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## Between hunger and growth: pursuing rural development in Partition's aftermath, 1947–1957

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Built from the ground up by three thousand Sikh and Hindu refugees in the aftermath of the Partition of India in 1947, the town of Nilokheri in East Punjab emerged as an unlikely centre of agricultural education and scientific exchange. With support from the Ford Foundation, Indian and American scientists and development planners worked through the 1950s to transform the refugee township into a model of agricultural innovation and community development. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru even cast Nilokheri as the first step on the 'road to new India' that would bring the nation to self-sufficiency in food production. Over the course of a decade, experimental farms, workshops, and agricultural training centres rose around the village. The bustling town rapidly became an internationally recognised centre for deploying new farming technologies, training farmers, and sharing scientific knowledge. Yet for all its initial promise, allegations of bureaucratic mismanagement dogged the project, floodwaters disrupted the site in 1957, and Ford's interest shifted by the early 1960s. The Nilokheri experiment, however, set the stage for the scientific and social interventions of India's Green Revolution, contributing to an international development paradigm that persists today.

**Keywords:** Partition; community development; refugee rehabilitation; Ford Foundation; Green Revolution

### Introduction

Though an avowed secularist averse to religious sentimentality, Surendra Kumar Dey appreciated a deeper meaning in the site chosen for the refugee camp on the Grand Trunk Road leading to Delhi. As he surveyed the camp at Kurukshetra, East Punjab in late September 1947, he observed a plain littered with the tents, carts, and the scattered belongings of nearly three hundred thousand Sikh and Hindu refugees from the newly formed West Pakistan. These former residents of western Punjab, Sind, and the North-West Frontier Province had been displaced by the violent division of British India at the end of empire. They now found themselves stranded on the legendary battlefield of *Mahabharata* epic. As Dey (1961, 7) observed:

Kurukshetra was the battlefield millennia back to decide whether the brothers were right to fight for a speck of land and whether battles did ever decide anything at all. She was to receive the

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first shock of this new flood-tide. [...] It looked as if it was a beacon from destiny to try us afresh through a god-send opportunity.

Eager to serve the nation and captivated by the symbolism of Kurukshetra, the 42-year-old Bengali engineer who had trained at Purdue and the University of Michigan left a management position with the General Electric Corporation and volunteered as technical advisor to India's Ministry of Rehabilitation in New Delhi. He returned to Kurukshetra in December 1947 with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's blessing to establish a vocational training centre. Dey named the initiative *Mazdoor Manzil* or 'Workers' Destination' (Dey 1961).

Dey's initial goals for the Mazdoor Manzil project appeared modest enough. He sought, first and foremost, to provide the refugees at Kurukshetra with vocational training in artisanal work, including textile weaving and brick making. He emphasised the intrinsic value of work and discouraged idleness among Kurukshetra's dazed refugees. Quickly though, Dey, who had himself grown up in poverty in a Bengali village now subsumed into East Pakistan, expanded his objectives. He set his sights on forging a model township out of the Kurukshetra's 'inmates,' as he referred to them. In late 1948, with approval from the Ministry of Rehabilitation and the enthusiastic backing of Nehru, Dey resettled about three thousand refugees on the swampland adjacent to the evacuated Muslim village of Nilokheri, eighteen kilometres south of Kurukshetra.

Through the early 1950s, Nilokheri shed its legacy as a rehabilitation project and emerged as a prime model for community development among India's economic planners. The project garnered attention from national and international press, quickly drawing the interest of American philanthropic organisations and international development experts eager to test their theories of modernisation and generate a replicable model of rural development. With support from the Ford Foundation, Nilokheri made a swift transition from a 'rehabilitation township' to become the national hub for rural extension and community development training by 1952, drawing international expertise to India and preparing thousands of village workers to fan out across the subcontinent to lead rural reconstruction projects.

Tan and Kudaisya (2000) have shown that post-Partition rehabilitation played a vital role in reshaping rural East Punjab – territory that today constitutes much of the state of Haryana. They argue that this restructuring of rural society contributed in part to the substantial wheat production increases of the 'Green Revolution' of the late 1960s and 1970s. Earlier work by Kudaisya (1995) meticulously charts the economic reconfiguration of East Punjab's agricultural sector in the aftermath of Partition. The significant role played by American philanthropic organisations this restructuring, however, remains unclear. In the context of West Bengal, Chatterji (2007) has also shown how the post-Partition plan of rehabilitation generated unrest and mistrust through the state government's sluggish and inequitable resettlement efforts. Her work reveals that the Indian state coordinated with United Nations agencies to find the causes of 'social tensions' among West Bengal's Hindu refugees. Such inquiries framed refugees as subjects of social scientific investigation, justifying state and philanthropic efforts to not merely resettle, but integrate them into a national community development programme. A similar pattern can be seen in the experience of East Punjab.

