

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RM - 32
Village Self-Government.

Deoria Khurd
Azamgarh Dt.
United Provinces, India
22 February 1949

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

One of the world's most ambitious ventures in self-government is getting underway this fortnight in this province. Some 27,200,000 adult men and women have the opportunity of electing representatives to executive and judicial councils (panchayats). From village to village, election results are passing rapidly. Groups and individuals are weighing their chances of future development through the new local governing bodies. In the district where I am, rule of the majority comes in as part of a strong upsurge of formerly depressed classes. In some other areas, landlords and existing village leaders appear to be consolidating their position through votes. The tussles involved in political democracy reach deeper and more widely than ever before in India.

The Congress concept of "Panchayat Raj" has origins far back in Indian history, when the panchayat or five-man council chosen by the people exercised a wide range of functions and authority in a village far more self-contained than today's. As an elderly Brahmin in a nearby village said to me recently, "In ancient Hindustan, village panchayats fixed the village boundaries, which are now laid down by Government (the provincial government). If they were able to do so much then, why can't we now?"

This man's knowledge was the result of a certain amount of education. Few villagers today can name so specifically a function of the ancient panchayat. To them it is a hazy and uncertain tradition. European traders, invaders and administrators found panchayats actively functioning in some parts of south India as late as the early 19th century. In north India, centuries of foreign invasion and imperial administration long earlier broke the continuity and sapped the vitality of local governing bodies. Introduction by the British of new forms of land control, strong centralized district administration, and elaborate legal procedures which removed disputes from the village to the district or sub-district court - such innovations, accompanying other changes in the village socio-economic structure, took away most remaining functions of the village panchayat. Today's traces are (a) a panchayat of quite different jurisdiction, the caste panchayat enforcing caste custom; and (b) informal groupings of respected individuals in a village to settle local quarrels. The village council as a strong institution of self-government has not existed for many generations, perhaps centuries.

Voluntary creation of a judicial council for the village, as has been done recently by the people of Deoria Khurd, is unusual. In

this case it is due solely to the initiative of two or three educated young men. In most villages, residents have no concrete memory or example of what a panchayat chosen by themselves could and could not do in managing their affairs. It is not the uneducated villager who has called for establishment of panchayats. It is rather the educated student of politics, or the politician, who has advocated it in legislative assembly, press, college classroom, and in speeches to village audiences.

The movement for village self-government gained impetus three decades ago from the decisions of constitutional and administrative policy-makers for development of wider representative government, for 'devolution' of administrative responsibility and authority to local bodies. In the early 1920's, most provincial governments passed panchayat acts, under which some village panchayats were formed. Generally these were criticized by Indian nationalists as entirely inadequate. As they turned to the villages under Gandhi's lead, nationalists began to realize a need for a new village vitality, with freedom from the choking administrative framework directed and controlled from above. Out of their hopes arose the vision of "Panchayat Raj", village self-rule wherein peasants would be free from the intimidations and apathy of police, canal inspectors, land recorders, court clerks, sub-district officers, the agents of a centralized Raj.

In 1927, Congressmen introduced in the United Provinces legislature a bill for more democratic panchayats with enhanced powers. The landlord and other parties combined to defeat this bill. With enlarged electorates, the Congress gained control of the legislature in 1936. It then succeeded in passing a new Panchayat Act, but due to the war the Congress Ministry resigned before panchayats could be established. On return to office after post-war elections, the Congress Ministry prepared a new act, the United Provinces Panchayat Raj Act of 1947, which was piloted through the legislature by Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. This act, plus rules made under its authority, provides for the delimitation of local political units and the election of executive and judicial panchayats throughout the province, and defines the initial powers and procedures of these panchayats. After a year's preparation, elections are now being held under this act.

Thus panchayats are being set up wholesale on the initiative of the politically educated. Their members are being nominated and elected by men and women 85% of whom are illiterate and unused to organization for new functions. It is true that villagers generally feel a real need for a different spirit and system of government. Whether they will be able to grasp and utilize the scheme now introduced by the Congress Administration is a vital question. In this letter I want to describe the scheme and the villagers' first move, elections, insofar as I have seen them. The operation of panchayats is to go forward on this basis.

The United Provinces Panchayat Raj Act, 1947,
and execution of it to date.

