

## EASTERN UTTAR PRADESH

## Inundation and Backwardness

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IT is common knowledge that the eastern Gangetic plain is excessively flood-prone. Floods are caused both by discharge from rivers, as well as by waterlogging following incessant rain. As we move eastwards along the Gangetic plain, the land gets flatter and the average precipitation increases. Rivers are consequently sluggish, change their courses frequently — resulting in the formation of extensive 'deara' tracts along the banks of the Ganges in eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal — and often overflow their banks.

Village Chaturabehar is part of Mahmudabad tahsil which is a predominantly lowlying ('ganjar') tract. The inundation in Chaturabehar is caused by waterlogging and not by discharge from any river, there being no river in the immediate vicinity. H R Nevill, the author of the 1905 Sitapur District Gazetteer described the situation thus:—

The whole of this tract is liable to annual inundations which during the rains cover the country with a sheet of water having a depth that ranges from six inches to as much as eight feet, according to the lie of the land and the nature of land fall. In this part of the district the villages are placed on the highest available spots, which are constantly raised by the frequent subsidence of the mud huts. Even in spite of this, the inhabitants are often compelled either to leave their homes and migrate to a drier clime, or else to take up a temporary abode on rough wooden platforms till the waters subside... intercourse is almost wholly carried on by means of boats... for the fields become the haunt of fish, turtles and crocodiles, which seem to prefer the shallow waters to their natural home in the deep streams.<sup>1</sup>

Little seems to have changed during the seventy-seven years which have elapsed since Nevill's description of south-eastern Sitapur. In point of fact, in the opinion of villagers things have become considerably worse. 1982 witnessed one of the worst inundations in living memory. Almost the entire village, including the built-in area which comprises the highest part of the village, was under water. The streets of Mahmudabad town, situated within a kilometre of the village, were knee-deep in water. As late as October, as the kharif harvest was coming in and as

preparations for the rabi were under way, one-third to one-half of the cultivated area was still water-logged. People moved about in boats across this area. Crocodiles and turtles were not to be seen, but smaller forms of aquatic life had apparently sprung up, for these inundated fields had become the haunt of several species of water birds. In addition to the ubiquitous egrets, lapwings and pond herons, which will gather wherever water collects in the North Indian country side, Sandpipers, Cormorants, Terns, Dabchiks, Black-winged Stilts and three species of Kingfishers (common, white-breasted and pied) had assembled in fairly large numbers. Even bigger birds like Sarus Cranes, Grey Herons and white-necked Storks could be seen hunting patiently, albeit in smaller numbers. In fact the variety of water birds may well have increased, for Nevill mentions a limited number in comparison. In particular he remarked that egrets were not present in "sufficient number". Egrets and Pond Herons are now very numerous in the area.

The number and variety of water-bird life tends to corroborate the complaint of villagers that the problem of waterlogging has been compounded in recent years. The recently constructed Sharda Canal is unanimously singled out as the villain of the piece in this regard. The Sharda Canal Scheme was mooted over a century ago by British Indian Government officials, but was shelved on account of the opposition the scheme encountered within the bureaucracy itself. Fremantle,<sup>2</sup> who was in charge of settlement operations in Rae Bareilly towards the end of the last century, in particular opposed the Sharda Project on account of the waterlogging it would inevitably result in, given the low-lying nature of the terrain. The scheme was however revived after Independence, it being perhaps felt that the trade-off would be in favour of the construction of the canal.

The Sharda Canal has served to make agricultural conditions even less secure than they had formerly been in this area. It does not benefit the area at all; in fact, its water is not available to the villages here, which use tube-wells as the chief form of irrigation. On the other hand, seepage from the

canal has added to the problem of waterlogging. Moreover, since it runs from north to south, the canal embankment acts as a barrier to the flow of water along the natural incline of the land from west to east, thus trapping rain water on the western side. Even prior to the construction of the canal, the road and railroad embankments had served to act as barriers to the flow of rain water, and severe waterlogging occurred on either side of the metalled roads and railroads. The Sharda embankment has only made the situation worse.

While it is true that on balance the construction of all-weather metalled roads, railways and canals has raised agricultural production, and has in particular spawned the surplus producing rich peasant, these overheads have also resulted in a number of specific problems in agrarian society. In her work on North India, Elizabeth Whitcombe<sup>3</sup> has shown how canals, roads and railways led to the extension of 'usar' (uncultivable saline land), waterlogging and a general increase in the incidence of malarial fever. The failure to eradicate the anopheles mosquito may well lead to a resurgence of malaria in these parts.

The relative backwardness of central and eastern Uttar Pradesh in relation to western Uttar Pradesh continues to be a hotly debated issue among economists, sociologists and historians. Several factors have been considered — differential fertility, demographic pressure, climatic conditions, caste groupings (Jats, reputed for good and careful cultivation, constitute the dominant social group in western Uttar Pradesh), tenurial patterns (bhaiyachara and Pattidari in western Uttar Pradesh; Taluqdari and Zamindari in eastern Uttar Pradesh). Thus Eric Stokes, basing his argument on a comparative study of Jaunpur and Meerut districts, found one of the chief determinants of the dynamism of western Uttar Pradesh to lie in its traditionally backward and unstable agricultural conditions. Overpopulation and relative infertility made it a region of subsistence farming. Cultivators had to work hard and carefully to eke out a living. The lack of an appreciable surplus was not conducive to the entrenchment of a strong parasitic landlord class, as was the case in the more fertile regions of the eastern gangetic plain. The cultivators here were more slovenly, for a fair crop could be raised without much effort. The raiyats of western Uttar Pradesh,

more independent of landlord control and more careful cultivators, were able to take full advantage of new and favourable agricultural opportunities opened up during British rule — roads, railways, canals and post and telegraphs.<sup>1</sup> It was this productive peasant group which responded most enthusiastically to the new agricultural technology of the sixties.

