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**Modernizing Peasants and 'Master Farmers':  
All-India Crop Competitions and the Politics of Progressive Agriculture  
in Early Independent India<sup>1</sup>**

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*Introduction*

In May 1958, an excited "progressive farmer" from the Punjabi town of Kanthala stood by the side of the road which stretched from Delhi to Chandigarh.<sup>2</sup> Jagir Singh had heard, some weeks earlier, that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru would be heading to the Punjabi capital to lay the cornerstone of its new Legislative Assembly building, designed by the celebrated modernist architect Le Corbusier. The motorcade carrying the Prime Minister from Delhi, Singh calculated, would have to pass by Kanthala en route to the new capital, and this gave the farmer a perfect opportunity. For nearly two years, Singh had been planting hybrid maize seeds on a single-acre trial plot on his modest-sized farm. In 1956, he had brought forth a yield of ninety maunds of maize on a one-acre plot. The next year, doubling the acreage of his experiment, he had eked out nearly a hundred maunds per acre.<sup>3</sup>

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1. I am grateful to Ron Herring, Prakash Kumar, Nicole Sackley, Caterina Scaramelli, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Joshua Specht, and the two anonymous reviewers for their help in refining these arguments; any mistakes remain my own. Earlier versions of this work were presented at the 2015 Association for Asian Studies Conference in Chicago and at a workshop on Aid, Agriculture, and Hunger in India held at Pennsylvania State University in April 2015.

2. Ralph M. Gleason, "Meeting to Consider FY59 Agricultural Program," June 5, 1958, RG 286 / P446 / Box 9 / Reports - Quarterly Activity Reports 1959-62, United States National Archives.

3. The metric or imperial equivalents of these numbers, reported here by an American agricultural

Eager to impress the Prime Minister with his superlative yields — and the enterprising mindset underlying them — the progressive farmer set to work building a small exhibition to detail the results of his labor, sending word of the exhibit to Punjab's Director of Agriculture, as well as the regional adviser to the American Technical Cooperation Mission in India. The gambit worked: on a hot spring day, both men arrived at Singh's exhibit. Before the dust from their cars could settle, another motorcade pulled up, and the Prime Minister himself stepped out of the car, flanked by the Chief Minister of Punjab. Nehru greeted Jagir Singh, and chattily admired the abundant stacks of healthy-looking maize that the farmer had laid out. The Chief Minister selected two particularly good ears of corn and offered them to the Prime Minister. "Why only two ears?" Nehru asked. "I will take them all." Jagir Singh smiled in appreciation, and helped to load the entire exhibition of maize into the trunk of the Prime Minister's car. The Prime Minister thanked the entrepreneurial farmer, and the motorcade sped off to Chandigarh.

Jawaharlal Nehru's fascination with agriculturalists and their mentalities underwrote frequent efforts to commune with peasantries the world over. Raised in urban opulence in Allahabad's Civil Lines, the future Prime Minister saw in farmers' travails the dignified struggle for better futures. Making a point to meet with Soviet peasants during his first trip to Moscow in 1927, Nehru would later valorize India's "great agrarian movement" in his "wanderings among the *kisans* [peasants]," and would ask specifically to meet with American corn farmers during his first trip to the United States in 1949.<sup>4</sup> Yet Jagir Singh's efforts to catch Nehru's eye with his stunning yield of maize spoke less to the pastoral romanticism of the Prime Minister than to a pervasive agrarian ethic promulgated by India's central and provincial governments in the first several decades of Indian independence. Anxieties and uncertainties over enduring food scarcity transformed farmers into foot-soldiers in the struggle for sustenance and national self-reliance. Not all farmers, however, were equally suited to the task: it was the "progressive farmer," imbued with an experimental mindset and liberated by independence from the purported fatalism of the Indian peasant, who would fill the nation's godowns in an exemplary manner. Through the public valorization of the farmers said to possess these qualities, independent India's modernizing bureaucrats and politicians promulgated a vision of progressive farming suited to the daring character of the new state itself.