Initiative in establishing the new panchayat structure is left by the Act in the hands of the Provincial Government. Real initiative and responsibility on the part of the villager occurs only with the elections, now underway. Before exploring these, a view is required of the structure that has been set up.

The new polis.

The Act provides that a Gaon Sabha (Association of Villagers, or Township) be established for each village or group of villages in the province. Accordingly, during 1948 the Revenue Administration, working in each district on the basis of existing maps and records, formed some 35,000 Gaon Sabhas of the province's 105,000 villages. Each Gaon Sabha is made up of 1 to 4 contiguous villages having a total population of 800 to 4000.

The name and territorial jurisdiction of each Gaon Sabha has been proclaimed by the Provincial Government through the official Gazette. The Gaon Sabha is the new political unit, a body corporate which can enter into contract, sue and be sued. Except those with certain disqualifications, all men and women over 21 years of age resident in the component villages are members of the Gaon Sabha. The land clerk (patwari), lowest record-keeper in the Revenue Administration, has prepared a register of all households in the Gaon Sabha for which he is responsible, and a second register of all adults eligible as members and voters in the Gaon Sabha. This second register becomes the electoral roll. Early in January of this year, objections to the electoral rolls were heard, and corrections made.

The adult members are to elect directly each three years a President and Vice-President (whom the citizens can recall by a 2/3rds vote) and a Gaon Panchayat (Village Council) of 30 to 51 members, the number depending on the Gaon Sabha's size. Any resident member can be elected to the Gaon Panchayat; those able to read and write simple Hindi are qualified for the presidency and vice-presidency.

In election of the Gaon Panchayat, seats are reserved for the minority community (i.e., Muslims, in most regions of the province) and the Scheduled Castes, in proportion to their numbers in the Gaon Sabha. Election, however, is by the joint electorate system (e.g., non-Muslims participate in the vote for Muslim candidates; Scheduled Caste people vote for higher caste candidates in the general constituency as well as for their own).

The Judicial Circle.

As provided in the Act, the Provincial Government has grouped 4 or 5 contiguous Gaon Sabhas to form a Judicial Circle, for administration of justice in minor cases and suits. Some 8100 such Judicial Circles have been formed. Members of each Gaon Sabha elect by di-

rect vote 5 representatives (known as panches) to their Judicial Circle's Panchayati Adalat (Panchayat Court).

No reservation of seats for minorities or depressed groups is made in election of the Panchayati Adalat. Any resident member of the Gaon Sabha able to read and write simple Hindi, may be a candidate for the position of Panchayati Adalat panch.

The elected 20 or 25 Panchayati Adalat panches will elect from among themselves a head, or sirpanch.

Powers and duties of Gaon Sabha
and Gaon Panchayat.

At each harvest season, fall and spring, the Gaon Sabha is to meet. In the fall, the Gaon Panchayat will place before this "town meeting" the budget for the next year. The Gaon Sabha may pass the budget or may require any modification. In the spring, the past year's financial report will be placed by the Panchayat before the Sabha.

The authority over finance given the general electorate is a major innovation in local-self-government in India. It means that every adult will have opportunity to puzzle over the ways and means through which improvements are to be made. Previously his taxes have all gone outside the village, only part to trickle back down through the unpopular officialdom. For the first time, he is now asked to tax himself for his own direct benefit.

The Act authorizes the Gaon Sabha to levy three main taxes: (a) a tax on the land rent paid by cultivating holders, the tax not to exceed 6½% of the rent; (b) a tax on trades, callings and professions, not to exceed a prescribed rate; (c) a tax, also within prescribed limits, on buildings owned by persons paying neither (a) nor (b). These tax powers granted to the Gaon Sabha are designed to build up an orthodox local tax structure, which will bear on individuals roughly in proportion to their property and incomes, not progressively.

Other sources of income authorized the Gaon Sabha are: fees from markets and fairs, or from use of public property owned by the Gaon Sabha; sale of refuse and manure; court-fees and fines realized by the Panchayati Adalat, to be distributed proportionally among its component Gaon Sabhas.

In addition, the Gaon Panchayat may contract to collect provincial taxes or dues on behalf of the Provincial Government. Under the plan of the United Provinces land reforms committee, the Gaon Panchayat will collect the land revenue, keeping 5% as collection charges, to be credited to the Gaon Sabha Fund.

