paying him a percentage of the amount stored. This practice does not lower the total production of grain; yet it must affect the appearance of the grain situation and it may push up prices. So much for the small peasant.

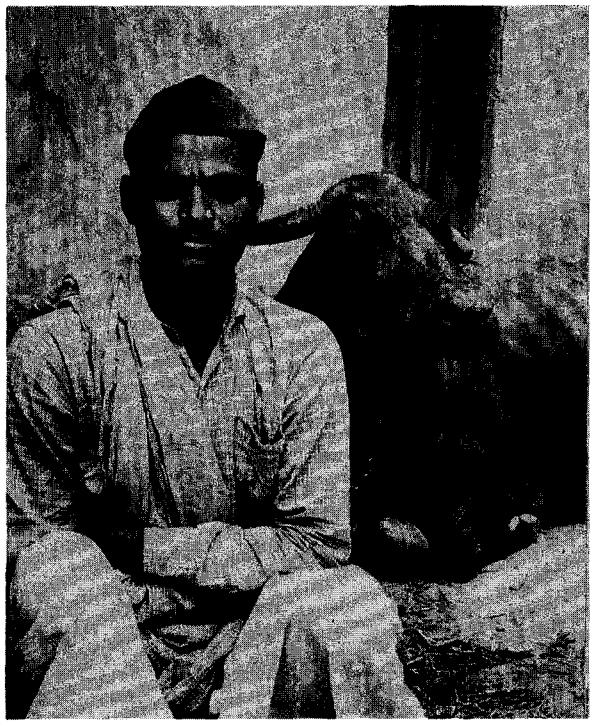
Wealthy farmers like Bajran, who cannily pleads poverty with the ardor of a Scot, are in a much different position. They raise enough grain to eat well and have a goodly amount to sell. They often have storage space, and they have enough capital so that they have to sell only a part of the crop to pay the traditional spring season expenses. The rest they can save until prices begin to rise; they doubtless see no reason why they should sell at twenty and let the grain merchant make a profit

of twenty-five. This is one aspect of the problem of hoarding that so exercised the government last fall. (I don't think the word "hoarding" applies to a peasant who stores grain to ensure his own survival.) The other form is hoarding for speculation by grain merchants. There no doubt has been a great deal of this, but the government has never really substantiated its claims against the grain merchants. And I have heard many "authenticated" reports that the government only proceeded against those speculators who didn't make adequate contributions to Congress Party funds. In Karimganj one of the three Mahajans with a shop on the main road reportedly speculated in grain. A justifiable, although perhaps rudimentary conclusion would seem to be that until the gap between spring selling prices and autumn buying prices can be lessened the peasant will only bring his grain to market when it suits him, if at all. Families who know to the ounce how much grain they eat a day will take no chances.



A grain storage jar in one of the Teeli houses. Beside it are mill-stones for making atta. The white streaks on the edge of the stone are teeth that have been filed into it.

Changes such as these are only a few of the many that are taking place in Bajran's household, in Karimganj, and in the villages of India. Two changes are fundamental to the others. The first is irrigation. Karimganj now has a tubewell. About sixty feet deep, its electric motor pumps 27,000 gallons an hour, enough to assure the village's wheat crop by giving it three irrigations during the winter months and to permit the production of new cash crops like Devidayal's melons. More important still, irrigation means that chemical fertilizers can be used. Bajran and other landowners in Karimganj use it and to them "superphosphate" is now as much a part of their language as "Ramlila". Because of irrigation Bajran has raised his yield from three to four maunds of wheat per biga and, according to agriculturalists in Aligarh, should easily be able to raise it to six or higher. The average yield in U.P. is three maunds per biga. Also, only through irrigation and drainage can the salty wasteland of North India be reclaimed for farming; in U.P., it is estimated, there are three and a half million such acres. To the eye or in its implications, there is nothing lovelier than the swift rivulet from a tubewell running through the fields or than a major irrigation canal curving greenly across a dry plain.