In the years immediately following independence, India's central government identified exemplary "progressive farmers" through the sponsorship of a web of national, provincial, and district-level crop competitions, rewarding cultivators whose exceptional yields spoke to the qualities of daring, industriousness, and experimentation that modernization in agriculture would require. As India's new leaders struggled to actualize their promises of abundance in the face of material constraint, the progressive qualities of its *Krishi Pandits* — "Master Farmers" — were extolled as the key to increased agricultural productivity, and in turn, India's rapid

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adviser, are difficult to calculate. Prior to metrication, yields in India were occasionally given in imperial units but were more frequently recorded in maunds — a unit which varied by location. At independence, the value of a maund was fixed at 37.3242 kilograms, but Singh's crop could not possibly have been in excess of three thousand kilograms. Here, as elsewhere, reported values have been used without an effort to convert the same.

4. Nehru, *Soviet Russia: Some Random Sketches and Impressions*; Nehru, *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 59–64; Theodore W. Schultz, "Three Illinois Farms and Their Families: Introducing Prime Minister Nehru and His Party to Middle Western Agriculture and Farm Living, October 27, 1949," 1949, National Agricultural Library, United States Department of Agriculture. See also Jodhka, "Nation and Village."

industrialization.<sup>5</sup> Like many of early independent India's campaigns for agricultural growth — from the "Grow More Food" campaign to the efforts to remake Indian diets along lines of scarcity — these crop competitions were both inexpensive, and twinned together the projects of economic reform and the remaking of the Indian citizen.<sup>6</sup>

If these competitions had the air of Soviet Stakhanovism to them — celebrating, through title and reward, the superlative productivity wrought of hard work — so too did they draw upon parallel Indian and Western notions of "progressive farming," and the development of mentalities suited to the project of overcoming rural stagnation and torpor.<sup>7</sup> Yet the administrators of these competitions and the publicists who dutifully chronicled winners' success rarely noted that, beyond daring, these "progressive farmers" were buttressed by large holdings, surplus capital, and privileged access to credit, labor, and implements.<sup>8</sup> In an era when equity was a watchword in Indian agriculture, and planners advanced schemes for egalitarian land reform, the continued adulation of these cultivators hinted at a widening chasm between subsistence farmers and capitalist agriculturalists that would grow markedly wider in the wake of India's Green Revolution.<sup>9</sup>

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5. On the balance between agriculture and industry in India's postcolonial planning, see Frankel, *India's Political Economy*, passim. On the promise of food against the backdrop of scarcity in the nationalist movement and afterwards, see Amrith, "Food and Welfare in India"; and Siegel, "Independent India of Plenty."

6. On the "Grow More Food" campaign, see Sherman, "From 'Grow More Food' to 'Miss a Meal.'" On dietary reform in early independent India, see Siegel, "Self-Help Which Ennobles a Nation." More generally, on citizenship and the postcolonial state's adoption of nationalist idioms, see Roy, *Beyond Belief*. Not all state efforts were inexpensive — the tasks of land reclamation and fertilizer distribution, for example, were deemed as worthy of major state investment. See, descriptively, *Projects for Plenty*.

7. Stakhanovism in the Soviet Union, as a mass movement stoked by state support, provides a useful parallel, but bears little structural resemblance to the institution of India's crop competitions. The Soviet Union, in 1935, championed the 102 tons of coal milled by Aleksei Stakhanov in a six-hour shift -- an unbelievable fourteen times his mandated quota. Subsequently, workers and peasants who set production records or otherwise demonstrated mastery of their tasks had once been gained the title of Stakhanovite, and were further extolled as exemplars of how to live properly as the "new Soviet man" or "new Soviet woman." On Stakhanovism, see Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941*. See also an excellent account of peasant imagery in among Russian intellectuals, journalists, and the public in Frierson, *Peasant Icons*.

8. "Progressive farmers," Shalendra D. Sharma notes, "were invariably rich peasants and enterprising landlords." Sharma, *Development and Democracy in India*, 140. The paradigm expressed here is not unique among India's postcolonial developmental efforts, wherein developmental resources were inequitably secured from and distributed to particular privileged groups in exchange for their purportedly democratic support. See Bose, "Instruments and Idioms of Colonial and National Development"; Chatterjee, "Development Planning and the Indian State"; and Kaviraj, "Dilemmas of Democratic Development in India."

