by Richard Critchfield
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The Changing Peasant
Part III: The Modern Farmer

Revolutions claim victims. The Green Revolution claimed Dhakel. Charan understood. It did not make him sympathize with his cousin but he did admit, "This would never have happened if Dhakel had been harvesting his own fields." Nobody else, not even the landless, untouchable Harijans, went as far as I did, blaming the richer landlords like Basant Singh who thought only of the new methods and machinery, never weighing the human cost. Somebody had to pay. Odd it should have been Dhakel, still young, handsome, more tradition-minded than most, keeping to himself, farming his land, inconsequential, a minor figure, almost incidental to our story. But the reader should judge for himself.

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April 1970. Early one morning a springless, creaking bullock cart rumbled out of the village, a prosperous Jat farming community of 1,400 souls, 180 miles north of Delhi and just a few miles southwest of Kipling's famous Grand Trunk Road. The cart's wooden wheels groaned and creaked at the slightest movement; a copper drinking vessel, hanging from a pole fixed to the cart's side, punctuated each rotation, chiming like a bell. By these sounds, apart from its pathetically worn wooden flanks, you might have concluded as to the cart's age and readiness to fall to pieces. In the cart sat two inhabitants of Ghungrali: Gurcharan Singh, a Jat farmer known as Charan to his friends, and his hired Harijan laborer, Mukhtar. As they moved, Charan crouched on his haunches on the cart's wide tongue, holding the reins and coaxing on the bullocks in that falsetto mixture of praise and curses Punjabis use to address their cattle: "*Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat. Ta-hah, ta-hah*!" The bullocks, grave and dignified, kept to the accustomed ruts they had followed to the fields in the morning and back at night these many years. The flat, dusty dirt road was as much of their daily lot as the cool shade at Charan's well where they munched grass all day long, or slept, rolling over on their sides.

That was the morning the comet appeared in the southern sky. Mukhtar told Charan his wife had awakened him at four o'clock to see a giant star with a long fiery tail. The old men in the village claimed it was an omen; such a star had appeared only once before and that was in 1947 just before Ghungrali's former Muslim population had been massacred by thousands of Hindu soldiers and Sikh mobs from the city.

"Yes," Charan said. "They say that when such a star appears there will be a disaster in the village. But it has been there for some days now and nothing has happened."

In a few months Charan would be 40, a giant of a man with a long bushy black beard who towered over most of his fellow villagers. His eyes were deeply shadowed but underneath his bushy black eyebrows the eyes themselves sparkled with life. When he laughed—so deeply you could see down his throat—he had a look of great physical strength and vitality. Yet his asthma had grown worse over the years in such a dusty climate and he could no longer do the work of two men in the fields as he once had done.

Like all the members of the 65 Jat families in Ghungrali, Charan had come south by wagon train from his father's old home in Pakistan after the 1947 partition. Charan had been 16 then and although the refugee caravan his family joined numbered 22,000 bullock carts, it moved in single file and was highly vulnerable to attack on the journey south. Charan had helped fight off Baluchi marauders with a homemade cannon, seen schoolfriends slaughtered by Muslim soldiers, and barely survived a flash flood in what had been taken for a dry river bed. He had experienced starvation and when they reached the safety of the new Indian frontier, cholera claimed his youngest sister and only brother. Charan's father, Sadhu Singh, a plump, indolent man who had been a gentleman farmer until the flight south, told his son, "I have never taken my hands out of my pockets and I never shall as long as I live."

Thus at 16, Charan became the sole supporter of his parents and 4 surviving sisters. To make ends meet, he joined the untouchable Harijans as a hired field laborer by day and cultivated his own rented fields at night, working 16 to 20 hours each day. As Charan often retold it in later years, "I've worked like a Harijan most of my life. I had

to. There was no alternative. But you know, those hardest years were the happiest. Maybe work is good for a man."

Finally Sadhu Singh and his brother Sarvan, whose son Dhakel was only a child, were each allotted 15 acres in Ghungrali under the Delhi government's refugee resettlement program. The two brothers took a combined loan of 2,500 rupees* for a tubewell and settled in Ghungrali for good, for water is everything in the arid Punjab; with it you can turn a desert into a garden. That was in 1953. The tubewells multiplied to 46 by 1957; by 1970 to 95. All but the 11 wells fed by canal water were run by electricity and Ghungrali also had 51 electric motors and 35 diesel engines.

Basant Singh, a poor Jat who started out with two acres, was the village's greatest success story. He and a brother married two Ghungrali girls who together inherited 50 acres of land from their fathers. When the government sought to build a canal through this land, each of the wives was awarded 10,000 rupees for right-of-way titles. With this money, Basant Singh managed to get the sole franchise for selling liquor in Ghungrali and his fortune quickly grew. From then on always in the forefront, he bought Ghungrali's first tractor in 1962; by 1970 there were 36. The villagers followed his example in using modern methods and chemical fertilizer consumption rose from nothing to 600 tons a year. Basant Singh, profiting from connections at the state university and agricultural ministry, planted the first new Mexican-bred dwarf wheat seeds in Ghungrali in 1965. He sold these seeds at enormous profit and by 1967 the new wheat was sown on all 1,370 acres of Ghungrali's wheatland (the village's 65 Jat families cultivated 1,500 acres in all). New varieties were soon sown each year; Ghungrali's Jats embraced the idea of change and tried every new crop and innovation that came along.

Yet in 1970, after three years of windfall profits from the new wheat,

*currently 8 to $1.

The author with Charan Singh, 1970.

Ghungrali still resembled the usual Indian huddle of walled brick and earthen houses, with the usual temple—since Ghungrali was a Sikh village it had a white *gurdwara* with bulbous towers—the usual school, stagnant pond, and a giant banyan tree. As Charan and Mukhtar rode their bullock cart to the fields, only on the broad limitless plain was change really evident: the landscape was broken here and there by clumps of trees around the wells and pumphouses. One after another, almost uniform in appearance since most were 15 acres, these small landholdings unfolded before the eyes of the two men in the cart. The farms stretched to the horizon on both sides of the dirt road, flowing into a faint dusty-white atmosphere. You can go on and on in the Punjab and never see where this horizon begins and where it ends. The scattered trees at the wells created the illusion of a distant jungle hung with mist, but there was no jungle; the land was too valuable and fertile. Almost all of it was planted in wheat, mostly still green, but with a field here and there, sown early, already ripening into a dull gold. But what wheat. It was all short, stunted and dwarfed, barely reaching a man's waist. A thick tangle of plump heads on short, stiff stems, growing in a green carpet in all directions. To Mukhtar, this wheat still seemed a miracle with its lush, almost artificial appearance and its many strange names like Khalyan Sona, PV 18, 227, RR21, and Triple Dwarf. As the cart moved along Charan commented on each crop, "This PV 18 is sick. It has a disease." "Not enough fertilizer; Nirmal is a poor farmer." "Now here's a good crop; yes, Basant Singh does it right."

An old man with a clean, faded blue cloth loosely wrapped around his head and holding in his hand a long wooden staff—an Old Testament figure—rose from feeding sugar cane stalks into an old-fashioned iron crusher turned by bullocks and came forward to the cart, his palms folded inward in the traditional Punjabi greeting. It was Charan's neighbor, Pritam Singh, a distant relative; Pritam was a saintly giant of a man who at 72 was still one of the strongest in the village. Known for his simplicity and goodness, Pritam was one of the few Jats who still worked side by side in the fields with his Harijan laborers.

"Sat Sri Akal!"

"Sat Sri Akal, Charanji."

"Are you hale and hearty?" Charan called in his exuberant way.

"Work can keep your health. An idle man gets lead in his bones."

For a time the two talked about their crops and the weather and then Pritam raised his hand to the sky. "Did I feel a raindrop?"

"It's only that one small cloud overhead. It will pass over."

