

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Village: Deoria Khurd  
District: Azamgarh  
United Provinces, India  
October 17, 1948

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 18, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

"Towards Freedom", Jawaharlal Nehru entitled his autobiography. Many Americans, glad at the concept of Indian independence, nevertheless wondered what meaning the word 'freedom' would have for inhabitants of India's remote villages. I am fortunate in being able to write my first newsletter from a rural area where many people, stirred by the successful struggle for independence, are now beginning to feel the opportunities of freedom and to participate in its responsibilities. I have been here ten days, too short a time to judge social movements carefully. But I have seen enough varied activities to know that men's initiatives are being released, their self-reliance strengthened. Some of Gandhi's principles are being lived. Men are moving toward freedom, in its larger sense.

I expect to stay in this area several weeks, to analyze conditions more adequately. Here I report my overall introductory impressions.

The setting.

The area around Deoria Khurd, a small village four miles from road and rail, is typical of the eastern districts of the United Provinces. With greater rainfall than the western districts, it is more dependent on lower nutrition value rice than on wheat. In prewar years some grain was drawn here from the west; during and since the war such imports have fallen and people eat less. Villages, less than a mile apart, have 350 to 800 inhabitants. Unlike larger landlords elsewhere in the province, most landlords of the area live in their villages, personally supervising cultivation of 5 to 40 acres, and collecting rents and paying government revenue on perhaps an equal acreage let out to tenants. (Family holdings of as large as 100 or 200 acres are rare.) They are thus in everyday contact with their tenants and laborers. Usually, however, they are not in close social contact. Low caste laborers and some tenant families, who cultivate  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 8 or 10 of their landlords' acres, live apart in a separate settlement of inferior mud houses. They are allowed little intercourse, except on the job, with their socially prominent landlords: Kshatriyas, Brahmins, Muslims, and Ahirs.

Save for the crafts indispensably woven into the agricultural pattern, hardly any villages have cottage industries.

Politically, the area has shared the fever of Congress movements. It remembers especially the August 1942 uprising, when patriots captured and destroyed government buildings at a police station not far away. Police fire finally killed several and subdued the rest.

The village Deoria Khurd is not quite typical. For one thing, the only university graduate in more than a hundred surrounding villages lives here. Mul Chand was completing his MA and LLB degrees when I met him twenty months ago at Banaras University. His grandfather and father also had some schooling, and expanded their horizons by outside service in the railways. His elder brother is an able, hard-working farmer. Unlike many graduates, Mul Chand has returned to his village to try to be of service to his people. He is independent and courageous in thought, seeks to live by truth and ahimsa, is not a member of any religious or political organization.

Secondly, three families of Deoria Khurd, including Mul Chand's, hold considerable land in other villages. They are not wealthy, but constitute a substantial resident middle class. Moreover, they are alive, as I have seen in their activities toward self-entertainment. Each afternoon for ten days, about a dozen pandits and relatively leisured landlords have staged a vivid incident from the Ramayana. Yesterday Lanka was burned by Hanuman, the Monkey King. Today Rama will kill Ravan, Sita's abductor, and triumphantly return as king of Ajodhya. Bringing moral lessons, fantasy and pleasure to hundreds of people from nearby villages, this annual Ram Lila is a healthy cultural activity. Acting, costumes and props are done with a flourish in this village, giving expression to artistic, musical, histrionic and organizing talents quite remarkable for the countryside.

Thus I am in a village probably better equipped than most to move with an independent pace. Some of the areawide forces I am about to name are potentially disruptive. Deoria Khurd, I think, shows promise of constructively channelizing these strong forces into democratic working processes of social improvement.

Productivity and health: little visible advance, but many minds receptive.

Towards increased productivity, agricultural or industrial, local people have made no major steps beyond some use of improved seeds supplied by government. I am sure that many of these sturdy, self-contained men are excellent farmers within their range of resources and knowledge. None here have formal training in agriculture. Many feel their lack of scientific knowledge, and have expressed to me their need of sound technical advice on such things as manures and crop diseases.

Many times daily I am told, in discouraged tones, "Curs is a poor country." But some men here have turned this fact into a challenge. Mul Chand says, "Our goal is: two meals a day throughout the year for everyone." He and uneducated farmers have said, in different words, "We must learn to make better use of our land." Some of these small landlords are in favor of the major land reform proposed by government, even though it will abolish their own superior rights. They think the reform may pave the way for consolidation of their scattered holdings, a step toward higher efficiency. Acceptance of the idea of consolidation is a change among many of his neighbors, Mul Chand says. Five years ago consolidation found no support in his village.

Towards sanitation and improved health, local people have made no advances. A young doctor offered not long ago to come to the vicinity

to practice if paid his living costs only. The well-to-do landlord who was approached to finance him was not interested. Enough supporters have not been found to finance him on a cooperative basis.