9. From a voluminous literature on Green Revolution transformations and the propagation of inequality, see Baker, "Frogs and Farmers: The Green Revolution in India, and Its Murky Past"; Farmer, "Perspectives on the 'Green Revolution' in South Asia"; Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments*; and Varshney, *Democracy, Development, and the Countryside*. On more recent market interventions in agriculture and food, see Cohen, "Supermarkets in India."

*Peasant Modernization and the "Progressive" Indian Farmer*

The notion of the "progressive farmer" was at the heart of the bureaucratic imagination of a modern Indian agriculture suited to a modern state. This farmer, variously formulated over several decades, would prioritize experimentation and eschew blind custom. He would participate eagerly in the market economy — accumulating profit without hoarding produce — and would follow exuberantly, if dutifully, the advice proffered by the relevant extension officer. He would make use of better inputs and resources, from chemical fertilizers and improved seeds to new irrigation and plowing techniques. And as his lot improved, he would avail himself more readily of educational opportunities and new lines of credit, his success invariably eroding the skepticism of his more conservative and backward village compatriots.

In proposing the existence of these qualities and individuals within the extant rural structure, Indian bureaucrats and politicians drew upon interlinked notions of progressivism and modernization, hewn from colonial imagination, the nationalist struggle, and the emerging conceits of international social science. As they contended with the specter of dismal underdevelopment at the dawn of independence, and looked to the promise of centralized planning as a palliative, India's politicians envisioned citizens who would shoulder the burden of development themselves, subsuming individual desire to national good. And even as they rejected the bogey of Indian fatalism and superstition as a colonial conceit, India's planners nonetheless saw in peasants a fundamental conservatism and reluctance to change that would need to be shattered in the name of national development and greater yields; the "natural leaders" of agrarian society, identified by personal quality rather than hereditary right, were to be the stewards of this vital transformation. Simultaneously, as social scientists in the West modeled and outlined possibilities for non-communist modernization in the emerging "Third World," their reconceptualization of the peasant and his mentality suggested to Indian planners, through Community Development and earlier schemes, the importance of progressive leaders within village communities.

Largely blind to role of their own rapaciousness in India's agricultural maladies, India's colonial rulers had seen in its peasantry a fatalism and superstition precluding growth and improvement: the defects in the Indian peasant's mindset were, to the minds of district collectors and agricultural economists alike, as damning as his antiquated practices and implements. Indian cultivators, in spite of ample evidence to the contrary, were presumed to be fundamentally passive and averse to improvement.<sup>10</sup> In the eighteenth century, this purported trait had underwritten the folly of Permanent Settlement; in the twentieth, the indolence of the Bengal peasantry had supposedly caused destitute farmers to lay down and submit to famine deaths rather than rise up in insurrection.<sup>11</sup> Rural indebtedness, a byzantine system of land holdings, and

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10. A key account of the fraught notions of improvement in Indian agriculture, is Arnold, "Agriculture and 'Improvement' in Early Colonial India." Two important reviews, written in the decades preceding independence, are Nanavati and Anjaria, *The Indian Rural Problem*; and Howard and Howard, *The Development of Indian Agriculture*. On the alleged passivity of the Indian peasant, see Ahuja, "State Formation and 'Famine Policy' in Early Colonial South India"; Ambirajan, "Malthusian Population Theory and Indian Famine Policy in the Nineteenth Century"; Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India*; Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*; Hall-Matthews, "Colonial Ideologies of the Market and Famine Policy in Ahmednagar District, Bombay Presidency, C. 1870-1884"; Hardiman, "Usury, Dearth and Famine in Western India"; and Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya*.

11. The classic account of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal is Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal*:

rapacious intermediaries all exacerbated the lot of India's peasants, yet it was equally their own recalcitrance and custom that accounted for stagnation and famine. But as rural India's plight emerged as the site of colonial anxiety and nationalist discontent at the turn of the twentieth century, agriculturalists attuned to new techniques and mentalities emerged as vital movers in the project of rural reconstruction, and, subsequently, the project of national development.