More recently, Nicole Sackley (2012, 2013) and Daniel Immerwahr (2015) have shown that community development emerged as a contentious global movement of communitarian organising, rural extension, and democratic empowerment from the 1930s through 1960s. It represented a widely replicated model of local-level interventions informed by social scientific inquiry, at times influenced by the Cold War priorities of the United States, and championed by a handful of international agencies and American philanthropic organisations,

including the Ford and Rockefeller foundations. While admirably demonstrating the global dimensions of the community development movement, this work has done less to explore its relationship to local post-Partition rehabilitation efforts, situating such projects in the context of decolonisation.

This article examines how independent India's community development push of the 1950s emerged in critical ways from the immediate imperatives of post-Partition refugee rehabilitation. Under Dey's leadership during the 1950s and through his later influence as India's Minister of Community Development, the initiative that began as the Nilokheri rehabilitation township would mark the first substantial state-funded community development and rural extension training project launched by the new nation. Building upon the example of the Nilokheri project and supported by the Ford Foundation and the United States Technical Cooperation Administration (TCA), the Government of India's community development and rural extension initiatives of the 1950s expanded the reach and methodologies of international development organisations across rural India. At the same time, the community development methods tested at Nilokheri and refined in the rural extension training programmes of the Ford Foundation struggled to engage women effectively, drawing official criticism for neglecting half of India's rural population. Nevertheless, these models of rural development and knowledge sharing would channel state and philanthropic efforts to increase Indian food production, influencing the course of the Green Revolution.

### **Hungry for work**

Tensions between the central government and East Punjab's administration over the trajectory of post-Partition rehabilitation set the stage for independent India's first state-led foray into community development. On 3 October 1948, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru dashed off an angry letter to Gopichand Bhargava, a loyal member of the Indian National Congress and the Chief Minister of East Punjab: 'The problem which has been troubling us very greatly is that of the people at Kurukshetra Camp, more specially the Frontier refugees. This is a very urgent matter requiring immediate consideration.'<sup>1</sup> Nehru expressed shock at Rehabilitation Minister Mohanlal Saksena's recent report on the languishing rehabilitation efforts in East Punjab and was particularly dismayed by the lack of progress at the overcrowded Kurukshetra site. 'Everything is hung up because the East Punjab Government has not yet allotted sites for their rehabilitation,' continued Nehru in the same letter, placing the blame squarely on Bhargava and his administration.

Almost fourteen months after Partition and with eight million refugees scattered across the Indian portions of Punjab and Bengal, Nehru's frustrations with East Punjab's rehabilitation initiative seemed justified (Khan 2007). In both East Punjab and West Bengal, rehabilitation failed spectacularly in its initial objective to quickly settle displaced persons on new land and in new homes (see Talbot [2011] for work on rehabilitation in Punjab). Conflicts between the central government and the government of East Punjab over the distribution of agricultural lands distracted the refugee resettlement process, leaving hundreds of thousands in camps like Kurukshetra, surviving on meagre government aid and rationed food (Khan 2007). Over the eighteen months following Partition, Nehru's frustrated correspondence with Chief Minister Bhargava underscored the fundamental tension between the stated objectives of India's central government and the actual outcomes pursued by state officials.

Rather than proportionally redistributing the land of Muslim evacuees to refugees who had held land in West Pakistan, Nehru alleged that East Punjab officials had allowed

massive tracts of land to become consolidated in the hands of a few non-agriculturalists on the basis of 'communal and personal considerations.' Nehru lamented that state officials had distributed the abandoned property of Muslim evacuees inequitably, dismayed by the prospect of creating a new landholding class just as efforts had begun in the United Provinces to dismantle the hereditary *zamindari* system. The Prime Minister also criticised the East Punjab government's apparent favouritism toward Sikh refugees, as well as the systematic persecution of *dalits* and neglect of refugees from the North-West Frontier Province.<sup>2</sup>

While officials in East Punjab had resettled most Punjabi Sikh refugees within a year of Partition, Nehru observed that most Hindus and refugees from the North West Frontier remained in the camps.<sup>3</sup> Further, East Punjab state officials expressed fears that the departure of the highly productive Muslim tenant farmers and artisans who had populated the East Punjabi countryside would spell the state's doom, precipitating not just an economic slump, but also famine.<sup>4</sup> Like a large number of the inhabitants of the Kurukshetra camp, many of the incoming refugees had been shopkeepers, clerks, and merchants. With such occupational backgrounds, these Hindus and Sikhs had little experience with the crafts and trades characteristic of village life in Karnal District, much less actual cultivation.

