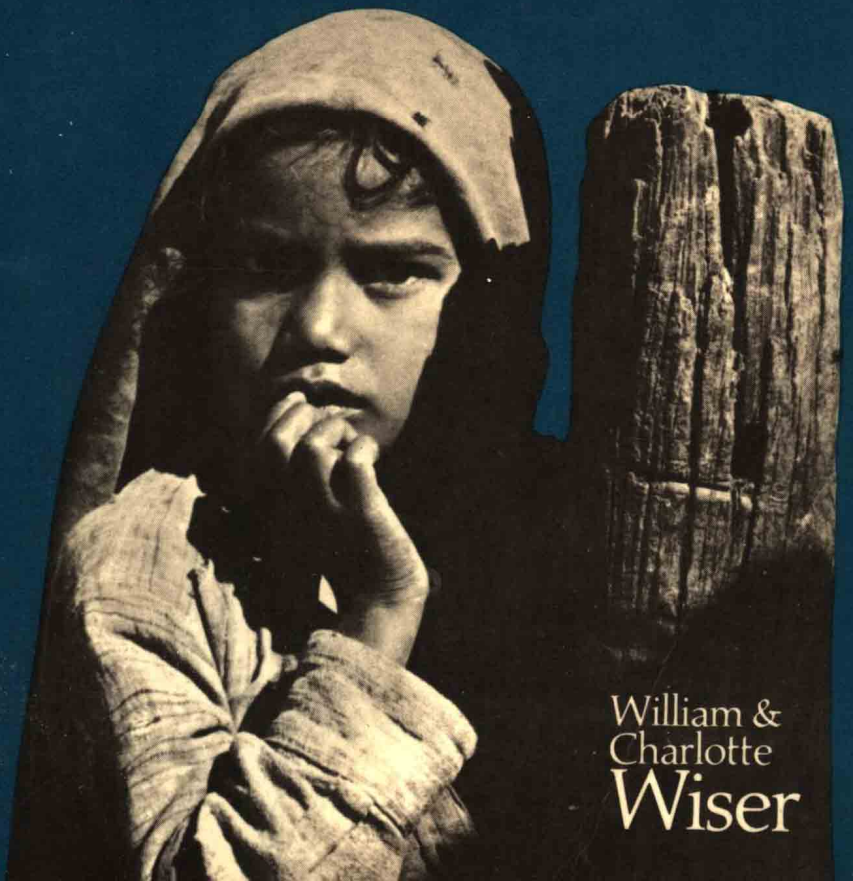
BEHIND MUD WALLS 1930-1960

"A Classic Description of Village India"
-American Anthropologist

With a sequel: The Village in 1970



William & Charlotte Wiser

BEHIND MUD WALLS
1930-1960

with a sequel:
The Village in 1970

BY WILLIAM H. WISER AND
CHARLOTTE VIALL WISER

WITH A FOREWORD BY DAVID G. MANDELBAUM

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Foreword

The Wisers first came to Karimpur, a village east of Agra, to do a brief statistical survey. They remained for five years to write a human document. When their book appeared in 1930 it was one of the few accounts of village life in India as seen by sympathetic observers who knew the villagers as friends and neighbors.

Thirty-two years later, after a new generation had come of age, Charlotte Wiser wrote the additional chapters, telling of her return to her friends in Karimpur and of their lives in the new times. When first she saw the village, its older people had grown up in the nineteenth century, when imperial rule was firm, unchallenged, and quite distant from everyday village affairs. Its youngsters now will reach into another century and are already living in a time when the village is much more closely linked to the larger world. This augmented edition of the book is unique in that it shows the people of an Indian village as seen by the same friend after three decades.

The Wisers are to be counted among those missionaries

who have made notable contributions to anthropology. They knew well that anyone who works to help villagers must first understand what village life is really like if the work is to be effective. William H. Wiser, who died in 1961, wrote illuminatingly about the relations between families of different castes in his monograph, *The Hindu Jajmani System* (Lucknow Publishing House, 1936). He and Mrs. Wiser were among the pioneers in working out the approaches to village development which are today being used throughout India and beyond India. Their efforts in the India Village Service and in teaching about rural realities entered into the shaping of the great Indian government movement for community development.

That movement has brought changes into Karimpur whose full effect is only gradually being felt. Mrs. Wiser finds that in most outward aspects the face of village life is much the same as it was. The daily round is little changed as is the villagers' absorption with their fields and with the tight world of the village and neighborhood. The animals are still quartered in the house or compound. The tasks of the women have altered very little; they still spend long hours in the kitchen enveloped in smoke from the chimneyless hearth.

