

PUNJAB:

What the Peasants Told Me

By RALPH IZARD

MOST of the farming villages of the Punjab are nameless, like those of the rest of India. There are too many of them to name—750,000 in all India, with 360,000,000 people living in them. So the villages are known only by number, such as "Village No. 18, Multan District." It was toward this village that Hardaev Singh and I trudged over the loose sand between scattered tussocks of tough desert grass.

The dry, grit-filled wind blew steadily, the same wind that blows over the *kala punjab*—the "dark" Punjab—the year around, a furnace blast throughout the long summer, keen as a Sikh knife in the wintertime. The section gained the name of the "dark" Punjab during the long years leaders of India's peasant leagues struggled vainly to build their organization among the peasants on its huge leasehold estates.

These high, dry plains in the Indian North are made fertile by an irrigation system that Hari Singh, chief of peasant organization in the Punjab, calls "one of the few really fine British accomplishments in India." Our route lay along one of the irrigation canals that with the hot sun and the long summer make this a two-crop country. Nearly a third of all India's wheat comes from the Punjab, most of it spring wheat planted after the cash crop—cotton—is picked in October.

Indian villages lie far off the few narrow, shallowly-ballasted macadam highways built for British military use. Chak No. 18 is no exception. We had been walking steadily for nearly fifteen minutes when we met one of Hardaev Singh's friends from the Jullundur District, Kishan Chand (or, as he would be called in English, "Farmer" Chand, since Kishan is only a variant of the word for peasant—*kisan*).

"The riflemen squinted down their sights at the seated men. No one moved. The sub-inspector barked a command . . ."

Farmer Chand was himself a tenant, but a very independent one, with a deep pride in the strength of the peasant leagues—*kisan sabhas*—in the Jullundur District. In the Jullundur District, he told us proudly, the tenants would never brook the kind of treatment or the taxes and penalties imposed by the landlords hereabouts. As a volunteer organizer for the peasant leagues, Kishan Chand gave us a few examples of the kind of taxation imposed by Multan District landlords on their sub-tenants:

"Over in Chak No. 15, the landlord taxes twenty-seven *seers* out of every *maund*, instead of the twenty *seers* that are his by law.* And he fines the tenants if their cows walk into his house.

"The three Dah brothers, who inherited their land, allow the peasants only one-seventh of the crop. Some landlords even demand one *seer* out of every *maund* for 'losses to the sparrows.' Others take five *seers* for 'technical expenses.' Still others take seven *seers* for 'depreciation of the oxen.' And then there's the water tax—a flat five rupees per acre."

"Water tax?" I asked. "Is that a government tax?"

"No. It is what the landlord pays to the irrigation company for water—two rupees eight annas per acre of *chara* (fodder), or as much as three rupees eight annas for wheat. But he doesn't want the peasant to bother his head with too much figuring, so the landlord just charges him a flat five rupees per acre for water tax. . . ."

"And then there's the *jajri* fee," Kishan Chand mused.

"What's that?"

"Oh, thirty rupees in most places

* The *seer* is the basic "standard" weight of India. In the South it is equal to two pounds, in northern India, 2.2 pounds. Forty *seers* equal one *maund* in either area.

around here. It's what the tenant has to pay the landlord when the tenant's daughter gets married."

"What!"

Kishan Chand nodded solemnly. So did Hardaev Singh, stroking his thin young Sikh's beard.

"But what for?" I demanded. "Why should the tenant pay his landlord when the tenant's daughter gets married? What's the landlord got to do with that?"

"Well," Kishan Chand said thoughtfully, "she drank the landlord's well-water and she breathed the landlord's fresh air all the time she was growing up, didn't she? For that her father must pay."

I halted to mop the sweat streaming from my face. Off in the distance a file of towering camels stalked along beside the highway, each bearing a huge load of cotton bales for the Khanewal gin. Seen through the thin, dry air, Chak No. 18 seemed very close at hand. Yet Kishan Chand had time enough to tell us of the marvel seen by the peasants on May Day before we reached the village well.