These daunting prospects fed into S.K. Dey's notion that the refugees at Kurukshetra must be resettled, not on the limited farming plots formerly held by Muslim evacuees, but on previously uncultivated land. There, he believed that his vocational training efforts would provide the basis for a self-sufficient village of five thousand people that would serve as the hub for a wider block of farms. On a swampy swath of wasteland, he could also test his theory that productive labour stood as the central cohesive element in a healthy community. Dey found such a place near the 85th milepost on the Grand Trunk Road in Karnal District. Writing in 1961, Dey (1961, 12) reflected on what drove him toward the challenge at Nilokheri: 'I was hungry. One who is hungry for work could be much deadlier than one who is hungry for food.'

Very much hungry for food, the refugees at Kurukshetra initially resisted Dey's proposal to relocate three thousand of them to the swampland to build up a town from scratch. However, as control over the Kurukshetra camp shifted back and forth between the hapless state government and Nehru's frustrated central Ministry of Rehabilitation through 1949, permanent resettlement appeared unlikely. A small group of refugees decided to try their luck with Dey and his vocational and agricultural training experiment (Dey 1961, 30).

### Testing the hypothesis

Under Dey's supervision, the rehabilitation township at Nilokheri rose as a prime example of community development in India during the 1950s, attracting attention and funding from the American Ford Foundation. Through the winter of 1948 and into the spring of 1949, Nilokheri's first five hundred residents remained housed in tents. Aside from a handful of workshops set up in temporary sheds, the Nilokheri site seemed little more than a swampy suburb of the still bustling refugee camp at Kurukshetra. The transplanted vocational training centre, holding fast to the Mazdoor Manzil slogan, sat at the heart of the new site. Training unskilled refugees how to make productive lives for themselves remained at the core of the project.<sup>5</sup> In spite of Nilokheri's ramshackle state, Nehru visited the village in April 1949 to check on Dey's progress. Significantly, he was accompanied by Countess Edwina Mountbatten, British India's last vicerene (Dey 1961, 71).

Instead of welcoming Nehru and Mountbatten with countless garlands as had become customary in villages across India, the residents of the ‘rehabilitation township’ surprisingly greeted the distinguished visitors with little more than muted respect. Dey assured the Prime Minister that this restraint reflected the refugees’ eagerness to show themselves hard at work in ‘building a home for themselves and the road to the India of tomorrow’ (Dey 1961, 72). The former engineer then led Nehru and Mountbatten on an inspection of the village of tents, sketching out plans for setting the concrete foundations of Nilokheri’s houses, schools, and workshops during the spring of 1949.

Providing able-bodied refugees with training for artisanal work represented the central goal of Dey’s efforts in Nilokheri. As he wrote: ‘If work is there, home follows; so do clothing, schooling for children, medical relief and other amenities of life. If work is not there, everything looks dark, doles and kindness notwithstanding’ (Dey 1961, 7). This work-focused philosophy sprung from a desire on the part of officials to move refugees away from the ‘doles and kindness’ Dey mentioned.

Nehru, for one, plainly saw a conditional relationship between relief assistance and work. As he wrote to incoming Finance Minister John Matthai on 18 August 1949, ‘They [the refugees] should be made to accept, if they are willing, a semi-military regime of discipline and work. If they are not prepared to accept this, then they can shift for themselves and our responsibility ceases.’<sup>6</sup> In this way, displaced populations could earn the aid that they received from the central government in food, shelter, and small agricultural loans (see Talbot [2011] for a discussion of these aspects of rehabilitation). By Nehru’s reasoning, the refugees could then pull themselves up and out of the camps still scattered across East Punjab. From his perspective, the responsibility for the situation had shifted from recalcitrant state-level officials and onto the refugees themselves.