A responsible estimate puts the annual income of the average Gaon Sabha from the above sources at about Rs.800/-. In relation to the potential functions of a local self-governing body, this is not a large sum. It would, for instance, pay less than seven months' salaries to the three primary school teachers serving the

Gaon Sabha to which Deoria Khurd belongs. Without supplementing this income by voluntary contributions and voluntary labor, members of a Gaon Sabha will hardly be able to undertake large projects toward village or agricultural improvement.

Apart from internal sources of income, a Gaon Sabha may also borrow money from the Provincial Government for certain purposes, or may receive a grant from the Provincial Government or the District Board (the elective administrative board of the district, which has certain tax sources of its own). Initially, the Provincial Government will provide each Gaon Sabha with about Rs.150/- (approximately the total of nomination fees received in each Gaon Sabha from candidates for panchayat office) for the expenses of getting established. It will also grant Rs.2,400,000/- to provide six months' pay for secretaries trained to handle the initial paper work of 3 to 5 Gaon Sabhas. Subsequently the Gaon Sabhas themselves will support their secretaries.

The Act sets a long range of executive functions before the Gaon Sabha, to be performed by the Gaon Panchayat. "It shall be the duty of every Gaon Panchayat so far as its funds may allow to make reasonable provision" for, among other things:

- maintaining the register of voters;
- recording of vital statistics, cattle statistics, and certain economic data;
- construction and maintenance of public lanes and roads, bridges and culverts;
- medical relief (including dispensary or indigenous system hospital where possible), sanitation, epidemic control, maternity and child welfare;
- control of drinking and bathing water sources; of new building, certain markets and fairs; of ground for the storage of manure and for the disposal of dead bodies and refuse;
- care of common grazing grounds and lands;
- primary schools for boys and girls;
- aid to development of agriculture, commerce and industry;
- fire protection;
- upkeep and protection of any Gaon Sabha property or building.

"A Gaon Panchayat may also make provision" for, among other things:

- organization of village volunteers for watch and ward;
- assisting agriculturalists in obtaining government loans, in liquidation of debt, and in establishment of improved credit facilities;
- cooperative economic operations, including supply of improved seeds and implements;

- veterinary service and improved cattle breeding;
- planting of trees;
- regulation or prohibition of curing, tanning and dyeing of skins within 220 yards of the settled area;
- maintenance of library or recreation ground;
- communal harmony campaigns.

For some of these purposes the Gaon Panchayat is authorized to make by-laws. For sanitary objectives it may direct and enforce appropriate action by the owner or occupier of any land or building.

All public property within its territorial jurisdiction (e.g., common grazing grounds, paths, wells, bathing ponds) is vested in the Gaon Sabha. It may also purchase any land which it needs. If the holder refuses to sell, the Gaon Sabha may apply to the District Collector for acquisition under established procedure for land required for public purposes. Land so acquired will be under the control and management of the Gaon Sabha.

On receiving from any resident a complaint, supported by prima facie evidence, of misconduct on the part of any subordinate employee or official of the Provincial Government, the Gaon Panchayat may forward the complaint to higher authority with its own report. The authority is to make the necessary enquiry and take suitable action, informing the Gaon Panchayat thereof.

Here for the first time villagers receive a means of moving in an organized lawful way to control the malpractices of government agents. This is a most necessary advance toward real responsible government.

On the other hand, the Gaon Panchayat is required, insofar as is practicable, to assist any government servant in performance of his duties within its area, if so prescribed by the Provincial Government. This provision, if improperly developed, could seriously infringe on the status of elected panchayats.

Jurisdiction of the Panchayati Adalat.

Among the duties of the elected sirpanch is the appointment of 5-man benches of the Panchayati Adalat to try civil and criminal cases. For each case, the sirpanch must appoint one panch to the bench from the Gaon Sabha where the complainant resides, one from the Gaon Sabha where the accused resides, and three from Gaon Sabhas where neither reside.

Crimes cognizable by the Panchayati Adalat include a variety of offences under the Indian Penal Code. Among them are: unlawful

assembly; unlawful compulsory labor; assault or use of criminal force; wrongful restraint; voluntarily causing hurt; commission of public nuisance; fouling water of spring or reservoir; absconding to avoid answering a summons; theft or dishonest misappropriation where the value of property involved does not exceed Rs.50/-.