MONTHS ago, on that first of May, he said, the peasants from all the countryside along the Northwest Railway had witnessed this thing, a marvel unknown in their time. To the peasants the passage of the trains had marked the hours of the day almost as well as the sun itself. The goods trains and passenger coaches had been as familiar as their own countryside to them since childhood; many of their cousins, brothers, uncles, nephews worked on the railway. They had left the fields to become part of the still-tiny army of Indian industrial workers, whose numbers amount to less than one million in the vast human sea of 400,000,000 people that is India.

On this May Day morning the

seven o'clock train rolled slowly into the Khanewal station as usual. But this time it did not roll out again a few minutes later. Other trains rolled up behind it, and stopped, until the double line of them stretched both ways from Khanewal for miles. Peasants who could see the halted trains from their fields trudged across the sands to find out what was going on.

At the station they found the train crews standing about the engine of the seven o'clock passenger train while the divisional superintendent harangued them. The peasants listened to him as curiously as the crewmen. The Anglo-Indian superintendent alternately cajoled and threatened the men standing before him, speaking to them in fluent Punjabi. But the Red Flag Railway Union members listened as impassively as the peasants. After a time the superintendent stopped talking and disappeared within the station. In a few moments he emerged again, accompanied by the station master, the telegrapher's assistant, both the sweepers and the restaurant crew. The superintendent and the sweepers mounted to the cab of the slow-breathing locomotive. The rest of the pickup crew scattered along the coaches of the train.

Now the silent railwaymen moved. All of them sat down on the rails before the locomotive, two rows of silent, waiting men. The train whistle

screamed repeatedly as the superintendent tugged upon the cord. Not one man moved from his seat upon the rails. The great driving wheels ground slowly once around as the superintendent eased back the throttle. No one moved. Royal Indian Navy cadets craned out the windows of their coach compartments, calling back and forth in low, excited voices.

Again the train whistle screamed, an interminable series of short blasts this time, followed by one long-drawn, dying whistle as the boiler pressure fell. Then the superintendent climbed down again from the cab. He was followed into the station by the make-shift crew. Most of the railwaymen remained seated on the rails; a few rose to greet their friends among the watching peasants with grave courtesy.

But railwaymen and peasants alike fell silent again as a column of marching men emerged from the dust cloud raised by their feet along the road from Khanewal. The constabulary halted in the shade on the western side of the station, grounding their rifles, mopping the sweat and grit from their faces, and peered curiously about them at the standing engine, the passenger-laden cars with the cadets still craning out of them, the other halted trains stretching far down the track in either direction. They stared at the strikers on the rails, who silently ig-

nored them. Their commanding sub-inspector vanished through the superintendent's doorway.

SHORTLY he reappeared. With a few commands he ranged his men before the station in a single line paralleling the strikers seated on the rails. The superintendent and his crew emerged and made their way to the locomotive cab and the coaches. Now the sub-inspector took his post at the end of the line of riflemen nearest the engine. Jerking his revolver from his holster he barked further commands. Rifles were thrown to shoulders; the constabulary squinted down their sights at the men seated on the rails.

Then the sub-inspector addressed the strikers, waving his revolver at them as he spoke. If they did not clear the rails immediately, he told them, he would order his men to fire.

No one moved.

The sub-inspector barked a command. All down the line of constabulary there was the merged clack of rifle bolts. He waited, glancing up and down the parallel lines of seated strikers.

No one moved.

A coach compartment door banged open, loud in the stillness. The sub-inspector glanced up. Other compartment doors clattered open as the naval cadets poured out of their coaches, their rifles in their hands. The sub-inspector glanced uncertainly at the seated strikers, at his line of riflemen, then back again to the running cadets. Now they too were forming into a line at the orders of a rating who had assumed command. They ranged themselves between the seated strikers and the constabulary, who still stood with their rifles to their shoulders.