In deeper respects also, the foundations of village society have not been altered. The family is still the main center of each person's interest and has unquestioned first claim to his loyalty. If there is any choice between family obligations and personal or community advantage, the family comes first. Kinship ties count heavily, even to affecting army recruitment. Caste still separates one village group from another in social relations, and still provides the organizational frame for economic relations. The fundamental concept of society is an hierarchical one. Villagers are zealous to maintain, if possible to advance, their group's status. They must ward off any upward mobility by lower groups which might impugn their own social rank. All villagers can unite in common defense, as

they did in protesting a tax assessment, but concerted action for village improvement is still apt to be thwarted by factionalism; if one side is for something, the other is likely to be against it.

Religion continues as a central fact of village life. Religious observances are part of one's daily life, indicate the main occasions in each person's life cycle, provide the principal markers of accomplishment in the yearly round. More than that, the main savor of village life comes in the setting of religion. Mrs. Wiser mentions taking a truckful of villagers to the nearest place of pilgrimage on the Ganges and notes, "I have never seen a happier crowd." Many others of the familiar, traditional ways continue to bring satisfaction and reward.

Yet the impact of the new ways is apparent and can be summed up in a sentence from the talk with a group of young men, "We have more to eat and more to sell." The villagers now raise hardier, more productive varieties of crops, and the animals are better than they were—a particularly noteworthy advance because, as the Wisers noted in 1930, improvement of the livestock was basic to the improvement of village economy. Farming has become more productive and less uncertain through the use of fertilizers, improved implements, tube-well irrigation. Better roads and bus service have made marketing trips to town easier and more frequent. Transportation greatly improved with the increase of bicycles in the village from two to fifty-six. Owning a bicycle brings some prestige to a villager; more importantly it is a machine that is of considerable economic importance.

A main advance has been in medical care. It was the simple, yet effective, medical aid which the Wisers gave that opened doors to them when they first came to Karimpur. Medical and hospital services outside the village were not then trusted. Now all who are sick are taken to town for medical treatment if they can afford it. Malaria has been much re-

duced, though other public health measures have not yet taken hold. The net result of better health care and more food is clearly demonstrated by the growth of Karimpur's population from 754 to 1129 in the three decades, an increase of 49 percent. This increase slows the benefit of the other gains, because the same lands must now be made to support all these additional people, half as many again as there were thirty years ago.

New crops, new techniques, population spurts have all affected village life before these decades, indeed long before this century. But never before have they come so rapidly and with such cumulative effect. An important element in the new wave is a social invention in public administration, the Community Development Program. It is a novel kind of bureaucracy for India, dedicated to culture change, designed to provide communication between village and research station Its officers do not have to cope with the usual tasks of maintaining society and government; the established governmental organizations do that. It attracts into its ranks many among the educated who sincerely want to devote themselves to helping their countrymen. The people of Karimpur know the program through their *gram sevak*, "village companion," the official who is at the base of the bureaucracy's hierarchy and on whom the success of the program in any one village largely depends.

Karimpur's village companions have achieved marked success with their farming demonstrations, but have been able to accomplish much less where their suggestions for change touched domestic routine and relations among people. The slower response in matters of social organization is not unusual in the history of mankind—social patterns are generally less amenable to change than technological patterns. Social improvements desired by many villagers and by officials alike are not yet within grasp, but the villagers' view, as Mrs. Wiser communicates it, is undespondent: "All are surprised that so much has been done in so short a time."

One of the first measures to stir the village after independence was land reform, the transfer of ownership from a relatively few large landowners to more of the villagers. Not all in Karimpur have benefited from the legislation; it has brought on an increase of wasteful litigation; there still are large flaws in the program, yet, on the whole, it has given an incentive to produce more from the land and thus to raise the standard of living of the family. Contrast the earlier reaction to a new kind of plough which Dr. Wiser urged the villagers to adopt, with the present use of an improved implement. In the last chapter of the 1930 edition, their response is quoted: "We were sorry to disappoint you, but we could not risk such an expensive and doubtful experiment, when the benefits would most likely not stay with us." In 1962 factory-made ploughs were accepted implements, with twenty-six being used to cultivate the village lands.

Technical improvements often raise social problems which require the development of adaptive social inventions. The tube wells installed in Karimpur by the government have been a great boon. But they require a tube-well operator who is a government employee and so was not under the social control of the villagers. Yet his control of the water gave him great power over them and, under the prevailing social conditions, he was likely—whoever he might be—to use that power to augment unofficially his small official salary. To protect the villagers' interest, a water control board of six men of this village has been established, including the president of the village council.

The new village council, the *gram panchayat,* is a key element in Karimpur's development. Elected periodically, endowed with legal and fiscal powers, expected by the government to take the lead in self-help and by the villagers to tap governmental bounty, it is a social device completely different from the traditional *panchayat.* In Karimpur, as in most villages, power did not shift greatly when an elected council was introduced. The outstanding leaders of the new council

are mainly the sons and nephews of the powerful elders. But Karimpur profited by the election of an unusually fine council president who has been able to devote most of his energies to the work of the council with results beneficial to the whole village.