Through S.K. Dey’s emerging doctrine of self-help, the rehabilitation township of Nilokheri provided the sort of ‘regime of discipline and work’ that Nehru envisioned. By early 1950, the cottage industries established at Nilokheri had grown large enough to employ about 625 refugee families (Dey 1961, 37). With financial support from the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Dey and his colleagues helped to set up industries and trades in the township, ranging from woodworking and brickmaking to dairy farming and sheep breeding. Seemingly little was planned for engaging and training the township’s women, but Dey (1961) noted that a large secondary school rose to educate their children. A printing press ran in the town as well, rolling out the first issues of a journal devoted to rural life and farming practices in 1953. Fittingly, the journal bore the name *Kurukshetra* and carried news and information from India’s Ministries of Health, Agriculture, Education, and Rehabilitation. As community development took off in India, *Kurukshetra* also featured first-hand accounts of village work from across the subcontinent, serving as a sort of clearinghouse for best practices in rural extension and development. *Kurukshetra*’s editors also worked in good humour to assure readers of Nilokheri’s market motives, at times even dispelling rumours that Nilokheri was a Communist stronghold thriving in the heart of Karnal District.<sup>7</sup>

Nilokheri was by no means the first model community to spring up in rural India. As Sackley (2013) has shown, Nilokheri’s contemporaries included Etawah, a pilot rural development project in the United Provinces (later Uttar Pradesh) designed and managed by the American urban planner and architect Albert Mayer. Mayer’s work in Etawah began in 1946, predating Nilokheri, and independent India, for that matter. Dey cited Mayer as an influence on his early thinking on village development in the Mazdoor Manzil project, but the two did not collaborate extensively. The Etawah rural organisational model gained the support of the Ford Foundation and would be replicated in later rural

reconstruction efforts sponsored by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister G.B. Pant. Etawah's roots, however, did not lie in refugee rehabilitation, nor did the project there evolve into a dedicated training centre for village-level workers. While not the first model village in north India, Nilokheri proved unique in that it represented a complete, self-sufficient town built from the ground up by Partition's refugees. Nilokheri marked independent India's first state-led experiment in community development. As one of the new nation's principal centres for rural extension training, it also appeared uniquely placed to teach effective rural development practices to the nation and the world.

Further, Dey's project at Nilokheri directly addressed the notion of reshaping individual citizens from within, instilling in them the knowledge and independence to work ceaselessly in improving the community as a whole. Generally, the refugees who came to Nilokheri from the camp at Kurukshetra were of a class that Dey described with thinly veiled disdain as 'the middlemen,' meaning those unskilled in a manual trade or cultivation (Dey 1961, 12). He demanded that the citizens of the township should learn a trade and, with the help of generous loans and a constant stream of orders from the central government for its workshops, the project provided work for every resident during its first few years. Full employment, expansive public education facilities, and ambitious architectural plans for a central market designed by architect B.D. Manda left Nehru lamenting the project's unsustainable expenses (Dey 1961, 23). Still, Nilokheri captured Nehru's imagination for precisely these reasons, regularly luring him back for official visits through the 1950s. He also frequently directed foreign dignitaries from other nations to visit the township. For instance, King and Queen of Nepal paid a visit to Nilokheri in late 1955 to inspect the central government's Extension Education Institute.<sup>8</sup> The same royal trip included a visit to the new planned city of Chandigarh, the state capital of East Punjab planned by the renowned Le Corbusier, with help from Albert Mayer.

Beyond being showcased to the world, the growing township drew Nehru back on 22 February 1950. Speaking to the people of Nilokheri, the Prime Minister labelled the rehabilitation town 'a model to India' and expressed hope that its growing fame would spread the model across the country and around the world. Shifting his tone, he also cautioned against the 'idlers' within the population: 'Idlers are of two types. Poor displaced persons spend something but cannot produce. The others, called rich, spend and yet do not produce. Both are idlers and live on the toils of others' (as quoted in Dey 1961, 116). Nehru was quick to clarify that Nilokheri's own citizens had proven themselves to be a benefit to the nation. Inspecting the township that same day, however, Nehru noted that while he had observed many men engaged in trades, he had seen few women in training. He warned the crowd that if 'the other half does not join hands' in work, the nation could not hope to pull itself up from poverty (as quoted in Sharma 2005, 249). Nehru's remark foreshadowed a recurrent criticism of Indian community development programmes that experts would struggle to address.