Again there was the rattle of rifle bolts as the cadets jammed cartridges into the firing chambers of their pieces. Only their commander had not raised his rifle to his shoulders, but stood holding it waist-high, pointed at the sub-inspector's belly, his finger inside the trigger guard. Leaning forward over his rifle he addressed the sub-inspector in Hindustani.

"If you fire, we will fire," he said.

The sub-inspector glared wordlessly back at the young cadet. By now his pistol arm hung limp at his side, the muzzle of the revolver pointing to the ground. Along the constabulary line two or three men let their rifle butts slip slowly from their shoulders.



Illustration by Amen.

Still their commander did not speak. Other rifle butts began to slide toward the ground as though the constabulary were overcome with their weight. The sub-inspector peered down the line of constabulary once more. Only a few of his men still held their rifles level, and even these were wavering. In a choked, tired voice the sub-inspector ordered his men to ground arms, then moved them off again into the shade beside the station.

Again the divisional superintendent dismounted from the locomotive cab. He was followed into his office by the other station attendants who had composed his train crew.

By now the cadets had broken without command, and were mingling with the strikers and peasants, talking in young, excited voices. Some cadets squatted on their heels, cradling their rifles between their knees as they talked with those strikers who still had not moved from the rails. Two men rose from the rails and mounted to the engine cab, where they flung a few shovels of coal into the firebox; then they rejoined the other railwaymen. The constabulary lounged in the shade, half-dozing in the heat. The peasants watched silently, storing up memories of this wonder.

"There was no more trouble that day," Kishan Chand said. "The strike ended on schedule at eleven. But that was not the end of it, as you will see."

BY NOW we had come to a broad-parapeted well atop which a water buffalo circles endlessly, turning the vertical axle extending down into the well, raising water to the thirsty land. One of the old men from Chak No. 18 squatted on an arm jutting out from the curving timber to which the beast was yoked, goading his haunches with a pointed stick whenever he showed signs of slowing to a stop.

Kishan Chand disappeared into one of the single-story, windowless mud-huts, leaving Hardaev Singh and me seated on a log below the well. Shortly the peasants summoned by Kishan Chand began to gather about us in a circle of squatting men, relaxed and silent. Most of them kept their eyes fixed upon the ground, rather than embarrass the strangers by staring. But from time to time one of them would glance briefly up at us. All the dark faces had the same corner-crinkled eyes common to plainsmen, seafarers and fliers the world over. Kishan Chand rejoined us with the last of

the men he had been able to find, squatting down among them.

There was a silence, and then Kishan Chand began to urge the circle of men to tell us of their troubles. Hardaev Singh questioned the circle without response until at length one Moslem in a dirty crimson turban, ragged and thin as his fellow-farmers, began to talk. They were all sub-tenants, he told us, living on part of the 1,150 acres that their three landlords leased jointly from the British land company. For these forty-six "squares" (*murrabas*—about twenty-five acres each) their landlords paid an annual rent of 100,000 rupees, or a little less than the cash that four squares of cotton would yield.

Only eighteen of the forty-six *murrabas* were tenanted; each family farmed about four acres of its own. But even on their own land, for which they paid the landlord an annual rent of ten rupees, they were not permitted to raise vegetables or any other food crop not profitable to the landlord. And there was the strictest accounting for all produce.

"If we could raise our own crops without interference," the turbaned Moslem said, "we would have enough to eat and clothes to wear. As it is—well, our landlords fined Triloch Chand thirty rupees for picking a melon to eat from his own land—a watermelon that costs about one anna.