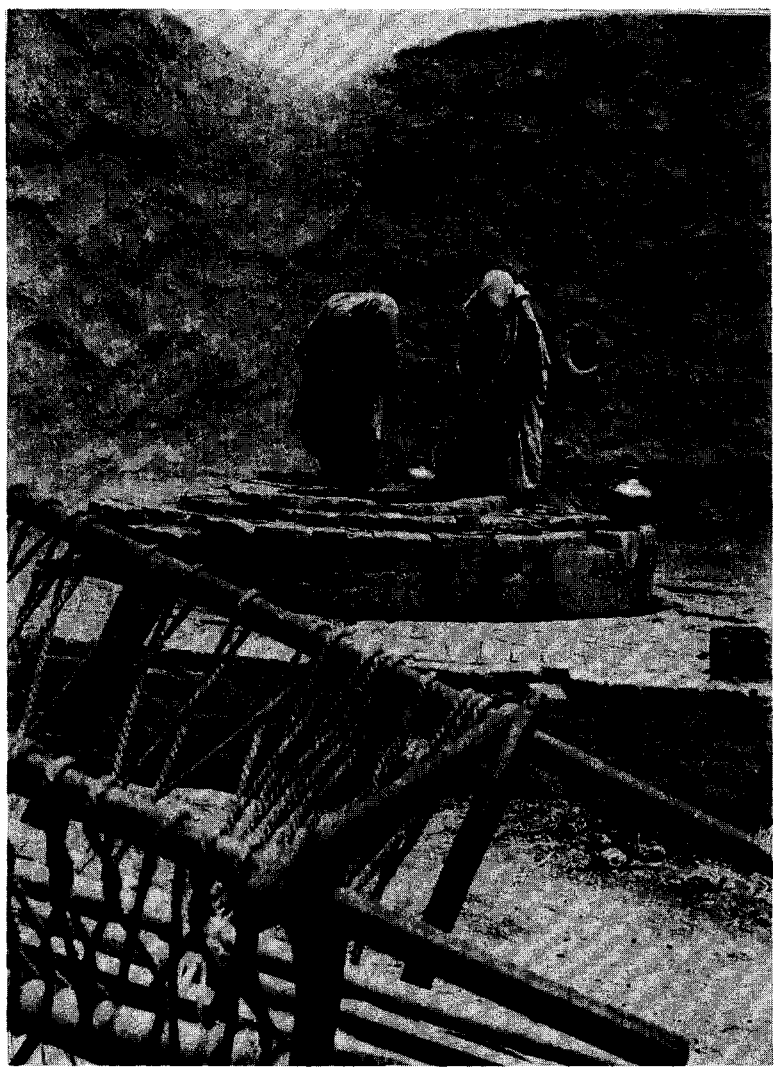
The unemployed oil presser and his buffalo.

Along with fertilizer and new crops come improved seeds and insecticides. All increase the yield. And with a basic food supply secured, new ventures can be started. When Bajran was a youth he wanted to take the family's extra milk and cycle the seven miles to Mainpuri to sell it. His father said no because milk-selling was done by the Ahirs, a much lower caste. Now Devidayal wants to raise chickens and sell the eggs (and maybe eat a few when no one is looking) and it is Bajran's turn to say no because the sweeper caste usually raises chickens. Yet Devidayal is determined. He says that as soon as he gets some cash, he's going to go ahead and have chickens anyway. He probably will, and another breakthrough will have been made. Devidayal, by the way, is nearly my age and his subservience to his father illustrates the traditional type of authority in the Hindu joint family. There are other new things in Karimganj, such as the seed store and the cooperative bank--both to some extent manipulated by the upper crust in the village, although agricultural credit will, it is hoped, be increasingly extended to poorer farmers. Many changes in Karimganj are subtler, brought about by the increasing ability of people to get out of the village and of ideas to come in.

The arrival of new ideas and the increased opportunity to pursue them is producing the second fundamental change in Karimganj and other villages: the dilution of traditional values and the breaching of the solid wall of fatalism and resignation that has for so long held villagers prisoner. A weakening of traditional values is always dangerous. The resulting insecurity and unease bring ill-effects as well as progress. But the doing away with fatalism and apathy is a prerequisite to any progress at all. This is not happening rapidly. The holes in the wall aren't big and villagers aren't rushing out of them; yet they <u>are</u> going. The trial of modern agricultural techniques, among many other things, shows this, for villagers are now helping themselves and do not just sit like ducks in the shooting gallery of fate. The impetus for change must, I think, continue to come from the top, from government. Villagers will respond, but they seem not to have initiative. On the other hand, Mrs. Wiser and others sensitive to the ways of villagers

believe that the government must first help bring about changes that the villagers themselves want. Here is where the government falls down. It often supports projects that gain neither the peasants' interest nor their support. And much more important, I am told, government servants, especially at the lower level, consider villagers more traditional and apathetic than they really are. They don't give them all the help they want. There is another reason for this: government servants are often more interested in their own status and security than in doing their job well. In one man's phrase, they are not "service-oriented"; they have their own apathy, and it may be more dangerous to the future of the country than the peasants'.