By the end of 1950 Dey's work at Nilokheri attracted the attention of Paul Hoffman, president of the Ford Foundation and former chief of the Economic Cooperation Administration, which had implemented the Marshall Plan in Europe following the Second World War. Hoffman visited New Delhi in the spring of 1951, announcing a new, broadly international focus for the Ford Foundation's philanthropic endeavours to halt the feared advance of Communism (Sackley 2012, 233). Douglas Ensminger, the Ford Foundation's new representative in India, also spent the year laying the groundwork for the inauguration of mass training in rural extension and agricultural development that the foundation would coordinate with the Government of India during the coming year. This training marked the start of Ford's broader initiative with the United States TCA to transmit agricultural



expertise and deliver on an American promise to bring development to rural South Asia. Nilokheri, boasting a population of nearly six thousand rehabilitated refugees, would provide an ideal venue in which to train brigades of rural extension workers and administrators.

### **A model of development for the world**

On 5 January 1952, Prime Minister Nehru and United States Ambassador Chester Bowles met in New Delhi to sign the Indo-American Technical Agreement. As a product of President Harry Truman's Point Four Program to share American 'know-how' and counter Soviet influence in the 'underdeveloped' world, the accord emphasised investments in agricultural development and rural reconstruction through the promise of \$54 million (US) in technical assistance to India (Immerwahr 2015, 88). That same week, Douglas Ensminger formally opened the Ford Foundation's offices in New Delhi with the aim of building the close relationship between the two countries promised within the agreement. Ford had agreed to take the first step in that relationship by facilitating the training of six thousand new village-level workers to help organise and revitalise India's 700,000 villages (Sackley 2012, 241).

The case of Nilokheri and the broader community development efforts it inspired reveals how the 'transnational development regime,' as Sinha (2008) terms it, expanded in north India in the wake of Partition. Sinha traces the lineage of this global economic phenomenon – including the institutions, practices, and assumptions of modern international development – to earlier rural reconstruction projects of Indian nationalists, British colonial officials, and American planners alike. Dey's Nilokheri project and the national community development schemes it inspired built upon this heritage, but its unique origins in refugee rehabilitation and resettlement distinguish it from these predecessors. Like Jawaharlal Nehru before them, the Ford Foundation's development experts took notice of Nilokheri precisely because of its origins as a vocational training initiative for unskilled refugees.

In July, Ensminger, along with agricultural and community development experts from the Ford Foundation and the TCA, travelled to Nilokheri to take part in the three-week-long training of India's first cohort of community 'project executive officers.' From 22 July to 16 August 1952, several hundred trainees attended seminars and training workshops at the recently constructed Government Polytechnic. The rigorous training schedule represented the informal start of the national Community Development Programme to be officially launched by Nehru and Ensminger on 2 October 1952, the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth (Ensminger 1957, i). From the helm of the new Community Projects Administration, Dey would spearhead the movement, with the hundreds of project executive officers trained at Nilokheri overseeing extension efforts in their 'development blocks' of one hundred villages each. This hierarchy of expertise would form the core of the National Extension Service, with the goal of rapidly spreading the knowledge and practices of the community development movement across rural India (Ensminger 1957, 3).

This first cohort of Indian trainees at Nilokheri would organise wider rural reform efforts, serving as a critical link between the theory of community development and the farmers and villagers who constituted over 80% of India's population. At a higher level, Dey's coordination with Ensminger in shaping India's community development programme served as a two-way street by which abstract thinking on village work might be tested and best practices could be determined (Ensminger 1957). This intermingling of foreign interests and domestic priorities during the nascence of India's community development



programme complicates interpretations of it as a predominantly external movement that entered South Asia following independence.

The American expertise surrounding community development and rural extension had indeed arrived in Nilokheri by the first project officer training in the summer of 1952, with the trainees attending seminars on topics as varied as communicable disease prevention, social psychology, and cattle breeding. At the same time, the records of the proceedings compiled by the Community Project Administration show that representatives of India's own agricultural universities, polytechnics, and government ministries made up the bulk of the rural extension trainers. Rather than representing an injection of foreign doctrines and methodologies, the Nilokheri training appears to have been more a gathering and sharing of India's domestic expertise, at least to the extent that such expertise had Ford Foundation approval. Contingents from the Ford Foundation and the TCA remained on-hand to observe and periodically offer lectures on rural life, public health, and the workings of government in the United States. They also fielded questions regarding the new Indo-American Technical Agreement, reminding the trainees of the new friendship between the two nations.

