

# THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

May 1958

## Village India

By Robert Terry

### ALLAHABAD, UTTAR PRADESH

Today I was taken for the first time to the other India. It is vast; yet its boundaries appear on no maps. It is centuries old; yet its history is monotonous. It has 300 million inhabitants; yet only a few are fortunate enough to eat one and a half full meals daily. It is called Village India.

My guide was Nobakrushna Choudhuri, a vigorous man of 56 years who wears the Indian "dhoti," a light, hand-spun cloth draped loosely about the body. He reads such books as Tillich's "Systematic Theology" and Myrdal's "An International Economy."

"When I was a student," he explains, "I read and reread Thoreau and Tolstoi. Then Gandhi came into my life. He told students to leave college and work with the people of the villages. I did. Since then, I had to do most of my reading during the independence movement while in jail. Now, it's a habit, and it's necessary to my work."

After independence, Mr. Choudhuri served six years as Governor of the State of Orissa. Then he resigned from the Congress Party in order to devote his full energies to the Gramdan land reform movement.

Land reform is one of the greatest needs of the economically underdeveloped countries. At the same time, resistance to it is one of the greatest obstacles to their development. Land-reform efforts in India and other countries committed to parliamentary government are bogging down in legislatures where landed interests retain their traditional power. The mounting desire for land reform is a fertile source of frustration, of which the Communists are well aware.

In India, disciples of Gandhi are struggling to meet this desire by asking for voluntary gifts of land. They are also attempting to attack factionalism, "the curse of Indian village life," by directing these gifts from individuals to their village communities. As an extension of this basic idea, they are also asking for "Gramdan"—from "gram," meaning village—which is the gift of the entire land of a village to the village community.

Today, in Allahabad District, north central India, Gramdan was declared by the village of Baranpur. Mr. Choudhuri was called to witness the event, and invited me to accompany him.

We approached Baranpur across the great plain bordering the Ganges River.

The small square among the mud huts was filled with waiting men and boys. We entered through a ceremonial gate of colored cloth stretched on a wooden frame.

Young men hung strings of flowers about our necks, and led us along the narrow pathways to visit the homes. The walls of the better houses were of wood-reinforced mud, the roofs of kiln-fired brick tiles. The low rooms opened into an inner courtyard, with its open drain and few utensils. The poorer dwellings were hovels or straw lean-tos.

Each host greeted us with palms together. He brought forth a burnished metal pan containing piles of yellow powder, rice, and flower petals. Using his thumb, he marked the center of our foreheads.

The five Harijan (untouchable) families live at the outskirts of Baranpur. One Harijan host greeted his honored guest by placing palms together and stooping to stretch them toward his feet. But Mr. Choudhuri quickly caught him by the shoulders before he was halfway down, and drew him upright again, saying:

"Those old days are gone. We are equals as citizens of this new country and as men in the sight of God. I'm here not as a master but as a guest in your house."

We lunched in a courtyard, sitting on mats spread upon the concrete-hard earth, eating rice, beans, and wheat tortillas with our fingers. The local Gramdan worker told us how Baranpur decided to declare Gramdan:

"A year and a half ago, with the help of a Village Level Worker of the Community Projects Administration, the villagers started a youth club for education and recreation. It was successful. They took another step by pooling their resources to form a community orchard. It too was successful. Next they donated their labor to build a dam, raising the water level in the irrigation ditch enough to water their fields. Now almost all of the landholders have agreed to give up their private holdings and try the cooperative method full scale.

"Where has the inspiration and leadership come from?"

"The inspiration is partly poverty. The leadership is four young village men and the Village Level Worker, who have convinced the villagers that poverty need no longer be accepted as an unchangeable fact of their existence."

We returned to the square. A dozen women had appeared, but remained at a distance crouching against a wall. A young man shooed them into the gathering. Metal jewelry dangled from the nostrils of the young women, and belled anklets jingled at their steps. Their youngsters, carried astraddle the hip, one leg in front and one behind, eyed us momentarily.

Young men opened the ceremony with a song bemoaning the village's dependence upon the town. Two of the young leaders recounted the story of cooperative efforts, and presented the Gramdan declaration, a list of the gifts of land signed by the twenty former owners.

The local Gramdan worker rose. He described how, while sitting in on the village councils, he had seen the Gandhian spirit of nonviolence and cooperation grow strong.

"But gifts of land alone will not banish poverty overnight," he continued, looking at one man sitting in the front row. "Land by itself will not grow corn. How can a poor man cultivate without bullocks?"

"I have given land," the man replied, "and I will share the use of my bullocks, too."

The Gramdan worker then turned to an old woman: "You have a son, but now he has no more land. Who will take care of you in your age?"

She replied immediately: "Now I shall have many sons."

As the questions and answers continued in this vein, Mr. Choudhuri remarked quietly: "This is remarkable. In most Gramdan villages, the old people do not seem to realize what is happening. But see here how they took us into their houses; how the women are included in this gathering; and how they answer these questions!"

Then he rose and spoke: "Baranpur has the honor of being the first village in the home district of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to declare Gramdan. But, amidst this excitement, I must speak a word of caution. You have been persuaded by the way of love to try the method of cooperation. There are, however, still three landholders who do not yet wish to try it. I urge you not to turn upon them and seek to impose your view. Gandhi's way is nonviolence, voluntary cooperation, and respect for every individual. Remember him!"

The ceremony closed with cheers for Gandhi and Gramdan, and shaking hands all around. When we returned to our truck, the villagers were wedging flowers into the cracks of the hood and around the windows. They signed good-bye with their palms together as we drove away.

This is what I saw. Clearly, as an uninitiated outside observer, I cannot judge how deeply runs the resolve of cooperation. I cannot state that a revolution has taken place. But I did see that a needed revolution is trying to take place in Village India.