

THE INDIAN VILLAGE

My gifted and admired friend, Mr. Venkataramani has, with his poet's soul and conjuror's wand, here drawn a cheering and charming portrait—and it ought to be placed in the hands of every Indian Schoolboy :—Professor K. Sundararaman in the Foreword.

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K. S. VENKATARAMANI

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THE INDIAN VILLAGE

BY

K. S. VENKATARAMANI

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MYLAPORE, MADRAS

*First Published as reprint from 'Renascent India' :
February 1932*

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To
The Peace and Prosperity
Of One-fifth of the Human Race
Who Live in the Seven Lakhs of
Indian Villages.

FOREWORD

THE cry of "Back to our Villages" has been persistently heard for several years past. Those who left the villages two generations back in search of the new education and the advantages it offered through modernisation in outlook and in social life, now find that times have further changed and produced new men with new needs, ideals, and aspirations, and that therefore the towns to whose formation and growth they have themselves contributed are no longer suited to them. Many wish to go back, as they recall the idyll of the old village still living not only in men's memories, but also in the pictures

which men's imaginations have formed of it from the traces still left all over the land. My gifted and admired friend, Mr. Venkataramani has, with his poet's soul and conjurer's wand, here drawn a cheering and charming portrait of what it was and might be made to be again, and it ought, in my view, to be placed in the hands of every Indian schoolboy.

Many landholders, cultivating peasants, and even workmen still engaged in rural industry of one kind or another stick on to their lands and tenements or workhouses in spite of the extremities to which they have been reduced by failures of various kinds, and chiefly through the non-adjustment of supply and demand. Our *novi homines*, having hitherto prospered and played their parts in the organized life of the new world of towns and cities, cannot

return to the villages unless their restoration—now taking place or to be begun under the efforts either of enthusiastic individuals or our new boards of local panchayats—attains its full limit of efficiency not only from the undying elements of vitality in the ancient organisms still remaining scattered all over the land, but through the introduction therein of new sources of amusement, entertainment, and enjoyment—for example, the club, the reading-room, the theatre, etc.—to which they have become accustomed in our modern urban civilisation. Let me conclude by⁹ expressing the hope that my friend Venkataramani's vision and portraiture of the Indian village will have the widest possible circulation and will help, too, in bringing about such a universal reconstruction of India's rural

life and culture as will prove one of the prime factors in our regaining of that creative joy and peace which her ancient strength of wisdom had endowed as her lasting possessions during untold ages of plenteous and disciplined freedom.

Kumbakonam, }
20th Dec. 1931 }

K. SUNDARARAMAN

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I

THE Indian village is ever worth a serious study as an ancient rendering of a fine civic ideal. Now it has a living attraction. For, 'back to the village' is the song of renascent India. It is a preliminary to our achieving anything great. Before India can do her share of work for the commonweal of the world, she must put her own house in order, and cleanse the feeding sources of her own genius.

In the past, it was our village life that kept our culture pure and intact, the flame

steady amidst dust-laden gusts of wind. Conquest and invasion did not injure us or break the unity of our life. They were assimilated at the expense of a few military adventurers and ambitious political dynasties, rendering the national pulse only the more live and vigorous for such cleansing.

So careful and wise was the distribution of the life-centres of our polity. They were never gathered together into an ugly knot. These tiny village republics acted like the cells in the respiratory organ, and cleansed the impurities of an ever-growing people. Coral-like, they stood the tide of time and assured for India cultural unity, continuity and permanence. The Indian village is steeped in the sweetness and tradition of a continuous life with which

India has not blessed many of her institutions.

II

Why? Where is the magic in village life? The answer is, man is both gregarious and solitary—gregarious for gathering experiences, and solitary that he may chew the cud in loneliness and leisure, and assimilate them in a mood of transmuting rapture. Man too much alone destructively feeds upon himself; too much in the crowd he becomes a mere twig in the sea without drive or initiative. Village life beautifully harmonises the two, and prepares man for a higher plane of action, a simpler and more fruitful existence.

The Indian village, as a serious and successful social experiment in this direc-

tion, deserves a critical study. It has a special value both for its own sake as a vital Indian problem, and for the message it seeks to convey to the whole world. Even as mere arithmetic, ninety per cent. of India, one-fifth of the human race, live in the villages and follow the plough.

It is good that attention is now centred on rural problems. It is timely. Disease reminds us of health. Decay brings ideas of renovation. The Indian village has been slowly crumbling into ruin like the pagoda of its own temple. Economists who specialise in world problems, 'ask us to suppress a tear at the happening of the inevitable. They talk of merciless world causes and pitiless economic laws. But thank God, a new wind is now blowing all over with rain-clouds on the sea-line.

III

The pure Indian village is somewhat rare now but not yet extinct. Many of its characteristic features remain. Within the last fifty years the mainspring has snapped. But the wheels have not yet stopped clicking and the hands still continue to show time in obedience to an impulse not yet exhausted.