On 15 August 1952, the fifth anniversary of India's independence and the penultimate day of the training, Dey delivered an address entitled, 'A Road to New India,' to this first cohort of trainees. In his speech, he underscored the connection between the post-Partition refugee crisis, the potential of the community development movement, and the urgent need for the nation to expand agricultural production to compensate for the losses of Partition. He observed that India's fields produced on average only one-third of crops that could be grown in other nations. Dey attributed this shortfall to poor farming methods and the resistance to modernising improvements among India's villagers. At the same time, Dey remarked that the villagers could not themselves be entirely to blame for their lack of knowledge: 'A hungry man who has no work to do has time hanging on him. In sheer self-defence, he builds an artificial world within himself from which he bolts the world without.'<sup>9</sup> The task of the rural extension workers trained at Nilokheri, he argued, would be to bring reason and scientific knowledge into this artificial world of obstinate tradition.

### **Recruiting experts, teaching expertise**

A woman narrates the dramatic scene of her husband looming over her, demanding that she remain by his side in an Uttar Pradesh village. Crouched on a cot below him, she looks up toward the camera over his shoulder in desperation and pleaded with him: "There's a wall between us and the village people! Do you not understand that I cannot stay here?" But then, my husband spoke angrily and said, "It is my will." ... It was *his* will.<sup>10</sup> Produced by the Ford Foundation, and directed by Austrian-American filmmaker Ernest Kleinberg, the 1953 film *Gaon Sathis (Friends of the Village)* tells the story of a young, college-educated couple from Calcutta who volunteer to serve in the National Extension Program.<sup>11</sup>

The pair receives training from a group of rural extension officers at the Ford-funded Allahabad Agricultural Institute, modelled in upon the training regimen that had become routine at Nilokheri. Their instructors represent the diversity and truly global nature of the community development movement, including two Indian men and an American woman known to the couple simply as 'Molly.' During their month at Allahabad, they train in improved farming methods, animal husbandry, and the basics of home economics. After their study is complete, the young couple take to a bicycle and head to the village site where they will struggle to share their newfound wisdom with the local farmers and their wives.

Shot in colour and intended as a recruitment tool for community project volunteers across South Asia, *Gaon Sathis* emphasised the challenges and rewards of community development work.<sup>12</sup> Through collaboration with the Ford Foundation, Dey's Community Projects Administration adopted an approach of training volunteers, typically educated city-dwellers with no prior experience in agricultural work, and dispatching them to India's villages as rural extension workers. In support of that national project, *Gaon Sathis* communicated a message of determination and persistence in village work, even when social barriers appeared impassable and when arduous labour yielded paltry results. The woman featured in the film represented the comfortably urban Indian, dragged along to the village by a more inspired husband and forced to learn harsh lessons of self-reliance and national service.

In the end, she submits to her husband's will and remains committed to the task of converting an unwelcoming village into a model of self-sufficient productivity. Almost magically, her decision to stick it out prompts the villagers to suddenly embrace the deeper-cutting plough, improved well technology, and reading lessons that the couple had been pitching to them for months. *Gaon Sathis* communicated the transformative potential of the methods and work ethic of Nilokheri, representing an effort to convert urban Indians into dedicated village-level workers, or *gram sevaks*. It also signified an evolving interplay between India's Community Development and National Extension programmes and the objectives of the Ford Foundation as they shifted toward a concerted push for greater food production (Cullather 2010, 134–158). Further, Kleinberg's film echoed contemporaneous efforts by independent India's Films Division to define development as the ultimate civic goal of the new nation. As Peter Sutoris has shown, the Films Division's post-Partition efforts sought to enlist public participation in development schemes while asserting a vision of modernity defined and directed by government experts (Sutoris 2016, 100). In much the same way, Kleinberg's *Gaon Sathis* defines portrays official expertise steering a dutiful citizenry toward progress, albeit with initial resistance from the female character in the film.

More than mere propaganda, this model of expert-driven development stood poised to reshape India's food economy. By the middle of 1953, the Nilokheri project's initial goal of refugee rehabilitation merged with state and philanthropic efforts to increase grain yields, shifting strategy to help pick up the slack of the unsuccessful Grow More Food Programme (see, e.g. Sherman [2013] for work on this project). Beyond converting displaced persons into model villagers through the lessons of hard work, vocational training, and improved farming methods, the Ford Foundation's brand of community development now sought to establish India's self-sufficiency in food production. The methods of rural extension training elaborated at Nilokheri's education centres would prove vital in this effort, converting urban Indians into village workers and programme executives. Along the same lines, the May 1953 issue of *Kurukshetra* attempted to resolve the broad social focus of India's community development push with increasing demands from Nehru and the Planning Commission for tangible results in increasing food production. For instance, V.T. Krishnamachari, deputy chairman of the Planning Commission drew a direct connection between rural unemployment and food production deficits.<sup>13</sup> Considering the issue a 'human problem' and citing the limited success of the Grow More Food Programme, Krishnamachari advocated for increases in rural employment coupled with the introduction of 'scientific agricultural methods.' While agricultural science and new fertiliser, seed, and farming technologies could increase grain yields over time, Krishnamachari argued that only the promotion of 'self-help and self-reliance' could organise rural Indians into a truly productive agricultural labour force. The broad social objectives of community development

and the knowledge network building of the rural extension programme could thus be harnessed to achieve concrete economic ends.