"Well," Pritam said, "we are not salt that will melt away. God is after our wheat. With these thundershowers it goes down and becomes shaky at the root. Charan, our life is easier now. If people go on minding their own business, the villagers here in Ghungrali can become rich. There's no doubt about it. With these new wheat seeds, we're getting richer day by day."

"It will be hot today," Charan told Mukhtar as they drove on. It was not far to Charan's well and he instructed Mukhtar which fields to irrigate that day. The muscular young Harijan had been Charan's laborer for many years and made his own life immeasurably easier since Charan could always rely on Mukhtar to get things done. At Charan's well two more laborers, old gray-bearded Krishan, whom everybody called Poondi or "Little Bug," and his son Bawa were waiting to crush cane. Charan unlocked the white tool shed that gave his farmyard its distinction—nobody else had built one yet—and uttered a loud oath. Someone had emptied out a drum of residue from the crushed sugar he had hidden there; Charan wanted to use it to distill some illicit liquor.

"It was your father," Bawa volunteered with a grin. "He came last evening after you had driven the cart home and made us pour it out. He said, 'It does not behoove us to make drink. It is beneath our dignity.'"

Charan cursed his father. "I'll rape his mother! It would have made at least 30 bottles." He was angry for now, with Mukhtar doing most of the hard daily labor, Charan had taken to drinking heavily. He felt entitled to it; he had worked hard for 25 years to build up his farm, suffered asthma, survived repeated petty quarrels with his father, and been guilty of so many follies and injustices it was painful to remember them. As a boy Charan had dreamed of being an engineer or doctor as he might have been had India not been partitioned. Now, with a wife and five growing children to support, Charan clearly realized he was ending up something of a mediocrity, a bit of a drunkard, short-tempered, a companion of some of the worst wastrels in the village. Yet he felt resigned to it and looked forward each evening to laughter over a bottle with some friends, for he knew that every man must be satisfied with what he is.

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If you go to Ghungrali today and mention 1970 everyone will tell you at once that was the year of the "boycott," using the English word to describe an event that took most people by surprise and yet changed the village forever. By then the Green Revolution was well under way, moving down India's Punjab Plain, the land of the five rivers, in the same path foreign invaders had always followed. Western farm science was inexorably moving southward—Ford and Massey-Ferguson tractors, laboratory-bred grain, irrigation, chemical fertilizer, hydroelectric and deisel power. What few realized was that this quiet conquest would do more to change the face of village India than the combined forces of the British (who alone came by sea), the Moghuls, Mongols, Alexander's Greeks, and the Aryans ever did. To many in the outside world, the Green Revolution of the late 1960s, doubling the wheat production of India and Pakistan and rescuing a good many people from starvation, was a lucky one-time shot, something that came and went. Even Ghungrali's villagers, until the boycott of 1970, did not realize that what was happening to them was not a condition but a movement, not a harbor but a voyage just begun.

For the boycott ended the *jajmani* system, the traditional exchange of labor and services for grain and fodder. It was more than just an economic arrangement between landlord and laborer in rural Punjab; rather it was a form of social contract, rooted in caste, and perhaps the most important of the delicate social balances which have always held village society together in India.

Sikh religious teaching condemns the Hindu caste system which divides Indian society into racial compartments and excludes from many benefits the untouchables or Harijans, the children of God as Mahatma Gandhi named them.

The Granth Sahib, the Sikh sacred scripture, is very specific about this:

The Hindus say there are four castes
But they are all of one seed.
'Tis like the clay of which pots are made
In diverse shapes and forms—yet the clay is the same.
So are the bodies of men made of the same five elements.
How can one amongst them be high and another low?

Yet caste was rigidly practiced in Ghungrali as elsewhere in Sikh Punjab. There were three castes: the Jats or farmer-landlords like Charan, Basant Singh, and old Pritam, or Charan's cousin Dhakel; the Chamars or traditional leather-workers, now almost all farm laborers like Mukhtar; and the Mazhbis or barn-cleaners and sweepers like Poondi and his son Bawa. All were Sikhs; they prayed together at Ghungrali's *gurdwara*. But the Chamars and Mazhbis suffered constant discrimination outside the temple; they could not intermarry with Jats nor eat at their homes on an equal basis—they sat on the earthen floor, while the Jats sat on chairs or string cots—nor would Jats ever eat or drink in a Harijan's house.

There was also a racial difference. The Punjabi Jats are relative latecomers to India; an ancient ethnic group of Scythian origin, they did not migrate into northern India from the plains of Russia until the time of Julius Caesar and did not fully occupy the Punjab's farming

One of the landless field laborers.

land until the collapse of the Moghul Empire in the late nineteenth century. Originally a nomadic people, displacing less warlike rivals on the great Eurasian steppes, winning richer pastures for their flocks and establishing themselves as overlords of settled agricultural populations, even today the Punjabi Jats retain some of the old warrior spirit, glorying unabashedly in the strength of arms, in destruction of foes, and in the number of their cattle. These Punjabis never came under the domination of the priests and holy men of the Gangetic plain who succeeded elsewhere in India in setting the whole spiritual, life-negating tone of intellectual life. Of all Indians, the Jats seem the most strikingly European in appearance and character.

Ghungrali's Mazhbis, with their short, muscular stature and dark brown skin, were descended from India's aboriginal Dravidian race. The Chamars were of mixed blood; some of them were tall and fair as Jats, suggesting they were bastard Jats denied their birthright.

At the heart of the *jajmani* system were the terms of harvest. Under centuries-old custom, the landless Harijan laborer received a fixed part of every wheat crop he helped to harvest—traditionally the twentieth bale—which was enough to feed his family for a year. He also received the right to cut grass for his cow or buffalo on the Jats' land undisturbed. This worked out so that every Harijan family had enough wheat and milk, the two staples of the Punjabi diet.

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In 1970, five days before Baisaki, the Punjabi New Year on April 13th when the harvest traditionally began, the Jats gathered at the village *gurdwara* to fix the terms of labor during the cutting, baling, and threshing of the wheat. Basant Singh and his men, the richer, more progressive landlords of Ghungrali, declared they had suffered a financial loss under the traditional system. They proposed the laborer's share of the wheat be reduced from the twentieth to the thirtieth of every bale cut and tied. The Harijans responded with anger and dismay. They sent the Jats a declaration saying, "We Harijans do not agree to reap your crops on the thirtieth part. We will only accept the twentieth bale or fifty to eighty kilos of grain per acre depending upon the crop."

"Grains we won't give," Basant Singh responded and after another meeting, the Jats declared in a message over the *gurdwara* loudspeaker, "No Harijan can enter our fields. No Harijans can take grass from our land to feed their cattle." The boycott began, though it was agreed both Jats and Harijans would meet at the *gurdwara* on the morning of Baisaki to discuss a compromise.

At first few of the Jats took the idea of a third of the villagers boycotting the rest very seriously. Charan said, "It is impossible. We won't be able to survive in this village without a settlement. It is all foolishness."

His old father, Sadhu Singh harumphed, "It is all a fuss over nothing. You'll see. Once the wheat gets ripe and starts shattering, how the Jats and Harijans will go running to each other!"

Old Pritam had misgivings. "What we have sown we shall reap also," he warned.

Basant Singh dismissed such sentiments impatiently. He declared, "Either we shift to machinery or get labor from outside. It's the only

solution. Some say this boycott is harmful to the village. But the poor are making more money than ever and spending it on hashish, tobacco, and liquor. Their real enemies are their bad habits."

"If the Jats boycott us, then we must boycott them," Mukhtar told Charan. "It means I cannot work for you any longer."

Despite gathering tension in Ghungrali, ordinary life went on. The afternoon before Baisaki the Jats traditionally invited farmers from all the neighboring villages to compete in a bullock cart race. It was a splendid day, the wheat had ripened into a burnt gold, the sky was a pale blue, and there was dust; by three o'clock the dirt road beside Basant Singh's fields was lined with hundreds of men and boys, Jats and Harijans, who for the day had put aside their differences, both cheering alike the participants from Ghungrali. In the dusty luminescent light the sun looked almost white and everything was in beautiful pastel color: the wheat, the sky, the trees, the men in their clean white shirts and yellow, pink, pale green, red, and lavender turbans. The sense of community was very strong and the Jat-Harijan distinction temporarily forgotten. This was to be the last bullock cart race Ghungrali would ever have.