Yet the new social forms require a social substructure which has not been firmly established. The council president indicated this when he told Mrs. Wiser: "There is not one member of the *panchayat* whom I can trust to carry through a job." The villagers' prevailing fear and distrust of each other, rooted in experience and buttressed by poverty, was noted in the earlier chapters, and had not decreased much when the later chapters were written. Trust and mutual confidence are found in the family, in the circle of related families of the caste, even between families of different caste who have traditional association. But there is little tacit reliance of one person upon another on the basis of both being fellow villagers working for the common good of the community.

The common good is well understood when all approach the gods together in cooperative rites, or when all close ranks to ward off alien intrusions, but it is not clearly understood—and this can be seen in the legislatures of great nations as well as in village councils—that each may prosper best when all in a community prosper together. There is rather the idea that the good things of the village are forever fixed in amount, and each person must manipulate constantly to garner a large slice for his own. Hence the characteristic maneuver, which the young men mentioned to Mrs. Wiser, of bribes and counterbribes to the record keeper over a sliver of land. When one man does achieve a larger slice, he is thereby seen as a threat by those who have been superior in status to him; his rise is interpreted as diminishing them in the all-important social hierarchy. So they cannot usually rest easily until he is somehow diminished.

The Wisers do not hide these seamier sides of village life

but describe them for what they are, the outcome of social conditions rather than of the machinations of evil men. As friends, they know the worth and the talent of the villagers, and they are confident that the debilitating social conditions can in time be changed.

Mrs. Wiser now finds that in Karimpur change is in the breeze, the young men are on the move. The school is a principal factor in this. While a casual visitor might find the school far from adequate, with less than a third of the children in attendance and teaching facilities poor, Mrs. Wiser observes it from the vantage of thirty-five years of village improvement, and the promise of much better schooling to come.

There may be an allegorical meaning in the contrast between the earlier and the later discussion of mud walls. In 1930 the villagers said that these walls were a necessary part of each home's defenses, a barrier against the outer world, especially against those covetous officials who came to extort. Paradoxically, a dilapidated mud wall offered better protection because it suggested that those who lived behind it were not worth exploiting. In 1962 the young men stated that what they wanted most of all were walls of baked brick for their houses. No longer did they feel a need to build barriers which had constantly to be repaired—but not too well—after every rain. Now they do not fear that solid walls will attract the notice of predators. They want them, not for better hiding, but for better living.

These young men of Karimpur see village life as more open, with more good things possible, than did their fathers. They seem to have caught some of the fundamental optimism of the Wisers. The Wisers brought to Karimpur an optimism which runs deep in their faith and their country, that if men are under yokes which they do not want to bear, they can cast them off. This hopeful approach has not been absent in India but it has often been subordinated to a less buoyant

view. The optimism of the Wisers' faith has been justified by what Mrs. Wiser observed on her return: "We now see what for many years we had hoped for"; and of government officials: "I am greatly encouraged not only by what government representatives are accomplishing, but even more by their methods."

Much, very much, remains to be accomplished in Karimpur, as in many other Indian villages, before its people have the basic decencies they want for their children. The Wisers have sketched the villagers, their aspirations, their handicaps, soberly yet hopefully, in simple human terms, yet with a perceptiveness not often found in more sophisticated studies or in journalistic reports. In the microcosm of Karimpur we see enacted one of the greatest movements of our times. This edition of the book should not only enlighten students of village life, it should also give encouragement to India's people and well-wishers.

DAVID G. MANDELBAUM

University of California,
Berkeley, January, 1963

Preface to First Edition, 1930

When we came to Karimpur five years ago, to make a survey of the social, religious, and economic life of a fairly typical North India village, we were bent upon gathering facts by the most direct methods possible. But our new neighbors were not prepared for anything so rapid or impersonal. They refused to help us by any route other than the leisurely one of friendship. The result was that we became engaged in numerous neighborly activities which often led us out of sight of our survey, but which we could not conscientiously refuse. We had learned from our neighbors that the road of friendship and service is courteous and just, if not the most efficient. Those who expected a routine survey—as we did when we started out—gave us up long ago as hopelessly enchanted. But the information collected with the help of our village friends, is a document which we hope will be of some value as source material.