The true Indian village or a homogeneous group of villages nestling together within the well-marked boundaries of meandering rivers and ancient roads, is always a self-supporting unit. It is a perfect whole, a complete thing not merely in the excellence of its soil and climate but also in the outlook and temper of its citizens. It has a definite atmosphere. It

satisfies the first conditions of decent life. It raises its own corn and oil adequate to nourish its population. It has enough cattle for milk and for agricultural purposes. It has its own artisans to serve the primary needs of civilisation, though not its refinements and luxuries.

Weavers, carpenters, smiths, barbers, washermen and potters work together for the commonweal of the village with a devoted heart, for their interests are well entwined with those of the land-holding classes. For they too hold *maniyam* lands on service tenure from one generation to another, and the *maniyam* is the choicest acre in the village and their pride and pay. The village temple crowns this material framework. It inspires all labour with a common and selfless joy. It pro-

motes and keeps alive the unity and co-operation of the different classes in the village.

The real beauty and strength of the village system lie in the simple harmony between capital and labour. The one is intimate with the other. One works for the other and the need of each, which is limited by a long course of tradition, is the scale of reward. So minimum is the conflict. The village prosperity is firmly secured. Indeed, capital and labour are, to the casual eye, almost indistinguishable.

Every artisan and labourer is paid primarily by an allotment of land in the village, adequate to keep a family in comfort as tropical needs go, though not in luxury. Certain fixed recurring duties are the incidents of the tenure. And extra work is

remunerated by payment in kind—paddy, ragi or maize. The efficient monetary system of the civilized modern world plays little part in this primitive but idyllic society.

The carpenter who fashions the plough and the blacksmith who forges the share, have their *maniyam* lands and free residential quarters. So also the barber, the washerman and the potter. There is hardly a man in the village, who does not look up to agriculture as his primary profession. So everything on which the prosperity of agriculture depends, is carefully looked after. Work has the joy of recreation and the sweat on the brow is a pearl-like drop. For you do not sweat for another.

The manuring of the fields, the clearing

of the silt of the channels, co-operative irrigation and drainage of the fields, tank-digging and temple festivals and sundry repairs are attended to with a fidelity of spirit and devotion of heart that lift common work to the level of a sacred duty. When so many have to be provided with land, none holds so predominant a share as to control or paralyse the small holders. There is practically an even distribution of land in a well-constituted village.

IV

Now we shall consider the internal arrangement for the actual agricultural work in the fields and the administration of a village.

Every labourer or tenant, like the arti-

san, has his own free quarters and his *maniyam* lands, usually half an acre. He is paid also daily wages in kind on active field days. In addition, he has a share in the gross produce varying from ten to twenty-five per cent. He is entitled to certain perquisites which include a pair of clothes on *Deepavali* or *Pongal* and on certain fixed festive days in the year, about half a dozen. Every birth and death in the house of labour is entitled to a commiseration from capital.

There are also a few petty officers. They too are paid mainly by an allotment of land. The *talayari* has his *maniyam*. He is the village watchman, an important person who combines many offices in himself, chiefly police duties and the summoning and organising of labour for

field work. The *niranikan* has also his *maniyam*. His chief duty is to irrigate the fields impartially and attend to the growing crops, be they of the rich or the poor. In addition, he is entitled to a sheaf of paddy on every threshing day in the harvest season.

Then superimposed on this simple frame-work is the celebrated Panchayat system which governs the village. It is a body usually of five and the work is honorary. This village Panchayat was the only effective Government which the average citizen of South India had known and cared for till the British power reached its mighty, centralising arms from Delhi so as to control and shape the ~~smallest inland~~ village.

In the Panchayat, ~~it is~~ the president

who really counts. He is often a hereditary holder coming from a family reputed for its learning, piety and character, and owning a decent share of lands in the village. Neither wealth nor mere intellect by itself had ever commanded great respect in India as now. Mere cleverness and adventurous energy were never rewarded with well-minted and shapely coins. Piety, learning and character were everything.

Theoretically, the chief Panchayatdar has great powers to summon and chastise any one. But tradition and his own broad humanity and culture fix him within the just orbit of *dharma* and village work. The other Panchayatdars act as silent checks on any likely abuse of power by the chief. The one common ideal is

the efficient cultivation of the land and a simple life of peace. If the mind is not very much cultivated in the modern sense with a plethora of books and an array of humid lectures, at least land and life are to the utmost. The weeds are pruned with incessant care. A full, humane and moral life is the reward. Men are indeed golden in the true Indian village like the ripening grains in the fields.

Nature has made everything perishable and the Indian village never attempts to preserve Nature's gifts in the cold storage of coins, copper or silver. So whenever anyone has surplus grains or vegetables that must surely perish sooner or later, he distributes them gladly to his fellowmen on improvement work or religious vows or general philanthropy. What is raised by

co-operative labour is returned to the villagers, if not in the exact ratio of the quality or quantity of work of each benefited, at least fairly and adequately according to the likes and needs of each. So no one is actually unemployed or destitute in a true Indian village. The secret of this prosperity lies in the universal devotion to the plough as the primary source of wealth and the trade seclusion which the village enjoys.