"Clear the way! The first cart is coming now!" rose the shouts. "O, come with pomp and show," declared an announcer over a loudspeaker at the finish line. "Come with courage, come, O Bhajan Singh of Mal Majra village, come!" In a great cloud of dust and pounding hooves and cheers, the first cart rolled down the 11-acre-long course.

Charan and his young cousin Dhakel had goaded Sindar, a poor relation who worked with Dhakel, to enter the race. Sindar was a cheerful braggart, a tall, lanky young man who seldom stopped talking, mostly about his exploits. All morning long at Dhakel's well, just down the road from Charan's, Sindar had fussed about importantly, washing and brushing the bullock and swigging some homemade liquor he and Dhakel had made from sugar cane. "O, today you shall run like the wind," he told Dhakel's bullocks, for he possessed none of his own. Breathing deep to swell his flat, hairy chest, he boasted, "Ah, today I shall crush someone under the hooves of my bullocks. I shall ride them across the wheat fields like the wind."

When Dhakel told him he should go home and rest, the nervous Sindar was indignant. "O, what should I do there? Should I grab someone's penis? We'll go straight to the race."

Dhakel laughed. "You'll break your leg."

"When you have to fight a battle, why worry about your arms and legs," Sindar declared grandly. "I don't know about the others. But no one in this village can beat me." A crow in a nearby tree croaked derisively at this and Sindar cursed it, "Kill that bastard, Dhakel. I'll rape his mother." Dhakel laughed. "Just hit him with a big stone, then he'll understand."

Charan and his friends were already drunk when it came Sindar's turn to race. One of them, red-faced and staggering, led the others down the track, waving a bottle and crying out, "For God's sake, please clear the way, brethren. You are masters of your wills. It is your village. But clear the way."

Near the finish line the announcer's voice was deafening. "Bring that red flag up, just watch the red flag. These bullocks are running eleven acres. That is something. Run! Go! *Shabash, shabash*! O, green and red turbans, please clear the track. Here comes Mukhtar Singh of Jarg. One minute and twenty-nine seconds. Now it's number twelve, Ajit Singh of Majari.Look how the bullocks come! Like air! Look with your full eyes wide open but clear the way my friends.... Slow! One minute and forty-five seconds. Now *Sardar Sahib*, take the red flag up. Our starter today is an old army officer and knows how. He can kill a battalion for just one flag. *Shabash*! *Shaba-a-ash*! Sindar Singh of Ghungrali is coming. He's running like a railway train. Look at the man over there. He's making mischief. O, black-turbaned man, don't make mischief. *Shabash*! The cart is coming at full speed! Friends, clear the way. Sindar Singh, Ghungrali-wallah is coming! See how he flies... Oop! What's happened? Friends, clear the way. Stop running this way and that. What? Ah-h-h-h, the bullocks are running toward Bhambadi across the wheat field! Clear the way! We can't see! Friends, Sindar's cart has left the road. His bullocks are heading across the wheat field. O, look! Now he's turned them around again. Oh, he's bringing them back. They're back on the road. Clear the way, clear the way! The bullocks are coming with great dignity. Don't worry, friends, they'll get here some day. *Shabash, Sha-a-a-aba-a-a-a-ash*! Sindar Singh, Ghungrali-wallah...."

Sindar's cart finally rumbled across the finish line to a roar of shouts and laughter. Charan's voice carried over the din. "Seeing Sindar race, I get drunk without liquor!"

Humiliated, Sindar went off to get drunk by himself after the race. But the next day, braiding rope for the harvest under the banyan tree, he was back in his old form. He told Charan, "Our game was wrong. The people frightened us. They kept standing in the road. The fault lies with those bastards. Those who blocked the way. I'll rape their mothers. In the evening I'll show you I can come in one minute and fifteen seconds, faster than all of them."

"At least you're up and around," Charan told him. "If you had really lost the game, you'd be in bed the rest of your life."

"Sindar has been having diarrhea all day becaused he lost," joked old Poondi, who was working with them.

"Why should I have diarrhea? Even if my bullock cart falls in a well I won't have diarrhea."

Several Jats passed, going to join the village council at the *gurdwara* to meet the Harijans.

"Maybe the Harijans will move away, get jobs in the city," said Sindar.

Old Poondi grinned. "Never mind. City life is good."

"Take your children in big baskets if you go there," Sindar joked. "When they go hungry you can always throw them on the railway tracks."

"Never mind," Poondi retorted. "A law is going to be enforced where we'll only work eight hours a day. Then we'll apply to the government for a paved road and we'll buy bicycles and go to town every evening." He laughed. "You'll see Sindar's face after harvesting. He will look as black as a railroad guard. This time half the Jats will die of hard work. We'll make them real skinny, cutting their own wheat. They have too much fat on them anyway."

Sindar laughed. "When the harvest comes, you'll get your bottom torn by stubble. Work faster. Don't let your shadow fall on me. I'll get lazy like you. "

A group of about 20 Harijans arrived at the *gurdwara* about noon. Surjit Singh, a dignified, white-bearded former village chief who was Basant Singh's chief lieutenant, spoke for the Jats. "Now come forward with your demands and conditions," he addressed the Harijans.

A bare-headed, clean-shaven youth, chosen to speak for the Harijans because he had finished school, came forward and said in a nervous voice, "We want according to the field, that we should be paid for reaping according to the crop of each field."

"We can't go to each field to decide the worth of the crop," Basant Singh snapped testily.

"Each Jat knows his own wheat crop," the youth persisted.

Surjit hastened to speak in a more reasonable tone. "The Jats want that they should be giving less. You want more. We have to decide where the common area of agreement lies. Traditionally the wheat of our village has been cut for the twentieth part of the crop. But now new varieties of wheat have been introduced. If you go to Basant Singh's fields you can cut cheaply because the crop is rich, but those with poorer crops will suffer." For a time the two sides debated, the Harijans wanting to be paid field by field, the Jats demanding a general rate.

Basant Singh spoke up again. "If you don't want to reach any settlement, well, that's up to you. You may do what you like and we will do what we like. An individual rate for each farm would be too much trouble."

An older Harijan spoke up, his voice betraying an edge of anger. "It can't be any more trouble than this village is facing now. We can't go into your fields. We can't cut grass for our cows and buffaloes...."

Basant Singh interrupted. "If you will not accept our terms, there is no reason to talk further." For a moment there was a stunned silence as if neither side wanted to speak the words that could mean a final break. Charan couldn't believe what was happening and old Pritam shook his head in dismay.

Basant Singh bowed his head and raised his hands, palms folded together in the formal Sikh gesture. "It is all over," he said in a harsh voice. "Finished. Now you are free to do what you will and we are free to do what we will. Sat Sri Akal!"

That night Charan, Dhakel, and Sindar got drunk at Charan's well, cursing Basant Singh for causing the trouble; they had learned he had secretly purchased a new Dutch combine, the first in the village. It was to arrive for the harvest; Basant Singh would not even need to hire harvesters himself "There are real hypocrites in this village," Charan cursed angrily. In the afternoon a police inspector had come to see the village council. He told them, "Don't strangle these poor people. Don't kill them. I don't say that the Jats should be giving with four hands, but don't make the Harijans starve either. I want that this trouble should end with a little adjustment on both sides."

But Basant Singh had been adamant. He told the inspector, "We have already sent men to bring in laborers from outside. We have all contributed money, and when they come where shall we put them to work? We no longer need our village Harijans." As Mukhtar put it, cheap labor was Basant Singh's game, even if it destroyed Ghungrali's way of life.