Area-wide awakening and self-assertion among  
oppressed classes.

Towards economic and social emancipation, laboring low castes have started to fight their own battles. All laborers of the large landlord uninterested in doctors have been on strike for many months, neither plowing his fields, cutting his crops, or bringing grass to his animals. A smaller, elderly landlord near Deoria Khurd complained to me in bewilderment that even his low caste employees now feel they have gained Swaraj (self-rule). For a recent grievance, they gathered and destroyed nearly three acres of his unripe crops. Such strikes and outbursts of resentment reveal a new courage and determination among formerly subdued agricultural classes.

As yet I have not talked with such tenants and laborers about their grievances. Mul Chand, who often supports their demands, speaks of a marked psychological change among them. Not many years back a landlord could take a handful of roughnecks into the low caste settlement and beat up men, women and children. Laborers were often beaten. Now such incidents are rare, for the underdog won't cow down as he used to. He will gather support from his fellows and resist. "We too are free," he answers. "You can't drive me from my hut even though it legally belongs to you." Among other things, he is aware that the landlord's superior rights over him are scheduled to be abolished.

At least some of the uprisings of the past two years have been incited by the leaders of the Shoshit Kisan Sangh (Union of Exploited Peasants), a new peasant party which local people believe to have some Communist impetus. This group moulds both social and economic suffering into active hatred against the exploiters. Its attempt to provoke a strike by Mul Chand's seven plowmen failed, apparently because they find Mul Chand a decent man.

Towards religious emancipation, many untouchables of the area have ceased to attend ceremonies and pujas performed by Brahmins. Social and economic degradation, rather than spiritual impulse, seem to underlie this change. Mul Chand recently asked them why they remained away from an annual rite they had formerly attended. "If Brahmins will not touch us, why should we worship through them?" was the reply. For about ten years these Harijans have looked on one of themselves as mahant, or religious leader. He is uneducated, but was strong and dignified in inviting me to attend their weekly prayer meeting. With a hymn book of some ancient independent sect, they have thus succeeded in reaching a degree of religious self-sufficiency. I do not yet know whether any outside organizational impetus is present in their lives.

Deoria Khurd: positive moves towards a new  
citizenship for all.

Towards social emancipation, sincere initiative is coming from privileged as well as oppressed. A landlord (one of the amateur dramatists) who worked some years in Calcutta dropped caste observances there and

ten years ago brought a new attitude back to Deoria Khurd. After Mul Chand's first year at the university he took water from a Harijan in his village home. The village elders remonstrated. Now they say nothing. To signify his rejection of caste, Mul Chand has dropped the Kshatriya name "Singh" and has discarded the "sacred thread" of the twice-born. A group of his village friends, calling themselves the "New Youth", are gradually shedding prestige habits insulting to the manliness of low caste people. Even their elders were changed during Gandhi's lifetime. I have seen signs of their devotion to Gandhi, and in talking with them feel that his attack on Hindus' caste consciousness has penetrated the consciences of many old people and convinced many young. "While we have this separatist feeling at heart we can make no progress in any field", the dramatist told me. "Our country will progress only when our hearts are full of love for each other." A day will soon be fixed when all those ready will sit to take water and food with untouchables. The old won't take part in this revolutionary move, but the young men of all except three or four houses will not be held back by parental or social barriers.

This step in Deoria Khurd is far ahead of the practices of most local Congressmen, who have not had the moral courage to flaunt age-old custom by really living up to the principles of the Mahatma.

Towards self-education, Deoria Khurd built its own school some eight years ago. A landlord contributed an acre of land, others brought stones, wood, tiles, furniture. From outside, the District Board granted money for teachers' salaries. Three men now teach 107 registered students. This year one assistant teacher went out for government sponsored training in the new Basic Education. Spinning, design in colors, vegetable growing are now taught in the fifth grade as components of Basic Education. One wide-awake lad assured me that "the heart applies itself" to mastery of the tools of hand-spinning.

Towards further enlightenment, some two years ago villagers pooled materials, labor and books to build a "Young Men's Library". (As guest, I am esconced in one half of said library!) Shelves contain about twenty-five books. I have seen only two borrowers in a week. AAJ ("Today"), a Hindi newspaper from Banaras, is however the kernel of the library. At the entrance to the village, in a shady grove near the tiny Shiva temple and the bathing ghat, the library is part of a natural community center. A nearby wrestling pit resounds each evening with grunts and slaps of youths. Men finished with their chores gather for a chat, and one of them is usually found reading out interesting news from AAJ. On days when no one has brought AAJ out from the rail station, its absence is felt by the men.

