

Where serfs are taking on sahibs

FROM A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT IN INDIA

Can the Hindu caste system, which has always held India's 576,000 villages together, survive the coming of modern farming? Evidently not, if one looks to the prospering Punjab, where the familiar trinity of tractors, combines and electric power is rapidly displacing human labour. Strip away the age-old economic basis for caste—the exchange of labour and services for grain and fodder—and the old sahib-serf relationship shatters like overripe wheat.

At least it does for the untouchables, whom Mahatma Gandhi called harijans, the children of God. Long the true tillers of the soil in rural Punjab, doing much of the actual fieldwork under land-owning Jat overlords, the harijans got a rude shock in 1967 when new Mexican-bred dwarf wheat suddenly made many Jats rich. In a fast shift from subsistence agriculture to modern commercial farming, incomes soared and a struggle began to see who got what. The harijans lost out and millions deserted the fields for jobs in nearby, newly prosperous towns.

The Jats still don't know what hit them. Many evidently confused the old subservience and respect with their own inherent superiority (since they are generally, but not always, taller and fairer, there is a racial element too.) For a time they plugged the labour gap with seasonal migrants from the poorest areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, an alien, often pathetic lot, with a different language and culture. Now, as India's agricultural revolution moves down the Ganges towards Calcutta, even this labour source is drying up.

One solution is more mechanisation. But this makes farms of less than 10-12 acres uneconomical. The number of poorer Jats going bankrupt is growing; so is the number of alcoholics and opium-eaters. Inevitably the biggest land-owners are evading legal 18-acre-per-family ceilings to amass more land. This Punjab phenomenon is the sort of thing that can be expected to happen in large areas of India where modern farm science takes hold and labour, land and rent come to be treated as commercially negotiable property.

Take the story of one Punjabi village, Ghungrali, 180 miles north of Delhi in the green revolution's heartland. The

village is inhabited by 1,644 people, one third Jats, who own 65 farms, and two thirds harijans, who used to cultivate the land. The revolution began with Ghungrali's first tubewell in 1953. The first fertiliser was used in 1960, the first tractor in 1962, the first test plot of Mexican-bred dwarf wheat in 1965. Two years later this high-yielding variety was sown on all 1,370 acres of the village's wheatland. Ghungrali has never looked back.

The biggest changes have come in the past two or three years. Now there are 107 tubewells, mostly powered by electricity, which blankets the Punjab, 40 tractors, two villager-owned Dutch combines and giant East German ones hired out by state agencies. Consumption of chemical fertiliser has grown from nothing to 800 tons a year and biogas plants to supply both cooking fuel and fertiliser are being installed as fast as people can afford them (cost: \$150). Underground piped irrigation (to avoid evaporation) is catching on.

It might have all peaked out two years ago, when a hailstorm destroyed the wheat harvest. The Jats hastened to plant rice for the first time and made twice the cash profit they had ever made on wheat. This year triple-cropping is being introduced, a wheat-pulse-rice rotation made possible by a new 60-day miracle pulse, *moong*, which fixes nitrogen from the air into the soil and cuts down the need for fertilising the next crop by two thirds.

Almost all the Jats are in debt—on average \$5,000-\$10,000, up from \$1,000-\$2,000 in 1970. Yet with a medium-sized holding of 15 acres (land, house, machinery and all), a Jat family's assets come to \$50,000-\$60,000 at Indian prices. The costs of inputs are rising, and the Jats talk much of demanding "parity", but the price they are getting—112 rupees per 100 kilos of wheat—is already higher than the equivalent American price.

The harijans have been reduced to a rural proletariat and they like it. Fully 80% of the men from Ghungrali's 160 harijan families now commute by bicycle to nearby towns to work in mills or factories (making 10-12 rupees a day compared with 5, plus meals, for field

work). Most harijans took leave during the April-May harvest when the Jats, unable to hire enough combines or migrant workers, were forced for the first time to offer their fields on contract; the harijans, by putting wives and children to work, earned more than ever before.

For anyone who had seen past harvests, when large groups of Jats and harijans cut side by side, joking and often competing to see who cut the faster, the spectacle of small harijan families mowing while most Jats sat idly at their wells was sad to see. The former interdependence is almost gone and with it Ghungrali's old sense of community.

Few seem to mind. The richest Jats talk of the need for 100-acre farms to "really mechanise and solve the labour problem". Only the poorer Jats, deeply in debt, speak nostalgically of former times when "everybody worked together like a family" and "there was unity".

To the harijans their emancipation means "going out and working and talking freely", and "not having these Jats rule over us; they can no longer treat us like animals". A few have regrets: "If the Jats paid more generously we would not go outside to work. They are too greedy". But very few. Instead old resentments are now openly voiced: "Indira Gandhi was good to us. Once she sent money to us but the Jats objected. She also had a plan to allot land to harijans, but again the Jats objected". (Mrs Gandhi, whose party secretary, Buta Singh, is a harijan Sikh, remains a heroine to low-caste Punjabis, who, unlike the poor in other northern states, were never subjected to forced sterilisation.)

The new harijan credo of "now we are free" and "my sons will never work for the Jats" has swept village Punjab, where India's old Upstairs, Downstairs, sahib-and-slavey days seem gone for good. Atrocities against harijans by higher castes, who do not seem to want to grasp the economic reasons for what is happening, get reported in the Indian press almost every day. Having proved incompatible, the ancient Hindu caste system and India's unstoppable agricultural revolution are on a collision course. It could decide India's politics for a long time to come.