At the well, after several rounds from a bottle, Sindar proposed the sensible men of the village stand up to Basant Singh and his faction of big landlords. "If we could get Harijans from Ghungrali to harvest," said Dhakel, who was slightly built and did not look forward to cutting all his wheat himself, "I'd pay one bale after twenty-two or even twenty. We don't want those Hindus from outside. You can't depend on them. Anyone from outside our own village is not dependable."

Charan laughed. "That Basant Singh." He took a swig and passed the bottle. "I think he drinks in secret and is also an opium addict."

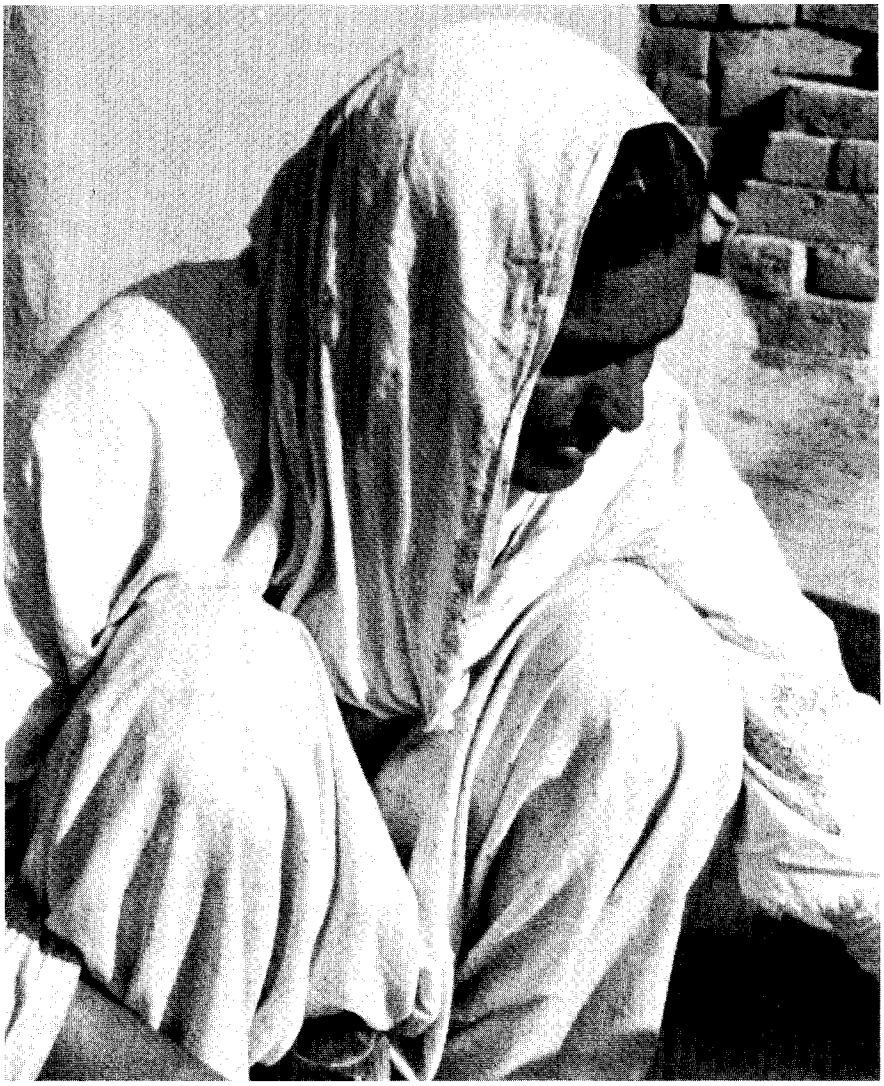
"In the morning he takes opium and in the evening he takes liquor," agreed Sindar, who had scarcely ever laid eyes on Basant Singh. Charan produced another bottle from his haystack and for some time, as they drank one round after the other, they enjoyed abusing Basant Singh.

"You can't really know about a rich man," Charan told them. "A poor man, when he need opium, he has to run and borrow money."

"Basant Singh used to abuse Harijans, telling them, 'You bastard, you must vote for my faction or else.'"

"Basant Singh is his own air."

"He is making the lives of the Harijans a living hell. The bastard is arrogant and proud."



"Forget Basant Singh. Let's go to America."

Dhakel's voice was suddenly serious. "Our America is here in Ghungrali...."

Charan laughed. "It is all the fault of that star with a tail. It wanted to show its power and chose Ghungrali as its victim."

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The boycott stayed and Ghungrali's 160 Harijan families went out each day to harvest the wheat of the surrounding villages. Basant Singh had his combine but most of the remaining 64 Jat landlords were compelled to hire migrant laborers from the poorest regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states; soon the village was full of these migrants, small, brown-skinned, emaciated-looking men, dressed in tattered *dhotis* and *lungis*, smoking their bidis and talking in an alien tongue.

At the last moment Ghungrali's few families of barn-cleaning Mazhbis did not join their fellow Harijans in the boycott. Charan managed to engage 12 of them and in his fields at least the harvest moved forward in the traditional fashion. By now a gray haze of dust had spread across the village sky, hot winds unceasingly stirred the ripe wheat, the sun had turned a livid white and the Mazhbis tied rags over their mouths and noses to keep out the dust. They cut the wheat as Punjabis always had, slashing their sickles at the ripe stems, grasping one handful at a time, advancing slowly, rocking from side to side on their haunches and moving steadily and rhythmically, to the end of a field, crouched low in a wide, spread out line, nearly buried in the wheat. All day long the sickles flashed in the white sun, all together making the same sound: *grrch, grrch, grrch*. As their muscles grew tired, the more the younger men cursed and joked and told obscene stories, and the quieter the older men became.

Often, stopping to bale the sheaves, they would race in two shouting, bantering teams. "*Shabash*, boys, we have to show our strength to these old men." "Hurry, we must beat the others; they're catching up." "You'll see," shouted Bawa, old Poondi's son. "We'll make them spit like stallions." "You hold mine and I'll hold yours. No, Bawa, I mean the rope." "O, the rope broke! I rape its mother!" "Come, boys, show your strength! Make the parrots fly! *Shabash, shaba-a-a-sh*!"

Charan, who could not mow wheat himself because of his asthma, never seemed so full of energy and life. He ran back and forth from the well, carrying water, tea, brown sugar cakes, pails of buttermilk, *chapattis*, kettles of potato and pea curry; he was tireslessly good humored, as if his jokes and genial good will alone sustained the brutal labor. On the night the last field was cut and the sheaves gathered at the threshing ground, his wife roasted a pig and Charan brought out great quantities of freshly brewed liquor. The exhausted, hungry Mazhbi harvesters fell to eating and drinking like birds of prey, leering and seizing and stuffing and swallowing it all down as fast as they could, for few had meat but once or twice a year. After eating, many sat as if paralyzed from the food and liquor, with foolishly happy expressions on their faces. It was soon dark; as the fire from the hearth flicked red shadows on the Mazhbis' faces, the world seemed to have shrunk to their circle, the star-filled sky and the croaking of angry frogs from the edge of Charan's now stubble fields. "Let me serve my friends!" Charan would bellow, very drunk himself,

and in the glistening faces of Mazhbis, in the warmth of the liquor, in the din of shouts and laughter it was if he had recovered the vitality and strength of his youth.

"Drink up!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Enjoy, for we only live once." And he rose to his full height, and waving a bottle and so bursting with feeling water came into his eyes, he cried, "I'm not only happy. I'm super-happy. Happiest of all the world. I'm so happy I can jump up to the sky!" And the Mazhbis exclaimed, "The way Charan treats us we can sacrifice our lives for him. He is a prince among men. Yes, where men work, there is God." And Charan would return with more liquor, shouting, "Have you ever seen so many bottles? These are the young ones of the last. Who wants more?"