Eric Stokes however failed to sufficiently emphasise the greater agricultural uncertainty in eastern Uttar Pradesh which derives from its vulnerability to floods and waterlogging. While one cannot over-emphasise the role of historical factors in the evolution of behavioural patterns like entrepreneurship, it must be remembered that the zamindars and taluqdars, whose existence was undoubtedly a severe check on peasant initiative, have passed into antiquity and ceased to exist as a social force. Neither do the dominant peasant castes in eastern Uttar Pradesh, namely the Kurmis and Ahirs, imitate the rentier life-style of the taluqdars. There is none of the 'semi-feudalism' characterised by rent-credit squeeze which Amit Bhaduri<sup>2</sup> found to be prevalent in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. The dominant castes here prefer self-cultivation to share-cropping and sub-infeudation. Indeed some villagers in Chaturabehar have installed pumpsets and 'gobar gas plants', most buy fertilisers and HYV seeds. But by and large they do not consistently apply the full package of scientific agriculture without which a Green Revolution is not possible. They are also reluctant to take loans to improve their agriculture, and are quite satisfied with prevailing levels of productivity. Multiple cropping, a common feature of Green Revolution areas, is absent. There is an eagerness to shift to non-agricultural modes of occupation in cities.

Agricultural uncertainty deriving from floods and waterlogging makes the cultivator averse to risk-taking. The fear is a rational one, and probably age-old. It also perhaps partly explains the proverbial slovenliness of the 'Purabi'. To some extent all traditional agricultural societies were dependent on the elements. This serves to explain the fatalism associated with peasant societies. But extreme dependence results in extreme resignation. In this part of Uttar Pradesh a very good crop can be reaped — nature willing. But if the floods come, as they frequently do, little can be done about it. It is difficult to expect agriculturists to be very dynamic in such hopeless circumstances. Until this bottleneck is re-

moved through state enterprise this slovenly attitude will undoubtedly continue. In the course of a conversation with a villager of this area, who was taking potatoes to the Mahmudabad market, the villager expressed the desire to procure a job in the city. The author tried to reason with him that agriculture, imaginatively practised, was far more lucrative than any petty job he could conceivably hope to get in the city. Had he not heard about Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh? What prevented him from investing in HYV seeds, fertilisers, pumps and multiple cropping? The villager gave an answer for which the author had no reply. Large parts of his lands were under water. He might of course get a bumper harvest in one season, but the next could be a wash-out. One got less

in a job in the city, but at least one knew how much to expect each month.

### Notes

- 1 "Sitapur: A Gazetteer", being Volume XL of the "District Gazetteer of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh", by H R Nevill, ICS, 1905 (LBSNAA Library).
- 2 Report on the Second Settlement of the Rae Bareilly District, Oudh, 1897, by S H Fremantle (National Archives of India).
- 3 Elizabeth Whitcombe, "Agrarian Conditions in Northern India — Volume I: The United Provinces Under British Rule, 1860-1900".
- 4 Eric Stokes, "The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India", Chapter 10, pp 228-242.
- 5 Amit Bhaduri, "A Study in Agricultural Backwardness under Semi-Feudalism". *Economic Journal*, March 1973.

## Social Science Takes Another Look at Rural Co-operatives

(By a Special Correspondent)

THE dismal fact that co-operatives, introduced to compensate for the economic handicaps of the rural poor, have themselves become vehicles for dominant interests of class and caste was once again underlined at a two-day workshop on co-operatives and rural development held early in March at the Centre of Advanced Study, Department of Sociology, Delhi University. Of course, such coming to terms with reality does not necessarily imply that the co-operative enterprise should be abandoned: assessment is required of any limited gains that do accrue to poorer (if not the poorest) groups, and of even marginal limitations on the activities of the privileged. Unflinching expectations that the co-operative structure could still work for and not against social ideals were expressed by M S A Rao in a welcome address, and the convener of the workshop, B S Bavisakar, provided a preliminary outline of issues in the current academic debate on co-operatives.

Two studies presented in the opening session starkly documented the structural weakness and functioning corruption of existing co-operatives. H S Verma and S M Batra both analysed the case of sugar co-operatives, in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, respectively. Verma quoted from an official document to reveal that the primary function of cane-growers' co-operatives in the area studied was to ensure a steady supply of cane to sugar factories owned

by joint stock companies, and that benefits to the cane-growers themselves were a subsidiary consideration. Batra showed, on the other hand, that not only private but official interests could infiltrate and weaken producers' co-operatives, with the example of a co-operative sugar factory in Panipat established and controlled by the state government. However, both papers — and the discussion that followed — attempted to go beyond the dead-end of condemning co-operatives as failures, by examining the ecological, agrarian, economic, and social variables responsible and by emphasising the differences (as well as similarities) between various cases of failure, differences that result from the diverse forms these variables take. Both case studies were held up against the example of Maharashtra's successful sugar co-operatives, yet with attempts to delineate the limits to the 'success' of the latter, particularly with reference to the marginal holders and the landless who constitute the most deprived groups in rural society.

During the second session, chaired by A M Shah, once again the issue of the limits to success in the case of co-operative institutions came sharply into prominence: this time concentrating on another success story, the Anand-pattern milk co-operatives of Kaira district in Gujarat. The first paper, presented by A S Patel (a long-term member of the co-operative in question as well as a sociologist), described the many