

Written in Lahore
October 31, 1946

Dear Mr. Rogers:

On the strength of an introductory telegram from Tarlok Singh to the Deputy Commissioner of Shahpur District, Mr. Kewal Singh Chaudhary, I arrived there last Wednesday after a sleepless train ride from Peshawar during which fifty Indians and I crowded into a compartment intended for eighteen, and tried to converse, unsuccessfully because of my lack of Urdu. As Mr. Chaudhary had been called suddenly to Lahore, I was immediately esconced in solitary splendour in the massive red brick town house of Nawob Sir Allan Baksh, one of the Punjab's biggest landowners and political figures. As the Nawob was away, I lived there with a cook and bearer for two days, visiting nearby villages with district officials. Then I was taken in charge for a couple of days by Sub Divisional Officer Kapila, an extremely friendly Brahmin who fed me well on vegetarian diet and took me on two tours showing me vastly different geographical regions and their peoples. After that I returned to the District Headquarters, Sargodha, where the D.C. and his wife entertained me most generously despite the fact that the one had just recovered from a severe malaria attack, and the other had a miserable cold.

My week's tour was characterized by three features. First, my own preliminary planning was nil, my questioning lacked organization. Secondly, practically all my visits were with officials, which tends to hide the understanding that would come with actual residence among the villagers. Thirdly, I toured in an extensive manner rather than an intensive one, visiting many villages of different types but spending only a couple of hours in each. As a result I have only a superficial knowledge of the inner economy of these villages, but have a large store of varying (and sometimes contradictory) impressions and ideas. From this week's experience I believe I have gained some notion of what a better approach would be, and hope to put this to test in Amritsar, the district I will enter this afternoon.

Shahpur District seems to contain four distinct types of rural economy, each characteristic of almost separate stages of civilization, and none of them entirely satisfactory. In some cases they overlap and the mixtures produce strange results. In other cases, villages seem to be ingrown and unaffected by the outside world. I'll try to describe these types, including my reactions. Some of the contrasts which I will mention will be untested generalities, subject, I hope, to later correction and improvement.

First historically, and determined mainly by geography, is the semi-desert village. Extending over one-third of the district and covering the two adjacent districts in the 'Thall', an arid, almost barren stretch of fine silvery sand with underlying loam, dependent on a treacherous rainfall which may be six inches one year, and twenty the next. I drove over much of this region with S.D.O. Kapila. Across the sand tracts, lone shepherds wrapped in white and

holding a long staff keep vigil over their flocks of sheep, goats, or even cattle, driving them to browse on the scattered shrubs, eventually to arrive at a water hole, a well, or the river, twenty miles away. But also in the mixed sand and loam, camels drag a simple plow, followed by a bullock team with a simple cylindrical seeder pouring gram or wheat seed into the dry furrow. No further cultivation is necessary. If it rains, there is a crop. If there are three rains during the growing season the gram crop is bountiful, exceeding that of canal-irrigated areas. But there may be two years without rain. When villagers store their surplus, the economy is stable. When they sell it, the next year may bring starvation. Thus the first village we visited had money, but was destitute for want of fodder and food. The houses were wretchedly small and dirty, the people discouraged in spirit and lacking in initiative. As we left, I was indeed gloomy at the prospect of visiting more impoverished collections of mud huts amidst the sand.

But ten miles beyond was a village full of resourcefulness, eager for progress. Their first request was for a better school, and then they proudly demonstrated one of their two wheat-grinding mills, and their neat, clean houses of mud with decorations carved over the doorways. Perhaps this village is newer than the other or has had better luck with rainfall. A study of the exact reason for the difference would be interesting, but in any case I was encouraged by the spirit and individuality of the more forward one. The land holdings in this desolate area are of course great, and there is no extreme difference in their size, which produces a self-reliance in the individual cultivator that was reflected in the way each member of the crowd contributed to the discussion, rather than leaving it to one or two headmen.

Nevertheless, the existence of these two different communities depends alike on rainfall, and one may rise while the other falls. Tomorrow the economy will be transformed, as a large irrigation project will start providing water this winter. The changes that will take place have perhaps been foreshadowed by a similar transformation of the rest of the district, which took place forty-five years ago, when the Lower Jhelum Canal was opened. In that area, two distinct economies have emerged.

The most modern one is the canal 'colony', paternally planned and organized by government. Much of the commanded area was government wasteland when the canal started, and government's interest was primarily to make this a breeding ground for horses. 10,000 acres were reserved by an Army Remount Depot centrally located, with another forty miles away. The remaining government-owned land was divided in neat geometrical patterns to facilitate irrigation and to standardize land holdings. From throughout the Punjab the Colonization Officer selected good agriculturists who could produce certificates of good character. These were brought to the area and settled among some 350 'chaks', or small colonies, each containing 25 acres for the village and 1250 to 2500 acres of tillable land. Each family was granted 50 acres, plus a spacious abode in the village, which was laid out with wide straight streets and enclosed courtyards for the villagers' mud huts. There were two conditions: each landholder must keep a mare according to Army standards, must breed her

to an Army stallion, and must sell the progeny to Army; secondly, inheritance was according to primogeniture, as the Army had to have one individual whom it could hold responsible for the mare. Otherwise, each man could produce the crops of his own choice, could hire tenants if his own family was small, could sell in any market, and paid his own land revenue tax and water rate. Government brought in the village 'menials': weavers, potters, shopkeepers, smiths, carpenters, sweepers, water carriers, and barbers, giving each an acre or two plus the income from his own production.

