



India's Road Ahead

ELIZABETH W. WILSON

It is one thing to give capital and tools — products of individual enterprise and saving — to the people of an underdeveloped area, but it's something else to help them grasp and use the philosophy of freedom. The following article relates how some villagers of India learned to help themselves — without government direction, subsidy, or foreign aid:

IN LANGALBERIA, a tiny village near Calcutta, the barefoot and illiterate inhabitants have found a way to improve their standard of living by pulling themselves up by their own nonexistent bootstraps. They have accomplished this near-miracle during the last few years without benefit of government capital or bureaucratic blessings.

The original idea was that of Mr. B. L. Jalan, a Calcutta businessman. He reasoned, "India's greatest source of wealth is the labor of her people. Therefore, her dense population is not a liability, but a real asset."

He went to Langalberia, met the villagers, and suggested to them that each donate an hour of work a day during the busy farming season and twice that when chores were slack, to improve the community. There was much to be

done. The people and their cattle lived in one- or two-roomed mud huts. Usually these were filled with acrid smoke from the cow-dung cakes used as fuel in the stoves.

The only road out of town was a mud path, in many places not more than nine inches in width. It was difficult to get to Calcutta for aid in case of emergency, or even to the next village. When the monsoon rains were heavy, the road was so slippery that it was impassable. If the rains were light, however, the two wells which supplied the village with water might dry up. Then the inhabitants would have to sell their cattle and move elsewhere.

Even in the face of all these hardships and difficulties, the men of Langalberia hesitated to participate in the Jalan scheme. "We cannot do extra work on empty

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bellies," they said. Mr. Jalan told them, "Your ancestors followed that policy; therefore, you and your children are living in poverty. The population is increasing, so there is less for each one. If you have any love for your children, you will give this little bit of hard work now so that they will live better later."

Out of the Mud

Apparently, the arguments appealed to some of the villagers. On the day the project was started, fifty workers and a number of boys turned up. Before they quit, they had converted the nine-inch path into a road ten feet wide for a distance of fifty yards. During the next fortnight, they constructed "a very nice stretch of road," after banking the intervening ponds with bamboo.

The new road was the best possible advertisement that could have been devised for the project. People from nine neighboring villages, on seeing it, asked to be included in the plan. Not only were roads cleared, but they were also leveled so as to be five feet above the adjacent terrain. This was important in the time of the monsoon floods. Later, some were even paved with brick.

Mr. Jalan estimates that a thousand man-days of work will build a mile of road twelve to fifteen

feet wide. If all the workers in India would participate in such a venture, thousands of miles of road could be constructed in short order.

To pave the roads at Langalberia, the people had to learn to make bricks. After a little instruction from trained workers, they became very adept at it, even building the kilns themselves. It is an ideal type of work for untrained laborers because (1) it requires almost no capital since cow-dung can be burned in the kilns and (2) even a tyro can make between forty and fifty bricks an hour.

Soon there were too many bricks for the roads. The surplus was sold and the money used to finance other types of work. For instance, trained well-diggers were hired to direct the sinking of new wells. This was not successful at first because the rains came and filled the pits before water was struck. The work was abandoned for a time, but was resumed successfully later. This was important because irrigation is necessary for Indian agriculture and one-fourth of all the canals in India depend on wells for water.

New Homes

Perhaps the most outstanding accomplishment of the scheme was the gradual — *very* gradual — conversion of mud-hut villages into

communities of model bungalows with two bedrooms, two verandas, a kitchen, a bath, and a privy! When the central committee, made up of leaders from the ten villages, found that bricks could be made so cheaply, they offered any family a bungalow, provided that two of its members would work one and a half hours a day for two years. The idea was that during the first eighteen months they would make between sixty and seventy-five thousand bricks. Twenty thousand would be needed for the house. The rest would be sold to buy things the workers could not make, like cement. Almost immediately, a hundred families signed up for new homes.

— and Schools

In Poleghat, near Langalberia, instead of selling all the surplus bricks, the villagers decided to use some to build a school. As 82 per cent of the people of India are illiterate, an important part of the Jalan plan was to open night schools. Nine were started during the first two years. They had an average attendance of 350 pupils who ranged in age from ten to fifty! Jalan writes, "This shows an urge in the masses for education. The school at Poleghat has been a means of great impetus and inspiration to the people."

Some progress has been made in

other less spectacular fields. Ponds have been stocked with fish, which have afforded a variation in the diet as well as increased income. Home owners have been encouraged to plant papaya trees, which bear fruit for three years. Jalan estimates that during that period a hundred trees would net the owner an annual income of at least 1000 rupees (about \$200). "This is tantamount to spending about one rupee to get 1000 within a year," he writes.

All has not been smooth sailing. Communists and other "interested" parties have done their best to sabotage the work and to wean the laborers away. Owing to seething poverty and the subnormal standard of living of the masses, the people become an easy prey to communist siren songs about government subsidies and the redistribution of wealth (they should say "poverty").

Nevertheless, the plan has succeeded. It has justified the dictum of Thoreau, who, by the way, is much admired in India. He wrote, "I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor." That is particularly true in these days when, as Jalan says, "the problem of economic uplift is the crux of the problem of democracy and world peace today."

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THREE GREAT

Deceptions

WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

IT IS HIGH TIME to recognize for what they are — great deceptions — three ideas in economics which have enjoyed much support and wide practice in our time. These are:

1. That nationalization of basic industries and natural resources, with a planned economy thrown in, makes for a higher state of well-being.

2. That the Welfare State is a kind of manna from the skies, given free to its beneficiaries.

3. That people become richer by multiplying paper money symbols of wealth.

DECEPTION 1: Nationalization makes for a high state of well-being

The biggest experiment in the nationalization of everything from steel mills to barber shops was carried out in the Soviet Union. It is also the one of longest standing, with the fortieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution coming up in November 1957. This experiment has been imitated, with some modifications, in Red

China and in the satellite states of Europe and Yugoslavia.

So nationalization and planned economy are no longer theoretical ideas; they can be weighed in the scales of actual results. The most significant and unvarying result of communist regimes is that large numbers of people, unable to oppose them at the polls, have been voting against them with their feet, by running away.

This flight from communism, often at the risk of life and liberty, is a most impressive plebiscite. No one knows exactly how many Russians are living outside their country as refugees from communism. But if one adds up the first wave of fugitives in the first years after the Revolution, the smaller number who left between the two wars, and the second big wave of Soviet citizens who at the end of World War II found themselves in Germany and Austria as war prisoners or factory workers and resisted all attempts to force them to return, the figure is certainly well over

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