Soon Charan was threshing his wheat, the first to do so in the village. In the adjoining fields, Dhakel, Sindar, and one Mazhbi were cutting all their 10 acres themselves. Dhakel, soon exhausted, worked quietly and determinedly, but Sindar showed surprising stamina and a zest for work. Throughout the scorching days, Sindar kept cutting with his sickle with a vigor that surpassed the rest; perhaps he wore everybody down by never pausing in his endless running monologue. "Work with an energy! Show your strength! God has made our bones of steel! Whatever happens, we will keep mowing. O, I rape their sisters. After this we must get drunk for two days. Show your strength, men! O, I remember one time in Isaru. We were threshing. A real good girl came along to beg some grain and she brought two more girls back the next day. We had three trips each. How they were jumping like springs underneath! All were happy and all were the gainers. There was another time in Mal Majra village...."

So despite the boycott the wheat was harvested, the sickles flashing, cutting it down stalk by stalk, row by row, field by field and acre by acre, until gradually Ghungrali was surrounded by bare, flat countryside with only stubble fields and the green-brown foliage of naked trees.

One evening in this spacious, empty landscape as old Pritam was returning to the village on his bullock cart, he passed Mukhtar, Charan's former Harijan worker. The harvest had come and gone and Pritam was ashamed that the rift between Ghungrali's Jats and Harijans remained unhealed. "It is not good, the way we are treating each other," he told Mukhtar. "But I think it will all be settled very soon."

Mukhtar did not reply; he wanted no sympathy from a Jat. "Now you go to other villages," Pritam went on. "We mind it very much. Look, we Jats have to feed your children. Your daughters are my daughters and your sons, my sons. We must see that they are fed."

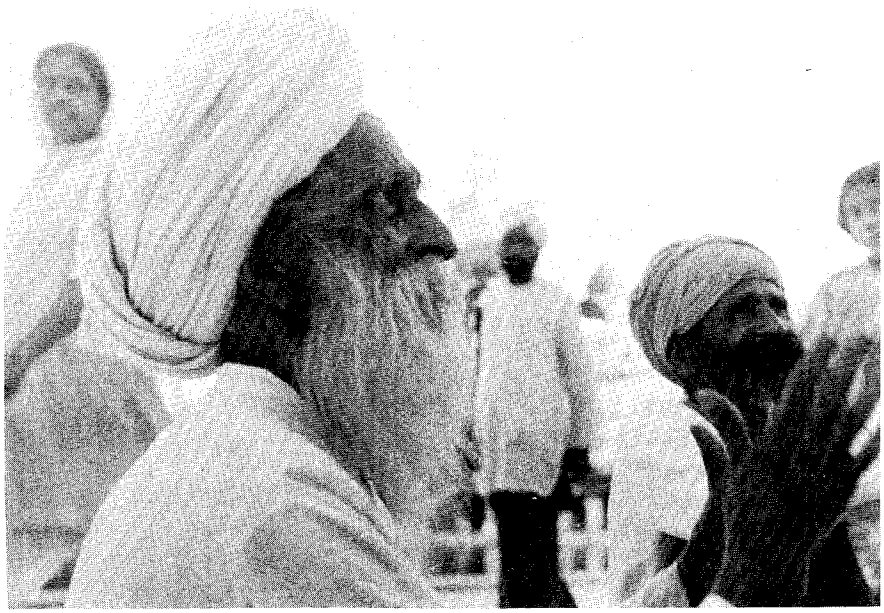
"Yes, you are right, *Sardarji*," Mukhtar finally answered; he himself was now convinced the old *jajmani* system was gone for good. "But it is written that we should cut the wheat of another village."

"Yes, it is written. But it will be all right in a few more days, my son."

* * * * *

In the late 1960s, the Green Revolution was going to solve all the problems of India's agriculture. In the early 1970s the fashionable view was that it had failed, leaving the rich richer and the poor poorer. Both judgments were wrong. What has actually happened is steady progress and what began in Punjabi villages like Ghungrali is gradually spreading southward into a much larger region of India. Before returning to Ghungrali eight years later to see what happened to Charan, Mukhtar, Basant Singh, Dhakel, Pritam, Sindar and the rest, let us first take a look at India itself and where its agriculture seems to be heading. In terms of technology alone, the picture looks remarkably and unexpectedly promising.

Soothsaying is, of course, an Indian specialty. Anybody trying to tell its fortune in the year 2000 is likely to come up with one of two possible forecasts. The first—the more conventional wisdom—is more of the same: an India with more industry, more people (900-950 million), and more food (180-185 million tons), but essentially the same old ant heap of hungry millions living from hand to mouth. This is the India the Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute had in mind when it predicted in early 1978 that India would run 20 million tons short of grain by 1990.



Praying Sikhs in India.

Another view postulates 900 million people but has them consuming more while the country exports surplus grain from an annual production of 240-360 million tons. This India would have 250 million of its 350 million cropped acres under irrigation, enabling it to triple crop with rotations of high-yield, fast-maturing wheat, rice, and nitrogen-fixing pulses (reducing the need for fertilizer) and allowing farm families of 5 or 6 persons to feed themselves and earn $500 a year besides on just 2 or 3 acres.

This second India would meet its energy requirements partly through biogas (60,000 cow dung gas plants providing both cooking fuel and fertilizer are in use already), trees (a World Bank-inspired $1.5-$3 billion plan to plant 5-10 acres of fast-growing eucalyptus and pines in each of India's 576,000 villages—already successfully done in one Punjab district—is in the works), and solar energy. The pride and joy of this India, though it may not even need it, would be a new $30-$40 billion hydroelectric-dam-reservoir-canal complex to channel the melting Himalayan snow of Nepal down to the now parched, flood-prone Ganges plain, transforming two of India's poorest states, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, into a granary that alone could feed all India.

In the late 1970s, the main prophets of this science fiction-like picture were such hardheaded and internationally respected agricultural scientists as M.S. Swaminathan and H.K. Jain; a former World Bank economist, and the Janata government's idea man on India's Planning Commission, Raj Krishna; and the 82-year-old Prime Minister himself, Morarji Desai. All of them spoke of India's agricultural future in these terms in interviews I had in Delhi in summer 1978; Mr. Desai told me, "We know now we can produce twice as much food in the next 20 years, maybe almost 3 times as much." But this will not happen, he hastened to add, because then India might be faced with a food glut. Another convert to optimism is Norman Borlaug, the Nobel laureate whose Mexican-bred dwarf wheat transformed villages like Ghungrali and rescued India in the 1960s. After a tour of rural India in March 1978, Dr. Borlaug declared India's advances in agricultural technology the past two years were "amazing." (Indeed Dr. Borlaug told me he didn't want to be too optimistic in public so as to discourage any complacency.)

It has always been evident that once India had the technology and the right government policies, its agriculture would be ready to take off. The resources have always been there. India has more unused agricultural potential (land, water, sun, and energy) than any other big country. It has exactly the same amount of cropped land as the United States (350 million acres including the land set aside when production gets too high). It has more irrigated acres than China (137.5 million to 100 million-plus), and a far greater potential for expanding irrigation (up to 270 million acres of which 167 million are planned to be brought under irrigation by 1983).

Once 270 million acres are irrigated, actual land use could rise to something like 400-500 million acres or more through multiple-cropping—enough to sustain a largely agricultural population of 900 million-plus who consume enough milk so that optimum per head consumption would be 180 kilograms per year (as compared to 150 kilograms in India in 1978 and 200 kilograms consumed by the average, nonmilk drinking Chinese.) The Himalayan water scheme now being investigated by the Food and Agricultural Organization would irrigate 6-7 million additional acres a year compared with 3-5 million a year brought under irrigation the past 10 years. As a tropical country India has a great solar energy future for the obvious reason that it has a lot of sun.

Peculiarly, unlike Egypt or China, Indian civilization had no tradition of fertilizing the earth; 10,000 years of continuous cultivation have left it with very poor soil. The use of fertilizer is just beginning; the 4.2 million tons of chemical fertilizer used in the mid 1970s are not much more than Egypt applies (though India has 58 times more cropped land). About half of some 12 million tons of organic fertilizer is used as cooking fuel (though the spread of biogas plants and more trees could quickly correct this). The result is that India's yields are extremely low (a fourth of Japan's in rice, half of Holland's in wheat), another slack that can be quickly rectified.