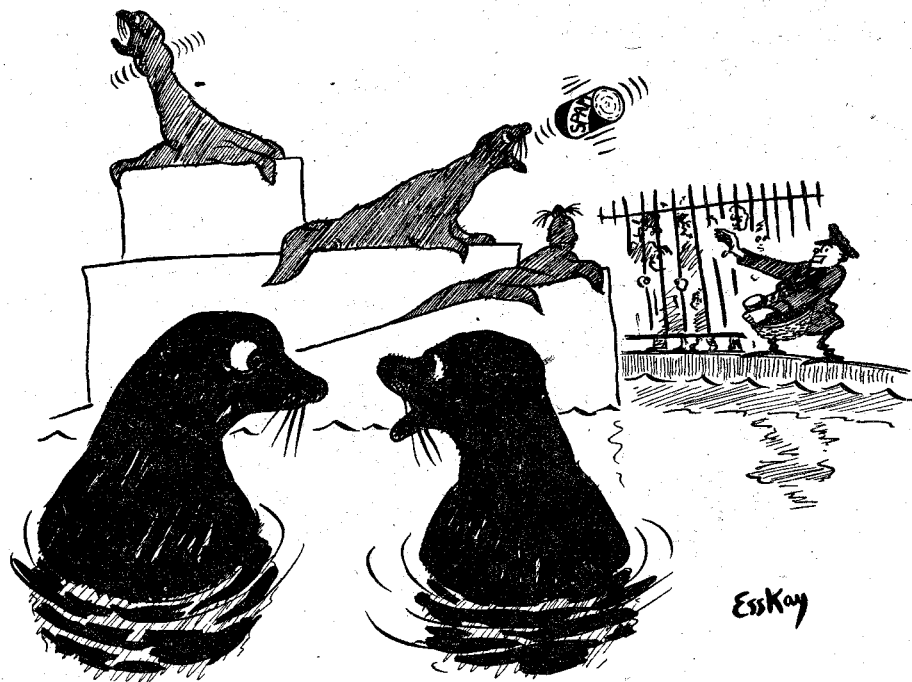
"We pay the water tax, we bring our own seed to the land, we use our own farm animals," he said, looking

up at us with sombre eyes. "For this the *raj* says we will receive half what the land yields. But we never do; the landlord takes here and takes there until there is scarcely anything left to divide. Now he tries to rob us of the cotton crop."

There had been little trouble in the spring when the wheat was harvested—oh, a few fines here and there, short-weighting and other standard landlord practices. But the claims made by the landlords in the spring were as nothing to those they made when the cotton bolls burst. Then they told the peasants that only the cotton from the tenanted land would be divided half-and-half. Why? Because since the twenty-eight squares of untenanted land were worked in common, no tenant had a legal claim to share in its yield.

In secrecy and by night a few of the peasants in Chak No. 18 took counsel among themselves. From among themselves they chose an emissary to lay their case before the Moslem League in Khanewal. But their emissary was rebuffed: Feroze Hus-sain, one of their three landlords, was a power in the League in Khanewal.

Another emissary was sent to Khanewal, to the sub-district headquarters of the Indian National Congress Party, on the following day. But he found things much the same with the Congress as with the League: Tek Chand Batia and Ram Chand Kukar, the other two landlords, were dominant Congress members.



"I wonder what's causing the herring shortage?"

Sitting in the darkness within the hut the peasants who heard the second report were long silent. Then Deva Singh, Sikh veteran with fifteen years' service in the British army, began to speak. Their brothers on the railway had some mysterious source of strength, he said, that was more powerful than the division superintendent, more powerful than the constabulary, more powerful than the *raj* itself. For he had learned that the trains had not only stopped in Khanewal: they had been halted all over India, from the Indus to the Ganges, the Punjab to Madras. Would this strength give them power also, that they might take their half of the cotton?

They talked long into the night. Before dawn many men from Chak No. 18 left the mudhuts to assemble near the Khanewal station, where the railway union was to hold a divisional conference. Deva Singh acted as their spokesman. He told the railwaymen of the cotton they had planted, how they had tended it through the long, burning summer and how, now that the fields were snowy as the far-off Himalayan mountaintops, they were denied their proper share.

THE railwaymen listened intently. For many of them, Deva Singh stirred almost-forgotten memories of past labor in the fields of the Punjab. Then another Sikh rose to his feet to reply for the railway union. Gyan Singh, leader of the Red Flag union and veteran of the long struggle to organize the Northwest Railway, told the peasants they must stand together for their rights. If they stood united before their landlords, their landlords would not dare deny them their share of the crop.

