

Book Reviews

Rampur Is Only One Village

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Village Life In Northern India by Oscar Lewis. University of Illinois Press, 1958. Pp 380. Price ' 7.50.

TRADITIONALLY nations have been represented, to themselves and to each other, by their governing classes. The Roman, one remembers, was a Senator; the supposedly typical Englishman is a member of the Establishment; Indian culture often turns out on further inspection to be Brahmin culture.

This is because, normally, the governing classes are also educated. They have therefore the capacity as well as the power to impress their image of themselves on the world. In the past this did not perhaps matter very much. Today, in the new world of egalitarianism and the socialistic pattern, it matters desperately. When everybody has a vote, everybody is a member of the governing classes. If, therefore, government is expressing coherently the people's ideals, and if nations are to have some understanding of each other's aspirations, the ways of thought and life of all sections of society, and not just of the few educated and influential, must be recorded and made known.

The example has been set largely by America, the country in which everybody has belonged to the governing classes longest. As the common man accedes to power elsewhere, sociology takes roots in other countries too. Here the great increase in the importance of the villager since independence has naturally been followed by a series of village studies, studies in the publication of which the 'Economic Weekly' has been the pioneer.

Of these studies Professor Lewis's book is one. Professor Lewis is primarily an observer and recorder. His one really wild generalisation is his title. His is not a study of Northern India; or even of Haryana. It is a study of a particular village of Dabas .Tats in the vicinity of Delhi. A village in Meerut or Hisar would have less bicycles, less people employed outside; probably less matriculates. A village in the East U P or Bihar would have a quite different caste structure, probably different attitudes to work and different marriage customs, almost certainly a different power distribution.

For his own village of Rampur, however, Professor Lewis is a careful and thorough observer. He gives us all the external facts we need, who owns the land, how the population is divided over castes, how the jajmani system works, how the festivals are observed, how people get married, how they look on the gods, and how they divide up into factions. He does not tell us much of their inner feelings about each other, or of the sort of religious experience the people have, or of what Jats feel about Chamars and vice-versa (as distinct from how they act towards each other in certain well-defined situations). But such description would require a psychiatrist or a novelist, and Professor Lewis does not pretend to be giving us more than sociology.

Within his self-imposed limitations Professor Lewis is admirably comprehensive and beautifully impartial. If he has views on what village life ought to be like, he never intrudes them. He confines himself to telling us what it is like. Unfortunately he often does so with unnecessary jargon and his sociograms are not very clear. And he perhaps exaggerates the importance of factions.

To generalise from what he tells us about Rampur is perhaps to fall into the very pit Professor Lewis has so carefully avoided, but certain of his facts are at least suggestive of wider conclusions. The jajmani system, for instance, is breaking down because the jajman every now and then, tries to pay less, and the kamin occasionally tries to get more. Each time this happens, some jajmans learn to do without kamins by doing the work for themselves and perhaps even for others, and some kamins drift away to other jobs.

Tenancy is not important in this village, only 1/12 of the land is tenant cultivated, but this 1/12 is not recorded; people know enough about land reforms to take care, to get their land recorded as self-cultivated, and when they live in the village or the tenant is a near relation, this is not difficult.

The Delhi revenue records are of a form and kept in a way that seems to invite the patwari to be

corrupt; they have none of the simplicity of the Bombay system. Nevertheless, now that so many villagers have some education, the willingness to pay the patwari's bribes has obviously gone down. He is having a temporary hey day because of consolidation, but once consolidation is over, his already lessened opportunities will lessen further.

The education which is defeating the patwari is now becoming general. Nearly all the Jat boys go to school, for instance, and about 1/3 of the girls. One wonders what a generation of this will do to the festivals people so seldom seem to worry about the meaning of, or to the traditional ways of dealing with disease which Professor Lewis describes so carefully.

The dominant fact about Rampur, however, is that it is a Jat village. Two thirds of the inhabitants are Jats and an even larger percentage of the land belongs to them. They control everything; when they quarrel with the other castes, they nearly always win. This is perhaps the situation Pandit Nehru hopes to break down by co-operative joint farming; but one wonders why a Rampur Jat should ever agree thus to destroy his own importance.

Rampur is only one village. Before one draws conclusions for national policy, one needs a score of studies like Professor Lewis's. But they need to be made quickly, for at present policy is made by urban intellectuals for the satisfaction of urban intellectuals. After all they do not know what the villagers would like.

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