The Panchayati Adalat may not imprison, but may impose a fine not exceeding Rs.100/-.

Crimes not cognizable by the Panchayati Adalat include: theft above Rs.50/-; robbery; dacoity; offences against human life; offences against religion; offences against the State.

The Panchayati Adalat holds jurisdiction in certain suits whereof the value does not exceed Rs.100/-, and in certain land disputes wherein the land at stake pays a land revenue of not more than Rs.200/-.

In both civil and criminal hearings, the Panchayati Adalat is fully empowered to obtain evidence and summon witnesses. No legal practitioner may appear before it in any proceeding (a move for simplification). The Panchayati Adalat will execute any decree or order which it passes, with aid of the Sub-District authority if necessary.

Power of review of decisions of the Panchayati Adalat lies in the existing judicial structure. If miscarriage of justice by a Panchayati Adalat is apprehended or has occurred in any case or suit, the Sub-Divisional Magistrate or Munsif holding jurisdiction over that area may cancel the jurisdiction of the Panchayati Adalat, quash any decree or order passed by it, and take the case or suit into his own court.

Checks. A Form of Trusteeship.

To get panchayats off on the right foot, the Provincial Government has attempted to give guidance. To assure that experienced and securely established authority will retain some control over Gaon Panchayats and Panchayati Adalats, the Act has provided certain powers of supervision and review by government at the district and provincial level.

Educational campaigns to explain to villagers the objectives of the panchayat scheme and the system of elections were conducted by district officers throughout the province in early January. These supplemented a series of articles in Hindi written by the Director of Panchayat Raj. Villagers were asked to elect to their panchayat their most able and trustworthy representatives, regardless of group or party affiliation.

Conduct of these first elections is performed by the Provincial Government through its district officers. Nomination forms were placed on sale in each Gaon Sabha by the patwari. For each Gaon Sabha, a day in the present fortnight has been set for taking of votes. Officials of rank higher than patwari, accompanied by

assistants and keepers of law and order, are touring the countryside as Returning Officers. They verify that nominees are on the electoral roll and qualified. Then, wherever the election is contested, they gather men and women together at the Gaon Sabha center and take the vote by show of hands.

Elections completed, the Provincial Government is to call for applications for the post of paid secretary to the Gaon Sabha. From candidates who have passed the middle standard in Hindi, prospective secretaries will be chosen by the District Collector, the Chairman of the District Board and the District Inspector of Schools. District authorities will then give several weeks' training to secretaries to fit them for their duties on the new panchayats. Sirpanches of the Panchayati Adalats and Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the Gaon Sabhas will also receive training at district and sub-district centers.

Under this program, panchayats throughout the province should be ready to start work in preparation for the budget session of the Gaon Sabhas at the kharif harvest, next fall.

Under the Act, the Provincial Government is authorized to inspect or institute enquiry in respect of the work of the Gaon Sabha, Gaon Panchayat, or Panchayati Adalat, and to dissolve any Panchayat or Panchayati Adalat found to have abused its position or failed in performance of its duties. For prescribed reasons, the Provincial Government may also remove any panch of the Panchayati Adalat.

The Government is soon to recruit 500 men to be trained as Inspectors of Panchayats. When prepared, each Inspector will be assigned to an area of 60 to 70 Gaon Sabhas, whose Panchayats he is to supervise and guide.

The Provincial Government may prohibit execution of any act ordered by a Gaon Panchayat if the act is deemed dangerous or injurious to the public or any class of persons. Any person may appeal to the District Collector if aggrieved by an order served on him by a Gaon Panchayat. On examination of the appeal, the Collector may vary, set aside or confirm the Panchayat's order and also award costs to or against the person filing the appeal.

Maintenance by a Gaon Panchayat of primary school or dispensary shall be subject to rules and standards prescribed by the Provincial Government regarding curriculum, employment and qualification of teachers or medical personnel, and supervision.

Finally, the approval of the District Board is required before the Gaon Panchayat can perform these important acts:

- execute the budget as passed by the Gaon Sabha;
- employ staff;
- apply for a loan from the Provincial Government.