"Go back to the village," he said. "Demand what is yours by right and by the law. We will stand behind you."

This they did. Their landlords listened to Deva Singh assert their right to half the cotton. Then Tek Chand Batia told him and the peasants standing eight-deep behind him that they had no claim to the cotton from the common land. It all belonged to them, to the landlords, he said.

Two days later Gyan Singh came to the village as he had promised, bringing with him Bishan Singh, an organizer for the peasant leagues. The peasants told them of the landlords' refusal to share the cotton as they all

THE WINDS OF HISTORY

History dies on the hour, the half the quarter
striking of the giant clocks in every town hall
yet lives on forever divided into each man;

So, sister, think: you are Saint Teresa
hearing voices among the olive trees
or are you the great whore of Babylon?

And you, brother, think: are you the slave
who will not be otherwise or the clerk in whom
stir the heavenly movements of a Talleyrand?

For we are what they made us, we are
what they taught, we are leaves of the giant
jungle vine of history which dies and grows:

The ashes of Hitler and FDR, blown
on the winds of the stratosphere
have always battled to the death
in each Tarawa corpuscle of every man's bloodstream:

We were all there in the evening at the Garden of
Gethsemane.

JAMES NEUGASS.

sat about the village well. There was long discussion. Then Bishan Singh told them that they must go forth to the fields and pick the cotton, dividing it exactly themselves — half for the landlords, half for those who had worked the fields. At first many were fearful and would not go into the cotton fields. But their hearts grew big with courage as Gyan Singh talked to them. He led them into the fields with Bishan Singh, under the slogans that the peasants had chosen for the task:

"On the fields, half-and-half!"

"Red Flag our flag!"

By the third day all the cotton had been picked. Half of it lay piled in the landlords' sheds, half lay in the mudhuts waiting to be carried to the Khanewal gin. Then, the Moslem narrator told us, forty-five constables and three sub-inspectors appeared in the village. (This figure was promptly contradicted by one of the village elders, who said, no, there had been fifty constables with the three sub-inspectors. "I know how many there were," he said positively. "I had to cook for them.")

The senior sub-inspector decreed that two of the landlords should meet with two tenant representatives until they arrived at some solution satisfactory to both parties. Landlords Tek Chand Batia and Feroze Hussain spoke for themselves and their absent partner. Deva Singh and Shahadat

Batte represented the tenants. The argument went on for two days, until the senior sub-inspector tired of it and called the villagers out to hear the decision, which he said must be made at once.

But it was still a deadlock. The landlords refused to yield one *seer* of their claims to the cotton. Shahadat Batte and Deva Singh stood fast by the right of the peasants to one-half the cotton they had raised.

For such refusal to compromise with the uncompromising landlords, both peasant representatives were promptly flung into the Khanewal jail, along with Gyan Singh and Bishan Singh. Another thirty-nine peasants picked at random from among the most stalwart were jailed with them. The rest of the men in the village fled to the jungles to escape the landlords' vengeance. Their womenfolk moved into Khanewal, or sought safety in the homes of relatives in other villages. The constabulary broke into all the mudhuts, where they seized the cotton and dumped it in with the landlords' share.

Of those arrested, seventeen were tried and found guilty under Sections 105 and 107 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which deal with "dangers to the peace." Another twenty-six were arraigned for the crime of "dacoity" — defined by the code as "armed robbery in bands of five or more members." They too were given

long jail sentences. One peasant was released unconditionally.

Now our Moslem narrator was silent again, watching a handful of dry sand trickle through his fingers. I took off my solar topee to mop my face, gazing off over the flat, endless plains. An old Sikh with the mad eyes of lifelong hunger burning in his noble face stared intently at me from across the circle. Suddenly he leaned forward and spoke in a low, accusing tone:

"We are poor. You can burn us, shoot us, kill us. We are at your mercy."

Hardaev Singh touched the old khakis that I wore, and indicated my solar topee. Because of my uniform-like clothing the old man had taken me for an English official investigating the disturbance at Chak No. 18.