Experts like Dr.Borlaug feel that while China has better extension services and a better distribution system to insure that no Chinese goes hungry, India is probably ahead on agricultural research. A huge new scientific agricultural establishment has grown up, particularly since 1965, with 21 agricultural universities and 30 research institutions. Under a new, revamped extension system, India plans to put one well-trained agricultural graduate in the field for every 800 cultivators.

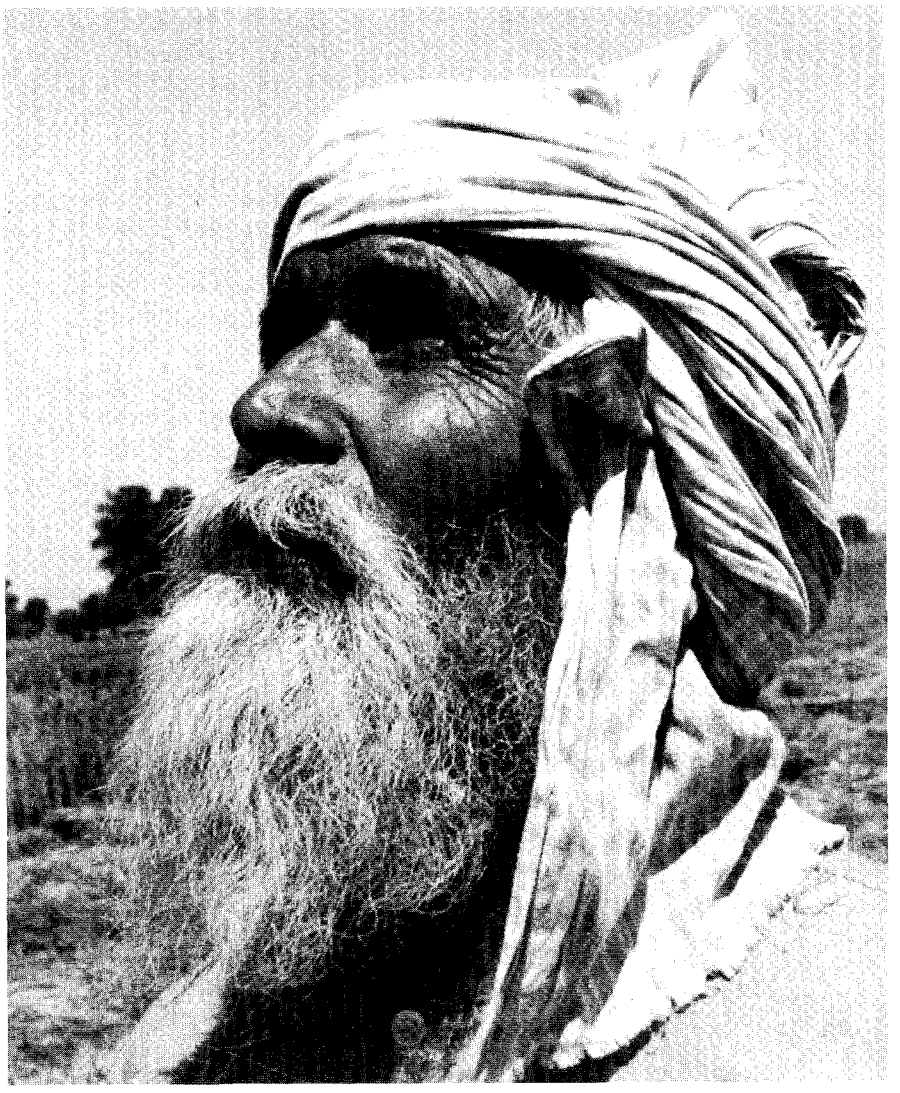
In Morarji Desai India had a leader (admittedly a very old and physically frail one whose Janata coalition was at best shaky) who had had a hand in running the economy for many of the 31 years since independence and who had long ago decided what he would do in agriculture if he ever had the power. His strategy, set down in his autobiography published in 1974, was fourfold: (1) bring down India's ceilings on irrigated land to something around the 2.4-10 acres of postwar Japan (India's 12-18 acre ceiling on such land, Desai felt, was too high and has yet to be enforced); (2) spread irrigation quickly to 50-60 percent of India's 350 million cropped acres; (3) spread multiple cropping with the new fast-maturing grains; and (4) encourage and protect cottage industry (India's big industries employ only 5.7 million people whereas cottage industries employ a vast number, 10 million of them operating handlooms alone).

As Prime Minister, Mr. Desai planned to invest $40 billion in rural development and agriculture over a five year period, especially in putting 42.5 million more acres under irrigation and investing in the power and pumps to run it (just over half in small canals and tubewells, the rest in bigger dam projects). The government tried to restrict credit from government-owned banks to farmers with 6.5 acres or less. It also sought to create jobs for landless peasants through huge public works projects on Chinese lines. Some 500 of India's rural "blocks" (consisting of about 100 villages or 100,000 villagers) received special help with know-how and marketing as well as money to buy cows, pigs, goats, and small vegetable plots. If the new government carries through on the basis of original plans, this program will be enlarged to cover 2,000 more blocks by 1984-85 and all 6,000 in the country by 1990.

In a sense the Indians are holding their breath; an agricultural revolution on the scale of America's, or even China's, seems to be too good to be true. Scientists like Swaminathan and Jain told me they feared the extension services would be too slow. The planners were worried that the bureaucracy will be too corrupt and inept ("What if 90 percent of the moneys goes into the pockets of corrupt bureaucrats?" Raj Krishna asked).

But no Indian with any technical knowledge doubts that a transformation is on the way. It is not merely that after the third good monsoon in a row, food production is up to 120 million tons with a record 25 million tons stockpiled after the spring 1978 wheat harvest. Confidence stems from what Indian technology has come up with and what India ought to be able to do with its land, water, sun, and energy supply.

My own feeling is that the big question is not whether India's agriculture revolution will come. As more effective demand gets into the hands of the peasants it will come all right. But what about its probable cultural consequences? For this we don't have to engage in soothsaying; in Ghungrali this tomorrow is already here.



Indian farmer in the Punjab.

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April 1978. Early one morning a springless, creaking bullock cart.... Well, the bullock cart is still there, but these days it's got rubber tires and rolls smoothly out of Ghungrali on a newly paved road, past a crowd of commuters waiting under the banyan tree for the new express buses to the cities of Ludhiana and Chandigarh. A steady flow of bicycles and scooters moves east to factory and warehouse jobs in small towns along the Grand Trunk Road. Some days there may be a few cars; Basant Singh bought Ghungrali's first one last year.

In the cart is Charan's 18-year-old son, Kuldeep, a handsome, husky youth who got married a few months ago and these days does most of the farming. He is strong and enjoys field work, having dropped out of school after the sixth year, a blessing to Charan as year-round Harijan laborers are no longer to be found. In 1970 I feared the Harijans would be reduced to a rural proletariat or urban migrants. They have and they like it. Fully 80 percent of the men from Ghungrali's 160 Harijan families now commute to jobs in mills and factories in the nearby towns, making bicycle trips of 10-15 miles each way daily. The boycott turned out to be a permanent break.

Mukhtar, Charan's old laborer, has prospered; last year he bought a small plot of land and built himself a new house at the edge of the Harijans' quarter. He also has two bicycles, a buffalo for milk, and a big Japanese transistor radio. Says Mukhtar, "It's better to work in town. We get more money. We work only eight hours. And we are free. These Jats no longer rule over us. They can no longer treat us like animals. Now I can go out and work and talk to people freely. One thing is certain: I'll do my best to give my son a good education. If he fails to become an educated gentleman, then he may be a factory worker or mechanic. But he'll never be a laborer for the Jats.