The guiding role and supervisory powers of higher authority go far to establish the nature of the present process. The spirit and methods of self-government have not arisen wholly and spontaneously within villages, but are largely being suggested and introduced from without. A type of political trusteeship is being undertaken. Established authority is attempting to prepare and teach process of self-government to village residents and electees. At the same time, it retains power to prevent irresponsible or unjust action by the new elective bodies.

The present elections.

How are villagers responding to all this?

Villages for the most part being away from roads and reporters, little news has reached the press on election patterns in various parts of the province. Election of women as Gaon Sabha presidents was a newsworthy item in one district. Lathi fights, resulting in two or three deaths, marred the contest in a few Gaon Sabhas where rivalry was exceptionally bitter. Such open violence has been unusual. In most Gaon Sabhas, in fact, elections are not being formally contested.

In Azamgarh District, a heavily populated rural area with considerable temporary emigration and consequent flow of new ideas and forces, I have been five days amid these elections. This time is too brief, but has shown me some lines of development. I shall state first significant events in Deoria Khurd itself.

On opening of nominations, educated leaders of Deoria Khurd and the adjacent village with which it is combined to constitute a Gaon Sabha called a general meeting of all members. Mul Chand, the educated young man who is my host, appealed to the assembly that, to get a good panchayat and to avoid the bitterness which might follow electioneering, all should agree on one slate of nominees. This plea was accepted, and general agreement reached on candidates acceptable to all as president, vice-president, and 5 Panchayati Adalat panches.

That night, however, Scheduled Caste voters (untouchables) did some calculating. They found that through some error only 7 seats on the Gaon Panchayat had been reserved for them, whereas their proportion in the Gaon Sabha entitled them to 8 or 9. They also talked with members of caste groups just higher than they in the social scale, especially with the Ahirs (cowherds). Together they found that the non-landlord, socially depressed members of the Gaon Sabha well outnumbered the landlords and other economically and socially favored.

The lower socio-economic groups then asked that another general meeting be called. Here they stated their new position. They said that 1 or 2 more seats should be given them on the Gaon

Panchayat. More important, they wanted 3 of their own men among the 5 Panchayati Adalat panches.

Landlords did not like this. But Mul Chand, a landlord by status but a supporter of depressed groups by choice, pointed out that if the landlords rejected this apportionment of places it would be mathematically possible for the lower groups to elect their men to all 5 Panchayati Adalat seats. The potential power of the majority prevailed. Nominations were finally made on the basis requested by the lower groups.

Here, in summary, negotiations replaced voting, and resulted in a slate representative of groups roughly according to their numbers.

The duty of the Returning Officer was thus made simple. On arrival, he merely called for nomination papers and verified that nominees were on the electoral rolls. For the top seven posts he examined candidates for literacy. One of the low caste candidates for Adalat panch, an Ahir, was hardly able to write his name, having learned only in the past three months in Mul Chand's night school. The Returning Officer accepted him, with the warning that he must work regularly to increase his writing and reading ability.

There being no contest, acceptance of nomination papers automatically returned the nominees to office. It was not even necessary to call voters together. Some of the vim was thus absent from infant democracy, but village harmony was protected.

This absence of actual voting contests is a general characteristic in the choice of panchayats in this area. Of 29 Gaon Sabhas over whose 'elections' this Returning Officer had presided, only 3 developed election contests. As encouraged by Government, groups are trying to agree on proper men without conflicting. Villagers' recognition of the value of true representation, in proportion to the numbers of a group, aids this no-contest tendency. The law guarantees seats to the minority community and the Harijans in proportion to their numbers. The principle being accepted for them, many villages apply it naturally and tolerantly to all. In these villages, the majority makes no attempt to exclude others from their proper proportion of panchayat seats. It seems to recognize that all forces in the village need representation if justice is to be achieved and constructive work advanced.

But the majority is not yielding the key places. On the whole, in this district, a great transformation is taking place, even in many Gaon Sabhas where no voting occurs. To explain it, a word on the socio-economic setting is required.