Along with regular issues of the journal *Kurukshetra*, the government printing press at Nilokheri published a wide array of training guides and manuals intended for the education of prospective village-level workers and programme executives. One such manual written by Douglas Ensminger, *A Guide to Community Development*, rolled off the presses at Nilokheri in January 1957. Containing a glowing preface by Dey who had recently been elevated by Nehru to the post of Minister of Community Development, the guide served as a handbook for training extension worker who would in turn educate village-level workers and villagers themselves. Dey and Ensminger's handbook represented the accumulated development training expertise of the first four years of the Community Development and National Extension Programs. To clarify the aims of the community development movement, Ensminger introduced the 'Philosophy and Basic Principles of Extension Education' in notably vague terms: 'Extension is changing attitudes, knowledge and skills of all the people,' he wrote. 'Extension is "learning by doing" and "seeing is believing"' (Ensminger 1957, 7).

Community development handbooks distributed by Dey's Ministry of Community Development also stressed strategies and techniques expanding India's food supply through a broader engagement of village populations. Published in October 1958, *The Gram Sevak's Guide for Increasing Agricultural Production* offered a condensed, print version of the training exercises being perfected at Nilokheri. In particular, the guide emphasised instruction in the use of insecticides, chemical fertilisers, and high-yield seed varieties within development blocks. To that end, the official handbook encouraged village workers to provide visual instruction to farmers, following up with verbal tests to confirm comprehension.

Perhaps addressing concerns over the shortcomings of community development initiatives, *The Gram Sevak's Guide* also devoted an entire chapter to the engagement of village women. As the handbook indicated: 'Each mother wants the very best for her children. You must use this interest to bring about the changes necessary for improved agriculture which will then improve family living.'<sup>14</sup> Further, the guide instructed village-level workers to encourage local mothers to alter their cooking practices to maximise the nutritional value of certain foods and to add milk, and vegetables into meals, thus relieving the reliance upon food grains. In this way, village-workers could appeal to motherhood to advance the cause of increased agricultural production for the nation. Community development's engagement of village women represented a means to the end of ensuring India's food security, but such training texts remained largely silent regarding the education or empowerment of women as agricultural experts or primary cultivators themselves.

### **Terminating the experiment**

With Dey's Ministry of Community Development reaching over 200,000 of India's 580,000 villages through rural extension efforts by 1957, the humble programme begun at the Kurukshetra camp attained almost unrecognisable, bureaucratic dimensions (Ensminger 1957, i). Nevertheless, the wide community development collaboration between the Government of India and the Ford Foundation remained grounded in the principle that vocational training and work were all that India's villagers needed to thrive. Anyone could be trained and educated in this optimistic model, be they refugees from West Pakistan, farmers from Uttar Pradesh, or bureaucrats from Calcutta. That said, internal criticisms of India's community programmes had already begun to build.

In 1955, for instance, the Planning Commission's second annual review of the initiatives of the Community Projects Administration found that the community development push had failed to engage village women in any meaningful way: 'In most places, lack of clear-cut programmes for women is the main reason why they remain more or less untouched by these [community development] activities.'<sup>15</sup> Although generally positive about the community development concept, the Planning Commission concluded that dedicated resources for village women remained rare in most development blocks, resulting in their exclusion from programming. This limited approach, the Commission found, could promote gender inequities and social injustice on a large scale.

Two years later, the Government of India enlisted Balwantrai Mehta, the Gujarati politician who would design the decentralised framework of Panchayati Raj, to assess India's Community Development and National Extension Service programmes. Mehta and his team concluded that the programmes had largely neglected practical improvements in agriculture and had focused far too heavily on welfare provision in the villages. More importantly, Mehta contended, community development had evolved over four years to become a scheme of bureaucratic centralisation with the programme's chosen experts wielding far too much local decision-making power.<sup>16</sup>

The 1957 Mehta Report proved to mark the beginning of a shift in public and official opinions of community development in India, prompting calls for increased decentralisation of rural development projects. As Mehta wrote: 'There has to be an act of faith in democracy' (as quoted in Staples 1992, 13–14). Further, Dey himself conceded that overlapping responsibilities to various government agencies and ministers compelled many village-level workers to file nearly three hundred reports per year (Staples 1992). As official interest waned and the actual impact of India's community development push came under further scrutiny, funding for such programming wound down through the early 1960s and the Ministry of Food and Agriculture ultimately absorbed Dey's Community Development Ministry in 1966.