A few of the Harijans voice regrets at the passing of Ghungrali's old way of life. But very few. Banta, a Harijan laborer in his sixties, tells me, "If the Jats paid more generously we could not go outside to work. Have I not been tilling their fields for 50 years? Once the university gave Basant Singh ten shirts as prizes for a wheat crop I had helped him to raise. I asked him for one, but he refused to give it. He is so greedy. These days the Jats, those who have become drunkards or eat opium, sometimes even refuse to pay their workers, something that never happened in the old days. It costs too much time and money to go to the police. We poor people cannot afford it. So we leave it to God and go our own way. He will punish the Jats, not us."

Young Kuldeep, as we ride the bullock cart to Charan's fields, speaks proudly of the many changes in the village. Now Ghungrali has 107 tubewells, all electrified (at night you think you're in suburban Chicago). There are 40 tractors, two privately owned small Dutch combines and more—giant German combines—come on hire during the harvest. The village uses more than 800 tons of chemical fertilizer a year, many Jats are installing sophisticated underground pipe irrigation to reduce evaporation, others *ghobar* biogas plants to provide both cooking fuel and organic fertilizer. Rice was sown for the first time two years ago and now has surpassed wheat as Ghungrali's biggest cash crop. This year, Kuldeep says, Ghungrali will start triple cropping, in a wheat-pulse-rice rotation made possible by a new 60-day lentil, *moong*. Developed by scientists in Delhi, *moong* fixes nitrogen from the air into the soil, cutting down the need for fertilizer by two-thirds. Even the green fields of wheat look different and I realize the stalks are much shorter, barely reaching your knees. "That's *Hira*," Kuldeep says and he identifies all the new varieties—2009, 711, 334, HD 1982, only PV 18 is familiar.

"After the boycott," Kuldeep goes on, "the Harijans never came back to work for us. Even now they are taking jobs in town, working in the oil and rice mills, loading wheat at the storage depots. Some do this loading and lifting work. It's hard but high paying. They have become too greedy. Because they get 10, 15, 20 rupees a day." Kuldeep says Ghungrali's Jats still pay five rupees as a daily field wage; I wonder if he realizes it is exactly the same amount they were getting eight years ago. No wonder they have abandoned the Jats' fields *en masse.*

Kuldeep is cutting cane to make sugar; like most of the Jats he relies on hired migrant workers from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. He calls them *bhaiyas*, a condescending term used by Punjabis for the slight, dark-skinned Hindus from the Gangetic plain. Charan's youngest son, Nindar, 16, who has failed his examinations, works with us. Except for Kuldeep's steady orders, "Take this," "go there, *bhaiya*," there is almost no conversation as the men work and none of the old good humored banter there used to be between Charan and the Harijans. Once, when Kuldeep goes to the well shed for some tools, one of the Biharis tells me, "Once we go to our village, we'll never come back. We don't feel at home here. These Punjabi landlords expect us to work 12, 14 hours a day without stopping." I soon find out even this supply of migrant laborers is drying up; fewer come each year and more and more Jats are forced to do their own field work.

Charan comes to the well, arriving on one of the family's six bicycles. He has taken his tractor and threshing machine into town for repairs and says such tasks seem to occupy all his time these days; the field work is left in Kuldeep's hands. Charan's beard is now gray, he takes better care of his dress and with his height, lean face, and broad shoulders, he is staid and important looking; you can already glimpse the patriarch he will become. This past year he has arranged marriages for Kuldeep and his oldest son, Sukhdev, now a policeman; a fourth son, Kulwant, has just finished college and a daughter is in her first year. Charan"s burdens have become quite middle class and with two daughters-in-law in the house and soon to become a grandfather, Charan no longer drinks nor even laughs and jokes much in his old easy way.

This is soon evident when, like his father eight years ago, he finds a drum of crushed sugar residue hidden in the shed; Kuldeep had hoped to make some liquor. Charan pours it out into a drainage canal, saying sternly, "If you boys want to drink you can purchase liquor from the shop, one, two, or three bottles, as you like, but I will never allow a son of mine to make this stuff at home." Kuldeep grins over his shoulder; perhaps he too remembers.

"These boys don't want to work, they only want to make liquor," Charan complains to me. "When the government is prohibiting it, why should these boys prepare wine? It is one and the same thing if you betray your house or your government. There are so many things better than wine, I don't understand why they take it." It seems more like a generation has passed, not just eight years.

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In the village the changes are more subtle but just as far reaching. Almost all the Jat families have sent one or two sons or daughters to college, creating a serious problem of unemployed graduates in the Punjab. Emigration is one solution, though no longer an easy one, and remittances from educated children abroad arrive postmarked Tehran, Kuwait, Munich, St. Paul, and Yuba City. A growing number of the Jat houses have screened windows and a few, indoor plumbing. Two new doctors come to Ghungrali every day on motorscooters and there is a resident nurse who is high on Vitamin-B-Complex injections. Ghungrali so far resists TV, though it is common in the nearby towns, perhaps following Basant Singh's argument that it will be a bad influence on the young. Yet in some ways Ghungrali seems more in touch than even New Delhi; Kuldeep, shyly, one day when Charan was gone, brought out a copy of *Playboy*, sent by a cousin in Canada. There is hardly a Harijan household without one or two Japanese radios and the first two Harijans graduated from university in 1977 (and unlike most of the Jats got jobs, since the Indian government reserves 35 percent of civil posts for them).

Charan, like many of the villagers, is uneasy about just where this roller coaster rush into the future is taking Ghungrali. He says debts are rising, from an average of $1,000-$2,000 per Jat family to between $5,000 and $10,000 now. But so are assets; an average Jat farm with 15 acres is now worth—land, house, machinery and all—about $50,000-$60,000 at Indian prices. So far five farmers with small holdings have been forced to sell out and many more fear bankruptcy when their mortgages fall due. The richer farmers are buying up land when they can evade a legal 18-acre ceiling by distributing titles among family members and an enclosure movement may be hard to stop. Charan says that where you could once do well with 10 acres and have a tubewell, tractor, bullocks and cows, threshing machine, and afford 2 hired laborers, you now need 15 acres.

Surjit Singh, who supported Basant Singh in the 1970 boycott, now contends, "We should not have small farms in Ghungrali. We should have big farms. Fifty to 100 acres are needed to support a tractor. For the past eight years we are all in debt and can never repay. The smaller farmers, those under 10 acres, must sell their land."

Basant Singh, who recently bought 20 acres more, goes even further: "Even 100 acres is too small. To really mechanize, you should go to 1,000 acres. And we've got to mechanize; it's the only solution to our labor problem." (If Surjit Singh and Basant Singh got their way, they would be the only landlords in Ghungrali, whose people, now numbering 1,644, have 1,500 cultivated acres among them.) Though Basant Singh has always been hospitable and even gracious to me (he keeps copious records and is the main source for statistics in Ghungrali), the sheer greed of such Jats is astonishing. After a hailstorm damaged half the wheat crop in 1976, the government distributed emergency relief in Ghungrali; the Jats took theirs but tried to prevent the Harijans from getting an allotted 40 rupees per person; in the end the local police intervened but even then each Harijan received only 25 rupees. The Jats have repeatedly frustrated government attempts to allot each Harijan family a small plot of ground to grow fodder and 18 acres of Ghungrali's land, supposedly reserved by law for Harijans, is half of it rented to Jats.

Even humorous old Poondi, the Mazhbi who has spent his life cleaning the Jats' barns, voices a new resentment: "We used to be dying the death of dogs. Slaving in the fields while those Jats sat and enjoyed themselves. But life comes with work. If you work hard you live much. Once I cut wheat for a Jat and he served the other Jats meat. For me only potatoes and vegetables. I asked him, 'Why? Did we cut less?' But don't speak. Fear God. The British ruled India for a hundred years. Why did they not give the Harijans one or two acres each? What did we do wrong to them?"