The rural social structure, with a favored few dominating over

much larger numbers, contains natural seeds of a type of class conflict. In traditional village strength are the Brahmins, Kshatriyas (locally called Thakurs), Kayasthas and some Moham-madans. Their props have been religio-social authority and tradition, economic security (as landlords and government servants), and educational advantage. Their prestige and comforts have been taken at the expense of low caste groups and outcastes (Scheduled Castes), whose economic status ranges down from that of cowherd and tenant cultivator to leather-worker and field laborer.

A conflux of forces, termed already by some a "social revolution", is carrying away the old bulwarks of high caste dominance in this district. Social taboos and inequality are being challenged: an untouchable laborer's wife retorted to Mul Chand's mother a few days ago, when warned not to soil her hearth, "Even the biggest people eat with us nowadays." This she would not have dared say to a Thakur five years ago. Economic sanctions are weakening: the abolition of landlordism, promised by the present government, will be part of the process. Political ideas are abroad, and political rights introduced: the power of vote opens a new era for majority groups hitherto suppressed.

In these eastern districts of the United Provinces, the word 'shoshit' ('exploited') is being used by men who are neither Communists nor even conscious Marxists to describe as a whole the low socio-economic groups. Their thrusts upward are encouraged by the Shoshit Kisan Sangh (Exploited Peasants' Union), a political league. Their formal political organization is as yet slight. But the Shoshit Kisan Sangh outdid Government hereabouts in educating villagers for the panchayat elections. It stressed the power of the vote. 'Exploited' groups listened. They became clearly aware that their numbers now count toward the lawful advance of their position.

Only a small percentage of the 'exploited' can read. They depend heavily on one or two trusted leaders in each village area, intelligent and perhaps literate or unusually well-to-do. Yet even some of these leaders do not grasp clearly the nature of the panchayats they are voting for. Those with whom I have talked do not know their exact taxing powers. The future panchayat structure is nebulous in their minds. But they realize that the vote is a tool fashioned for their advantage. "We are free. Our vote is as good as anyone else's", they assure themselves. The concept of equality begins to have a meaning. Not knowing precisely where the vote will take them, they nevertheless grasp it with determination and stand sufficiently united to overthrow high caste candidates. Throughout the district, reports come in of low caste and untouchable candidates returned as presidents, vice-presidents, Adalat panches, and in large numbers to the Gaon Panchayats.

Prominent in attaining office in this area are the Ahirs (cow-herds). Strong in physique, assertive in nature (great wrestlers and gymnasts) they stand in social scale below the Thakurs but well above the untouchables. On an area basis, I do not know the precise line-up of their voting support, but it appears that they are getting sufficient support from untouchables to bring them to office. The success of this middle-stratum caste group reminds that existing social values and gradations in Hindu social relationships are a stop against complete cleavage between 'exploited' and 'oppressors'. Important links still tie together individuals and blocs of all classes.

The fact remains, however: political power is coming to groups who since the Aryan invasion have not known a day's power in village society. What is the initial reaction to this phenomenon?

In a Gaon Sabha near Deoria Khurd, an Ahir and a Chamar (leather-worker, untouchable) won the posts of President and Vice-President. The Thakurs of the place, cultivating landlords, frowningly disapprove. "Poor men have been chosen", they state: "uneducated and rough". Anxiety is mingled with their regret. In Azamgarh town a leading lawyer, also Thakur by caste, expresses a similar thought in politer words. In an area where he toured last Sunday, Ahirs and other low caste men are coming to office. "The change is too sudden", he opines. "A few more years of educational advance and gradual social reform would have been welcome before this widespread adult franchise."

A railway employee, also a Thakur who has left his village, adds his word: "The panchayats will fail. Manned by illiterate and unexperienced fellows, they can not succeed." There is a hint in his remarks that some high caste groups may try cleverly to boycott the panchayats, hoping that rule of the majority will fail.

A curious psychological warfare campaign has in fact already been launched by some source unfriendly to panchayats. A rumor is afoot, spread by some high caste people but repeated with anxiety by the 'exploited', that panchayats will actually not come into operation for several years. An untouchable and an Ahir have come to Mul Chand and to me (who are considered knowledgeable, because literate and in touch with the outside world) to ask with concern, "Are panchayats to be stopped?" Among themselves they question: "having won office, is it to come to nothing? Are we to get no good from these elections?" A sort of warfare of morale goes on, someone apparently hoping to weaken the new-found confidence and determination of the 'exploited'.