## Conclusion

For Nilokheri, the end of community development's heyday in India did not necessarily spell its doom. Dey's direct oversight of the project ended by the mid-1950s as his official career at the Central Secretariat in New Delhi gained traction. By early 1961, over eight thousand people lived in the township, no longer an exclusively refugee population. As Dey (1961) recalled, the withdrawal of direct government funding for artisanal and agricultural production, however, unemployment rose to over 70%, more or less matching figures from the surrounding countryside. Despite torrential floods in 1957 and devolution of town management to the state government of Punjab and then to Haryana, the town remained a national hub for rural extension training and education. Nilokheri continued to host the Extension Education Institute, the Social Education Organisers' Training Centre, the Orientation and Study Centre, and the Punjab Polytechnic into the early 1960s – three of which remain important regional institutions today.

With its legacy in post-Partition refugee rehabilitation, national extension efforts and the community development movement in India contributed to the systems of knowledge sharing and rural organisation associated with the Green Revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s. As Abid Hussain, Indian economist and ambassador to the United States, wrote of the 'technological model' that characterised the Green Revolution:

What has been forgotten by most commentators is that this technological model would not have successfully diffused in the country were it not for the infrastructure built so carefully by

S. K. Dey and his dedicated band of followers in the 1950s. It is village and block-level infrastructure built up under the community development program that has served as a delivery system. (Staples 1992, 13)

The origins of the post-independence push toward agricultural development and rural extension drew significantly upon the crisis management work of India's Ministry of Rehabilitation. Over the decade following Partition, the Government of India's emphasis on community development would shift toward a focus on increasing food production, through social and then scientific and technological investments.

As the sheer bureaucracy of the new Ministry of Community Development hampered its progress in the early 1960s, the Ford Foundation's own philanthropic priorities shifted toward funding direct innovations in agricultural science and agronomy to pursue to coveted goal of exponentially greater grain yields (Staples 1992). Nevertheless, S.K. Dey's national community development programme influenced the evolution of Panchayati Raj and established lasting institutions of agricultural knowledge sharing and rural extension training. These efforts had been informed and shaped by the experience of rehabilitation. The entry of American philanthropic organisations, planners, and scientists onto the scene during the 1950s should not obscure this legacy, nor should their influence upon independent India's politicians, administrators, and planners be overstated.

The trajectory of community development in India and its legacy in the contentious interventions of the later Green Revolution can be more fully understood in the specific context of decolonisation and independent India's refugee crisis. The Nilokheri experiment began under the banner of Mazdoor Manzil at the Kurukshetra refugee camp in the direct aftermath of Partition. Dey's conception of Mazdoor Manzil as an ideal of cooperative learning, hard work, and self-reliance transplanted easily from the chaos on that epic battlefield into the fertile ground of the global community development movement. Yet, for all the optimism of subsequent community development initiatives and the ambition of a India's nationwide effort to transform average citizens into extension experts, state-led community development in the vein of Nilokheri began first and foremost as an ad hoc response to the forced migration and violence of Partition.

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### **Notes**

1. Jawaharlal Nehru, to Gopichand Bhargava, Chief Minister of East Punjab, 3 October 1948, Correspondence 1, Bhargava Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML).

2. Jawaharlal Nehru, to Gopichand Bhargava, Chief Minister of East Punjab, 4 February 1949, Correspondence 1, Bhargava Papers, NMML.
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6. Jawaharlal Nehru to John Matthai, Finance Minister, 18 August 1949, in Sharma (2005, 240).
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10. Gaon Sathis (film), Ford Foundation Grants to Grants E-G – Government of India (05200061), Box 4, Reel AV8697, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).
11. Martin Quigley to Ernest Kleinberg, 11 November 1952, Ford Foundation Grants to Grants E-G – Government of India (05200061), Microfilm Reel 0911, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.
12. The Ford Foundation also commissioned Kleinberg to film a documentary on the refugee situation in West Germany. Kleinberg completed shooting for that project en route to Delhi to film Gaon Sathis in 1952.
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