AT THE WELL

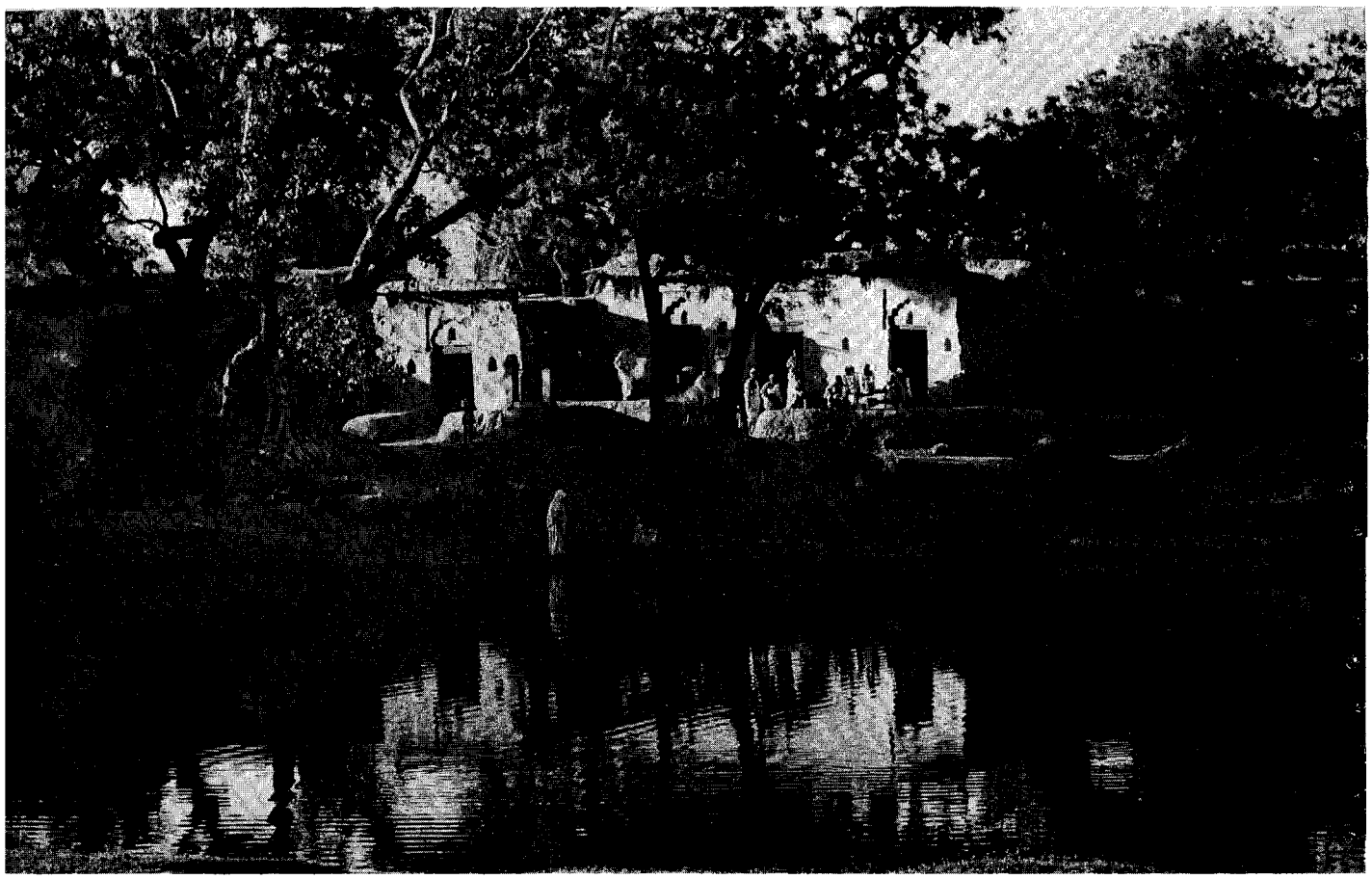


Foreign observers in India tend to live on a pendulum, swinging from hope to dismay and anger. It would be foolish to be too optimistic in Karimganj or too pessimistic in Delhi, although I confess the tendency. All one can do is wait--in which, I guess, there's hope--being careful, as the saying goes here, not to cook rice in the imagination.

Yours sincerely,

Red Austin

Granville S. Austin



A part of Karimganj seen across the tank.

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