Thus democracy brings differences into the open. Mul Chand, I might add, is more optimistic than the above speakers in judging the ability of hitherto suppressed groups to develop successful panchayats.

Trusteeship and the Times.

The determination shown by the uneducated 'exploited' to put their men in office, the spirit they have acquired, partly from Gandhi's words, "Be independent. Stand on your own feet." is to me a positive hope for the working of panchayats. Men of a mind to advance themselves will have a good chance of getting past the rough spots of self-government.

The same situation may be viewed from the opposite end. With forces kindling the 'exploited' to a new temper of action, the introduction of panchayats may prove timely in channelizing generated energy and heat into responsible judicial and executive action. Forced by panchayat responsibility to come to grips with environmental and social realities, formerly suppressed groups may be diverted from undertaking a course that would lead to violence and upheaval.

Part of this thought was expressed by the Thakurs near Deoria Khurd. They accused (not entirely with justice) low caste groups of being the chief troublemakers and goondas in the past. "Now", say the Thakurs, "these people will not dare misbehave. When they are responsible for keeping peace in the village, any mischief that occurs will give them a bad name."

A veiled threat of secret mischief by the Thakurs, to be blamed on the low castes now in control of panchayats?

Thus the situation is touchy, a difficult task for trusteeship. Will the actions of 'trustees' prove conducive to healthy panchayat growth?

Not all the 'trustees' are of the same background. At the top are Congressmen who conceived the present panchayat scheme and are now directing it. They are students and admirers of democratic political theory. The Director of Panchayat Raj, who drafted much of the present act, is a veteran Congressman with experience in elective administrative bodies at the district and municipal levels. He has a feel for village conditions. Despite his anomalous title, which suggests that "village self-rule" can be 'directed' from above, his ultimate objective is local bodies much more autonomous than those contemplated in the present stage.

In each of the 48 districts, on the other hand, implementation of policy is to date in the hands of existing administrative and revenue officers and staff, used to ruling in a framework basically undemocratic and paternal. Many of these men are skeptical if not scornful of the idea of self-government by villagers to now subservient and unenterprising. They themselves are mostly from the dominant socio-economic village classes. They will adjust with difficulty to situations like those in Azamgarh District, where low caste men

have become most important in the panchayats.

A village friend tasted the rudeness of such officials just a few days ago. Dissenting from the ruling of a Returning Officer concerning nominations, he went in appeal to the Sub-District Officer. The latter heard the appeal, then dismissed it summarily (as it happens, quite mistakenly). When my friend tried to argue his case, the Sub-District Officer insultingly ordered him away.

Rural folk are sensitive to treatment of this sort, though they have known it for centuries. Now they are less ready to take it. My friend, enlisting the support of an educated relative, went to a higher officer and is getting the incorrect ruling reversed.

With aid of educated advice, he knew his rights. Uneducated village residents are watching carefully. They are learning from it the advantage of education. Not for a small reason are they anxious to learn to read.

The incident shows a type of official aloofness from villagers which does not promise well for sympathetic guidance of panchayats by present administrators. Should rule of the majority succeed in rural areas, the spirit and system of administration would undergo complete change. This is a seeming threat to present officialdom, whose high platform of privilege will be chopped to shreds by the rise of equality. It will therefore not be surprising to find some officials in league with high caste village people to handicap the advance of panchayats.

These will be the short-sighted. I have met other officials, who even in government service have adapted to the spirit of nationalism and change, who will be more flexible in meeting and serving the change. The scale can be weighted in their favor by wise and determined policy decisions. Selection of panchayat inspectors, preparation and implementation of training courses, and reassignment of administrative control over panchayats at district level to give initiative to men of new spirit: these are steps soon to be taken which will, if advantageously planned and executed, give panchayats an encouraging start. As yet one can not judge the adequacy of the selection process and the training, for they are still being developed.

The village electee is interested in getting this training. But certain things he knows already, and can handle without any advice from outside. In this area, the uneducated villager is on the move. Young to India, I am hardly able to predict his staying power. Yet it strikes me that he will not permanently be set back should 'trustees' be inflexible and 'training' inadequate. Once given the opportunity for self-advance, as provided in the panchayat scheme, he is not likely to let go of it.

Sincerely yours,

Richard Morse

Richard Morse