The result was a prosperous colony because of the regular irrigation, and an economic equilibrium fixed rather rigidly by the over-all government plan so that landholders were nearly equal in economic status and their tenants were also prosperous. The chaks reveal an orderly neatness, and the well-kept houses are stocked with the ornaments and excess household equipment which Indians apparently spend their savings on. Initiative and village-harmony seem good, but there is really no village democracy because the headman, the land-recorder, and the revenue collector are all government appointed, and the headman's post is usually hereditary. Therefore the actual participation in citizenship is limited, and only in one or two chaks did I find a spirit of community interest among the people: this was revealed in one chak which had a "Young Farmers' Club" for village uplift; and in others where a locally-elected committee (panchayat) was empowered to settle village disputes. With those exceptions, I was unable to find activity and life in the chaks - I could not determine their motives, the tempo and pith of their life, the gossip, the scandals, the jokes which make their existence interesting. Such investigation will undoubtedly demand residence in villages for some time.

The future of the chaks is not hopeful. In 1940, the Army decided it wanted no more horses. At the same time, government wanted money. Therefore landholders were offered full proprietary rights at purchase price of Rs. 40 an acre. Practically all the land was purchased by the holders, and alienation of property started immediately, through sales, gifts, mortgages, and division of holdings. Customary law replaced primogeniture, and now each son inherits his share of the land. Within a generation, therefore, it seems apparent that holdings will be too small to be economical, and that population pressure will impoverish these communities. I hope this forecast is over-pessimistic, but it seems in line with past examples.

An entirely different economy exists in villages in the same area - a feudal economy, which has arisen on land which was owned privately when the canal was started. As the land was nearly barren, it was then held in huge tracts by transport monopolists who grazed immense camel herds here, or by cattle-thieves who kept their stolen herds here. These large owners were engulfed with prosperity when the canal began irrigating their land at only a small initial fee plus annual water rates. Most of these owners were already the leading men of particular tribes, and they settled down with their tribes and tenants in new villages which grew, in contrast to the government-planned chaks, in a haphazard and crowded manner, with poor sanitation, narrow lanes, small yards and smaller buildings. These villages are feudal in the sense that the people depend on the big landowners for practically everything. Some of the leaders have earned the loyalty of their people by encouraging economic initiative, promoting schools and dispensaries, and acting as fair judges in

settling disputes among the people. Others have dominated their people sheerly through their economic power, keeping their tenants uninspired by such things as schools and innovations, making them happy by maintaining huge festival houses where thousands are invited to celebrate such events as provincial elections, and settling disputes in favor of the man who bribes them most. In either case, the villager's originality and incentive, his civic responsibility, are blighted in the face of paternal or despotic rule. Needless to say, poverty is more extreme than in the chak colony.

Still in a fourth type of economy, least important, is the nomadic. I hadn't expected it, so was surprised. Especially notable in winter time is the Pathan who comes down from the Frontier Province or even from Afghanistan to sell his wool or timber, hauling it down with his family on camel back. Then he finds work as a road laborer, in mills, or in cotton picking, or perhaps settles permanently to become a money-lender. But native Punjabis also live the gypsy life with their grazing animals, settling for a time near a town and taking employment, then selling wool or meat and moving on. A study of this nomadic life would be fascinating, as these people seem more ruggedly independent, though actually their livelihood is very tenuous.

Apparently the Pathans do not intermingle very much with the local villagers. This brings me to the last impression which I want to mention. Entirely apart from economics, I have been surprised by the clannishness of the villagers of the Punjab. Naturally I am prepared to find social exclusiveness among Hindus where caste is still strong, but I didn't previously realize that Musalman tribes in the north have in many cases retained their tribal entity quite thoroughly. A person experienced in the area can with apparent correctness name the qualities and characteristics indigenous in a tribe which inhabits a particular region. The Awans, for example, described as fine and sturdy cultivators, but dominated by murder and blood feud, treacherous and sly. In some cases the breakdown is not a tribal one, but people from different districts tend to go their separate ways, not intermarrying or learning from other peoples. This exclusiveness and tendency to ingrowth always stagnates a society. Is it just a coincidence, I wonder, that the most energetic and civic minded chak I visited was one originally settled by cavalry veterans from districts all over the Punjab? Their Army experience was partly responsible, but I'm sure the varied origins, in contrast with other chaks, also contributed to the difference.

Sincerely yours,

Richard Morse