The turbaned Moslem looked up at us again.

"Here in this village we have always lived at peace together — Moslems, Hindus, Sikhs," he said. "But now our landlords are trying to set us against one another."

No one spoke again. At length we rose, and I looked about once more at this village, so like hundreds of thousands of other Indian villages—villages for which even the nineteenth century has not yet dawned. The water buffalo still circled endlessly about the high, wide parapet of the well, the wooden gears still creaked.

We plodded back toward the highway again through the loose sand, the gritty wind blowing steadily in our faces. Hardaev Singh told me as we walked that since the May Day strike of the railwaymen the peasant leagues had shot up throughout the Multan District like spring wheat.

"Chak No. 18 is not alone in this struggle," he said. "There are hundreds of other villages where such things are happening. But now the peasants know that they are not alone in their villages. This is no longer the 'dark' Punjab."

"Yes," Kishan Chand said, "when such things happen the people learn the strength that they have together. Perhaps some day the peasants of the Multan will be as strong as my own people in the Jullundur District. Who can tell?"

Mr. Izard served last year as a correspondent in India for Telepress, an Anglo-European news agency.

The Webbs

As I Knew Them

An American friend writes of the noted pioneers who sought out the truth and boldly proclaimed it.

By JOHN A. KINGSBURY

*"Officially, the Right Honorable the Baron and Lady Passfield are a superextraordinary pair," wrote Bernard Shaw. "I never met anyone like them, either separately or in their most fortunate conjunction. Each of them is an English force; and their marriage was an irresistible reinforcement."**

LORD PASSFIELD, SOCIALIST, IS DEAD," read the headline in the *New York Times* of October 14, announcing the death of Sidney Webb, who, according to the dispatch from London, "was the main architect of British socialism." At the age of 88, after a long illness, Sidney Webb died at Passfield Corner, Liphook, Hampshire—the charming but unpretentious estate where he and his brilliant, devoted wife had lived and worked together in single blessedness for many years, "two minds of but a single thought, two hearts that beat as one." Their ashes are to be buried in Westminster Abbey, there, in Kipling's words, to "walk with kings—nor lose the common touch."

To the Webbs' hospitable door a path was beaten by men and women from the four corners of the earth. Plain people, and their leaders, scholars and statesmen seeking knowledge, wisdom or guidance—all were equally welcome.

Beatrice Webb, after a brief illness, died April 30, 1943, at the age of 85. In reply to my message of sympathy, Sidney Webb wrote: "I am, as you will realize well, very lonely without her, but it is with pleasure I tell you she was working up to the end, and keeping her interest in all that is happening in these times. It is good to

know how you and your wife appreciate my wife. I know she always enjoyed her correspondence with you both." Doubtless this is typical of the reply he wrote hundreds of sorrowing friends. No engraved response for him.

The intellectual and literary partnership of the Webbs was indeed unique. It is not surprising to one who knew their work that they appeared to the public as "two typewriters that clicked as one." It is quite true that the Webbs were "the perennial and unailing source of all effective socialist propaganda" in England, but it is misleading to say that Sidney Webb was "the main architect of *modern* (italics mine) British socialism." He was the head and front of the Fabian Society, and the co-coiner of the famous phrase: "The inevitability of gradualness." Finally, however, the Webbs found that their Fabian philosophy could not stand the crucial test of the Russian revolution, "which changed crude Czarism into Red communism." As Shaw wrote in 1942, "The history of Communist Russia for the past twenty years in the British and American press is a record in recklessly prejudiced mendacity. The Webbs waited until the wreckage and ruin of the change was ended, its mistakes remedied, and the Communist state fairly launched. Then they went to investigate it. In their last two volumes they give us the first really scientific analysis of the Soviet state, and its development of our political and social experiments and institutions, including trade unionism and cooperation, which we thought they had abolished. No Russian could have done this all-important job for us. The Webbs knew England, and knew what they were talking about. No one else did. They

* An Essay on the Webbs, 1942.