But the library needs newer books, especially ones which will meet the needs of agriculturalists. At present it is relatively dormant, needing more impetus from within and intelligent help from without. Were they so inclined, some literate villagers are capable of running adult literacy classes which would meet the needs of many.

Towards self-defense and internal peace, local squads of the Prantiya Rakshak Dal (Provincial Defense Corps) have been formed since July. Two alert and fit young men of Deoria Khurd were among 120 selected by a tehsil organizer to take drill and rifle training last May and

June. Training completed, Raj Narayan and Mohan, now "Group Leaders", returned home to form local units. Raj Narayan's group now has its quota of 12 volunteers from each of 4 villages; Mohan's 4 villages, smaller, have only offered 38 recruits. I am awakened at dawn by the Group Leaders' whistles as they drill their squads on a barren field. Young men of all castes, the corps members like this joint physical exercise and lathi drill. The tricolor national flag flies aloft before them, carried some mornings by a snappy six-year old tike who is also aware that independence is cause for pride.

The Rakshak Dal's purpose is maintenance of internal peace. During the Hyderabad campaign, and on recent religious festivals, the best trained Group Leaders and units stood by with regular police to guard against possible communal outbreaks in tension areas. Raj Narayan and Mohan come in from such duty conscious of their contribution to Indian progress. The people in these parts share the feeling that the Rakshak Dal is "ours". Already it has been something of a local stabilizer, reducing the danger of attacks by "bad characters" and also, it appears, discouraging potential landlord-tenant strife. In villagers' eyes, the Rakshak Dal now seems a vast improvement on the regular police, which hasn't fully shed its corrupt, oppressive and haughty treatment of the public. With a disciplined force of their own, people now have less fear of the police.

The implications of such a growing volunteer force, adjunct to government (and in this area organized by veteran members of the Congress Party), are likely to have weighty importance in the future. It will require continued study. Here I can testify that it has encouraged self-reliance and helped ordinary people feel that they too share in independence.

Towards local self-government, men of Deoria Khurd and two adjacent villages have recently anticipated the government's Panchayat Raj Act by forming their own village panchayats, which meet each month. Last night at the library I attended a casual meeting called by Mui Chand, the first Sarpanch. Three Kshatriyas (landlords), one Teli (oil presser), one Ahir (cattle grazer and tenant cultivator) and two Harijans (laborer and tenant) make up the panchayat, in proportion to their numbers in the village. In the few months since formation, these men have settled several land disputes which would have cost much money and time if taken to the Azamgarh court. In most cases, the contending parties have gladly accepted the panchayat's compromise settlements. Last night the panchayat prepared for a village campaign for the provincial "Cleanliness Week", and set a day also when all villagers are to join to build better common roads. Their initiative and ability to work together indicates to me that Deoria Khurd is ready to handle the greatly increased duties expected of villages in legislation soon to be implemented by government.

Towards representative district government. One election, to the Azamgarh District Board, has touched these villagers since August, 1947. Though the Congress Party won a large majority of votes cast, other groups also got lessons in the good and bad tactics of political action.

Strongest opposition to the Congress in this constituency came from

the Shoshit Kisan Sangh. Many small landlords, though disillusioned by the nepotism, corruption and incompetence of some Congressmen in government, voted for the Congress candidate to defeat the new peasants' party. Mul Chand and his young friends tried to put up a candidate independently, but their popular and influential choice was unable to run, for personal reasons. Therefore Mul Chand's group did not vote, unattracted to the Congress and refusing to ally themselves with a group which, as Mul Chand wrote in a letter published in AAJ, preached inter-class hatred and violence.

Come next election, Mul Chand and his friends will not be found without plans, organization and candidate. Their platform will have constructive proposals for rural development which both small and large farmers will welcome. The Congress incumbent has already displayed lack of ability. Aided by a wider franchise and drawing experience from the past campaign, Mul Chand and his friends will be a real force. At least they hope to raise the character of local political action, and send at least one representative to the Board.

Free members of the world community.

Attitudes engrained from babyhood die hard. To many, of the more depressed classes especially, a white man is still a "sahib". From them I am shown a deference which may contain respect or submissiveness, or both.

But the more self-reliant classes and individuals shed such deference some years ago in and about Deoria Khurd. I am told that had I walked without protection through this interior area in 1942 or in the politically feverish months of 1946 and 1947 I would have very likely been attacked, by patriots who would not have considered me in any way more than their equal.

While enabling men to stand on their own feet and defend their rights, the feeling of equality and freedom also open the door to true friendship, and are essential to it. I find no hostility here, though suspicion naturally exists among some. Rather I find among these self-reliant groups a sense of dignity and strength, of equality as between citizens of two great nations.

"Now", said one farmer to me, "we can give you our true friendship and love, because we are free men."

Sincerely yours,

*Richard Morse*

Richard Morse

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