Many of our experiences along the way have been too personal to have a place in a survey. Yet they are too reveal-

ing to be discarded. We have set some of them down in this volume for the friends, both Indian and foreign, who have asked us repeatedly to share our village experiences with them. This informal presentation may be more interesting, and perhaps more helpful, than the detailed information of a survey. We have limited ourselves to those experiences which helped us most to understand our village neighbors, and those which were most challenging. We have included the latter that they might in turn challenge the young men and women, many of whom we know, who because of special training and gifts, or because their fathers own villages, are peculiarly fitted to serve village folk if they choose. As in other countries, interest in rural problems is growing rapidly in India. Since our coming to Karimpur, a number of training schools and institutes for prospective rural workers have sprung up; and there have been an increasing number of speeches and articles on the needs, the conditions, and the handicaps of the peasant. We want to use whatever influence and knowledge we have to encourage a healthy growth of interest based on careful study rather than on sentiment.

A mistake which most of us have made when we have gone straight from our town environment to the village is that we have expected villagers to react like college graduates or sophisticated town dwellers. We have criticized them when they have fallen short of our expectations, while the fault lay with us. Gradually we have learned what others before us have learned, that the ordinary village farmer is the victim of circumstances, not the master. His life is pervaded and pressed down by his fears of the forces which control him. Before we can do much to help, we must consider the source, the power, the utility or harmfulness, of these forces. The maladjustments which many of us have caused in the past, when we were sincerely trying to help, have been due to our consideration of the villager as a free individual, and our oversight of the circumstances which dominate his life.

Although this book is much more personal than our survey, still we have striven to keep it impartial. We have written nothing we would hesitate to write about our own community or our own family. When one of us has been tempted to wax romantic or condemnatory, the other has followed after with a firm blue pencil and has cut down effusions to prosaic facts. We realize that conditions vary greatly in living, as in language or diet or architecture, in different parts of the country and sometimes in different areas of the same province. All we can say is that we know these things to be true of our village. Friends in nearby sections of this province have said that some of our experiences are so much like theirs that they might be their own; whereas a friend from Madras remarked that if he did not know us so well he might doubt our veracity! Whether the material herein presented be of interest because of its contrast or its similarity, we hope that it will be provocative of further observation and thought and service.

We acknowledge our thanks to the friends and relatives who have made our prolonged stay in the village possible. We are grateful to our Mission for being so long-suffering while we made no apparent progress. We also wish to thank the friends who have criticized this material and helped make it more readable. And we express our gratitude to our village neighbors, who have been hospitable, generous, and sympathetic, even in times when we have been most trying.

CHARLOTTE VIALL WISER
WILLIAM H. WISER

American Presbyterian Mission,
Mainpuri, U. P. India, May, 1930

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CHAPTER I

Friend or Foe?

We sat on the running board of our car, and contemplated the village across the road. We had chosen Karimpur as being reasonably typical of the villages in our section of the United Provinces. We had secured credentials from higher quarters, and had been officially introduced to the *patwari,* the village accountant in the employ of the government. We had found an old mango grove, and therein had set up tents for our helpers, ourselves, and our two small sons. Now we were ready to study the village. But would the village permit itself to be studied? Certainly it gave no sign of welcome.

The irregular high, rain-furrowed mud walls which faced us might have been mistaken for a deserted fortress. No doorways, no windows were there to give glimpses of family life. Nothing but blank walls and more walls, so joined that it was often difficult to tell where one man's house ended and his neighbor's began. Dark doorways, patted into shape by hand, were the chief indications of separate dwellings. Directly opposite the entrance to our grove was a high-arched doorway,

once imposing, now about to collapse. Behind it were more blank walls. The only other breaks in the weather-beaten barrier were narrow lanes leading back into the village. These too were bordered by walls. A welcome variation in the picture was the pond which separated half of our grove from the village. It had been dug to furnish mud for walls and was now filled with water from the recent rains. On it two white geese drifted, making trails through the green scum. At one side a small semicircle of clear water indicated that here the washerman beat the village clothes. Beyond the far end of the pond we could see carpenters at work in a lane. A few extraordinarily thin cows wandered in from the fields and disappeared through the dark doorways, or down the narrow lanes. After some time a woman emerged from one of the doorways, a water jar on her head and another on her hip. She slunk close to the wall and hurried around a corner as though afraid of attracting our attention. We wished we could take upon ourselves the guise of lean cows. How else were we to pass the barriers? It began to rain, a cold, autumn rain. We retired to the dining tent for a conference on methods of approach.

Our assistant brought in the news that after observing our camp, and considering the various rumors that had arrived in advance, the leaders of the village had concluded that the Sahib must be the settlement officer come to check landholdings and revise rents. They knew that he was not the district magistrate nor a deputy; neither was he a police official. There had been missionaries here before, and he might be classified as such. But he had secured land maps of the area and had access to records of landholdings. Who would want these but someone interested in taxes? Our assistant had tried to assure them that we were here on a helpful mission. But rumor was against him. They would watch and learn for themselves. They were running no risks with unlabeled strangers.