V

The above sketch may seem ideal but it is real even now where the essential conditions obtain. Even to-day there are a few *inam* villages on the banks of the Cauvery which have this loveliness

and peace because of the shelter they have from the raids of modern competitive life.

This idyllic peace is possible only on these conditions of seclusion and simplicity. An agricultural population which has developed a taste for industrial manufactures which a village can never produce without maiming its identity, has rapidly hastened the decay of the Indian village and has almost blotted out within half a century one of the fairest and most ancient of our institutions which survived many changes and onslaughts for over twenty centuries.

In the wake of civilisation new tastes and habits are being acquired which are neither nourishing nor necessary for the higher and truer quests of life. The food-

stuffs of a village are exported in order to buy luxuries which have become necessities by regular use. This severe drain year after year impoverishes the village. Even in an Indian village, there is and will be for a long time to come an unequal distribution of wealth. So what is left is a bare subsistence even for the big landholder because of his acquired taste for needless urban luxuries. The labouring classes suffer acutely, and more and more join their ranks in the general ruin. *Maniyams* have been either annexed by greedy landlords or have become unattractive. For, agriculture has become unprofitable under these conditions. The common co-operative work on which it thrives, such as silt-clearing, manuring of fields and rearing of cattle, are naturally

neglected. The joy in work that springs from a sure harvest, is no more.

Nor these only. The worst evil that has now befallen an Indian village is the quantitative and the qualitative depletion of its best men in the wake of these initial difficulties. The best men, its hereditary *Panchayatdars*, are no more in the village. They have fled to towns for a living, as vakils and clerks duly hoping to become Judges and Magistrates, Collectors and Council Members. Our vision, in the wake of Western ideas, nay our very bones, have become commercialised. Ambition, unreal and ruinous, is driving us away from real and nourishing work. The eddies of the market place have caught our souls. Its shouts and excitement have denied us the sweet voice

of the simple folk and the common joys of humanity.

The remedy is simple on paper but difficult to work out in practice. The habits, ideals, taste and outlook of the people should change from the exotic to the indigenous, from the luxurious to the simple, from the urban to the rural, from the raw new to the ancient old. Simple life should once again be fixed as the ideal for all time.

The Indian village is a national asset, and it is the first duty of renascent India to revitalise the hundreds of Indian villages by reviving the old agencies which rendered the Indian village a little paradise on earth. This sacred duty is clear to one who knows the significance of an Indian village and its importance to the world.

VI

What is the meaning of an Indian village? What is its significance to the world?

The Indian village offers the only solution to the economic ills inherent in every progressive society which remodels itself for a higher stage. It enshrines a great and a human principle. It recognises the fundamental right of man to be paid a salary not in accordance with his skill but in accordance with his needs for honest work done, and paid in the most primary form of wealth, assignment of land. In the eye of the Indian village, wages are equal for all, for stomachs are an equal span for all, be he the cleverest artisan, or the most stupid tiller of the soil.

Energy, intellect, piety and character are best rewarded in India, not in an upward and soaring scale of salaries, but by the real affection and respect of the people. Is this not a lesson to the West and the East? The payment is never sumptuous. For sumptuousness is not at all in the line of our philosophy. We take a pride in limiting our needs. We always honour simplicity, character and piety. We do not worship the mere intellect, for it is after all only a means to make a full man, even as an engine is to a factory.

The Indian village stands for a great principle. Every form of labour must be paid equally, be the worker the highest official or the porter who carries his luggage. For the true economic needs of men are equal, as hunger is the same the

world over—two measures of paddy for each per day. This is the rich cry and the world-message of the Indian village.

The Indian village is a bright crystal which reflects a great civic ideal. It is the most direct and cheapest form of government. It is India's solution to the craze of over-government, costly, grinding, sterile, pale and unshapen, that is now sweeping into an ugly and futile knot the best brains of the world. Simplicity alone can save humanity. The Indian village is the very embodiment of simple life.

The Indian village is not a necessary accident in an agricultural country. It is the fruit of a philosophic enquiry into the highest wheelings and the lowest circlings of man. Our *Rishis* have built it as a her-

mitage for collected humanity on the way-side of evolution. It is an ideally fit abode for men of learning, piety and character. It is the working place for the worker and the cloister for the scholar. The one could change easily into the other, like cloud into rain.

The Indian village is the best reconciliation between the perpetual demand for action which matter makes, and freedom from action which the spirit demands. Even as the body is to the soul, the village is to a body of men—a haven of rest to the water-lashed and storm-bitten ship

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1. Mr. Venkataramani is known to a small but discriminating public as the author of some attractive sketches of Indian village life—*G. T. Garratt in the Nation.*

2. One of the best of Indian writers of to-day is Mr. K. S. Venkataramani.—*Cape Argus.*

3. Mr. Venkataramani is a village prose-poet. He frames a political programme while he plays the lyre.—*The Literary Guide.*

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