Or as Poondi's son, Bawa, says, "Once Indira Gandhi sent money to us but the Jats objected. There was a plan to give us land, but again the Jats objected. They have land reserved for the Harijans, but they never give even one acre. The Jats always say, 'We are poor, we are poor.' They don't like to spend money. Well, soon we'll all be working in town and the Jats will be cleaning their own barns and doing their own field labor. The old way of life is gone in Ghungrali. Before I was against so much change. Now I like it. A man must move with the times."

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The harvest in 1978 bore no resemblance to the one in 1970. Not enough migrant laborers could be found, the men who ran the big German combines refused to come for anything less than 100 acres, and the Jats in desperation had to turn to the village Harijans, contracting out each wheat field for 70 kilograms of grain per acre, a payment far more favorable than the Harijans had asked the year of the boycott. Some Jats, as the harvest wore on, were even forced to pay 80, 90, or 100 kilograms per acre. The Harijans, by taking leave from their town jobs and putting their wives, sisters, and children to work mowing with sickles, were able to earn more than ever before. But unlike in the past, the Jats were not obligated to serve the harvesters food, tea, or even water. Nor were the Harijans obliged to carry the bales to the threshing ground as before. The separation that now characterized the village, where Jats and Harijans each went their own ways, spread to the fields.

Alone of the Jats, old Pritam Singh continued to serve his harvesters tea in the traditional manner. When I asked him why, he said, "Because they are poor." But Pritam grew furious when, now 80, he asked a

Harijan to help him lift a bale and the worker refused, saying it was not in the contract. Pritam was aghast at the way money values had so completely taken over. "That man used to be like a son to me," he said.

After the spectacle of the 1970 harvest, with large groups of men, Jat and Harijan, mowing together in good-natured, joking company, often competing to see whose sickle was the fastest, the 1978 harvest seemed dismal. Small clusters of Harijan families working silently. From the glint of their sickles, from their wet faces and backs and the way they gathered up the swaths after cutting, you could see how exhausting and oppressive the work in the intense heat was for the women and children. The Jats for the most part sat idle at their wells, taking no part, and Charan said many more were drinking liquor or eating opium than ever before. The whole life had gone out of it.

Mukhtar, his wife, and a small son, and three of Poondi's strapping boys, as well as three of his daughters (who kept to themselves, cutting in a separate place and modestly veiling their faces when I came around) cut Charan's wheat. Kuldeep did not join in at all, but kept to the wellyard, doing other tasks. Like Pritam, I resisted the change, assuming Charan's old role of water carrier and the Harijans shared their tea and meals with me. But Charan and his sons ate and drank separately at the well. My interpreter and I bought liquor in town and invited both sides for drinks in the evenings when the day's harvesting was over. But the old spirit was dead and could not be artificially revived.

Only Charan's cousin Dhakel, who wandered over from his adjoining fields to help Poondi's sons and me cut wheat, seemed to lament the Jat-Harijan estrangement; Sindar had bought a truck and gone away, Ghungrali has not had a bullock cart race for years, and Dhakel seemed lonesome. "Before, harvesting was the best time of the year," he said. "Everybody worked together as a family and we told jokes and raced to see who could cut the fastest. Now I've hired these Biharis. They don't even speak Punjabi. How can I work with them?" As the harvest days wore on, Dhakel stopped coming and we saw he was getting drunk every day, starting in the morning. Even so he managed to hire a Harijan family, headed by an old white-bearded Chamar named Munshi, to help the Biharis cut his wheat.

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"Dhakel's molested a little girl!" someone cries and roused from the early afternoon stupor I see Munshi and his son, both carrying sickles, running toward Dhakel's well. "Have you no daughter in your house?" Munshi shrieks. "My daughter was cutting wheat alone. Dhakel went there and seized her! He has done this to us! We are family members! We will not leave him alive!"

Dhakel staggers out of his wellhouse, shouting, "What happened?" Munshi's son is upon him, seizing his collar and pummeling him to his knees, shouting with rage, "Have you no sister! I'll not leave you alive! I'll pull your sister from your house and rape her! You have brought shame upon your house!"

"Who accuses me? Call her in my presence!"

A girl, not too young, perhaps 13 or 14, cowering behind in the field, goes forward. She is sobbing hysterically and points at Dhakel. Poondi, ahead, as we run from our well, shouts, "Tell us what happened!"

"He tried to seize me!" As she gestures toward Dhakel, Munshi's son raises his sickle and tries to rake it across Dhakel's face; at the same moment Munshi thrusts his sickle at Dhakel's ribs. Dhakel throws up his hands, wards off the blows and thrusts the sickles away. At once his hands start to bleed. "Stop it, stop it!" shrieks an old man, rushing from the wellhouse. It is Dhakel's father, Sarvan Singh, who is addicted to eating opium and seems to be in a stupor. Dhakel breaks away, springs back and, panting, gasps, "I can go to the temple and take God's oath I have not done anything!" Poondi and the other men pull Munshi and his son away, saying, "Leave this matter now and go home and call the village chief before somebody gets killed." "Leave it, leave it now," Sarvan Singh repeats and then incredibly adds, "Start cutting my fields."

This enrages Munshi even more, but the worst is over. As we pull him down the road, he shouts back, "I'll not cut your fields! I'll see that your son does not stay alive!"

"No, no," protests old Sarvan. "Forget this and start work now."

"Send him to the village! Who will save him!" Munshi shrieks like a madman, his eyes bloodshot. "Have you no daughter in your house? We'll not cut your wheat. We will have our revenge! Such things have never happened in our family!"

Nor in the village, says Poondi, when we return to Charan's well. The old Mazhbi sighs heavily. "We live together. We work together. If such things happen, who will labor for such Jats? Munshi should keep quiet now. He should not do anything in the village. This is a terrible thing."

"If this happened to us," says Bawa, "we would not have left Dhakel alive. We would have beheaded him then and there." He asks me, "Why did you go there? Let this happen, let them kill him."

"No, no, my sons," Poondi interrupts. "Munshi must go and call the village council. That is the right way."

Mukhtar says the Harijans must stick with Munshi. "We have to live with these Jats. Their sisters are our sisters. Why should they do these things?"

"You have come to our fields for fodder," says Kuldeep. "This is very bad."

Charan, when he hears the news, comes to the field but Dhakel has run away. "It's shameful," Charan

says. "Had I been here, I would have beaten him myself. I could have given him two or three blows and that would have ended it. He must have been very drunk. If any of my sons did such a thing, I'd beat him mercilessly. Dhakel has three children and a fourth on the way. He's not a young boy."

"Well, Charan, nobody can match your reputation anyway," Poondi reassures him. "This will be the talk of the village now." He gives a hoot of laughter. "They'll all be saying it happened near Charan's well."

Charan looks grim. "What respect will our family have in the village? An idle mind makes mischief. This would never have happened if Dhakel had been harvesting his own fields."

In Ghungrali, the village chief fears tension between the Jats and Harijans. "This is a very bad thing," he says. "If the Harijans are insulted like this, who will work in our fields. If this continues some lives may be lost. Everybody, high or low, has his self respect."

Poondi says it is worse than rape, since that would have been kept secret to avoid ruining the girl's chances for marriage. We go to see Munshi and his family; the men seem ready to compromise but not the girl's mother, a wrinkled, wispy-haired woman prematurely aged by long years of field work; her rasping bitterness against the Jats is ugly.

"We will take our revenge," she vows. "If Charan gets involved, we will not spare him also. I have resigned myself that one of my sons is as good as dead. Whatever the sacrifice, we'll not leave Dhakel alive!" Poondi asks if Dhakel's father has apologized. "Not a word!" she cries in utter fury. "Not a word!"

This evening, from the *gurdwara*, comes the chant of nightly prayers:

We reap according to our measure -
Some for ourselves to keep, some to others give.
O Lord, this is the way to truly live.

Note: The material for this paper was drawn from my book, *The Golden Bowl Be Broken* (Indiana University Press, 1974), a survey on India's agriculture I prepared for *The Economist*'s May 13 1978 issue and a six weeks stay in Ghungrali in April-May 1978.

Additional *AUFS Reports* in this series, "The Changing Peasant," will appear in 1980.