In the wake of late nineteenth-century famines, institutions like the agricultural colleges at Pusa and Poona had begun to school the sons of wealthy cultivators in modern agricultural techniques.<sup>12</sup> And by the 1920s, colonial agricultural officials had identified the "progressive farmer," attuned to better practices and inputs far from one's own fields, as the locus for improved agriculture. "The progressive farmer must continue to progress," a 1921 *Text Book of Punjab Agriculture* proclaimed, "for the so-called scientific agriculture of to-day is often the ordinary practice of to-morrow."<sup>13</sup> But as national reconstruction emerged as a watchword for planners, the success of progressive farmers came also to represent the possibilities of economic self-reliance for the incipient nation. The influential agricultural economist Nagendranath Gangulee — himself an alumnus of the agricultural science program at the University of Illinois — penned an appreciation in a 1927 diary entry for the progressive farmers of Punjab's Canal Colonies, where agriculture was "fast emerging out of the stage of subsistence farming."<sup>14</sup> Marveling at Lyallpur's "enormous grain market in a tract which was a desert only a few years ago," Gangulee saw the results of progressive cultivators whose commitment to improvement had yielded prosperity.<sup>15</sup>

The notion that individual initiative and an industrious disposition would underwrite national development was intensified by the project and promise of national planning, inspired by the apparent success of the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Planning offered the vehicle for the independent state to "accomplish what they had critiqued the colonial state for not being able to do, i.e., to bring about the benefits of material progress through scientific means to be shared equitably among all citizens."<sup>17</sup> And those citizens, Jawaharlal Nehru would characteristically affirm,

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*An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement.* For two historians' interpretation, see Arnold, "Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action: Madras 1876–8"; and Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*. A compelling account from political science is Mitra, "'Indulgence and Abundance': A 'Cultural Model' of Why People Do Not Always Rebel." See also Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*.

12. On the history of agricultural research, extension, and education in late imperial India, see Borthakur and Singh, "History of Agricultural Research in India"; Ghosh, "Agricultural Research and Rural Development"; Hess, "American Agricultural Missionaries and Efforts at Economic Improvement in India"; Pray, "The Impact of Agricultural Research in British India"; Randhawa, *A History of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, 1929-1979*; Randhawa, *A History of Agriculture in India*, 1983; Randhawa, *A History of Agriculture in India*, 1986; Rao, "Agricultural Research and Extension in India"; and Singh, *Whither Agriculture in India?*

13. Roberts and Faulkner, *A Text Book of Punjab Agriculture*, i.

14. Gangulee, *The Indian Peasant and His Environment (The Linlithgow Commission and After)*, 83–84.

15. Investment, as much as orientation, underwrote the success of Punjab's Canal Colonies, the site of massive British irrigation undertakings since the late nineteenth century. See Agnihotri, "Ecology, Land Use and Colonisation"; and Mukherjee, *Colonializing Agriculture the Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism*.

16. Chakrabarty, "Jawaharlal Nehru and Planning, 1938-41: India at the Crossroads," 277–278.

17. Kudaisya, "A Mighty Adventure," 940.

would "have to feel that they are partners in the great enterprise of running the State machine [...] sharers in both the benefits and obligations."<sup>18</sup> The rights attached to citizenship did not precede duties to the state but rather flowed from the completion of those duties; citizens were asked, in other words, to undertake the burden of national development in partnership with the state, assuming a "republican" model of citizenship suited to the new state's exigencies.<sup>19</sup>

Within this framework, rural citizens occupied a complex position. As Gandhi envisioned independent India as a "village republic," and more pragmatically-minded nationalists forwarded their own programs for rural reconstruction, India's peasants were seen as remnants of the past and the most potent subjects for reform in the future.<sup>20</sup> The "backwardness" of the Indian agriculturalist might be transformed into a developmental asset, if the state were able to marshal the community orientation of the industrious peasant.<sup>21</sup> If Russian revolutionaries had drawn upon imperial antecedent in formulating the notion of a "sober and strong" peasant who would wake lesser peasants from a long slumber, so too would Indian planners draw upon colonial notions of "progressive farmers" to exemplify the daring and enterprising nature of the new state itself.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the reformed peasant was not merely the product of the fecund Indian and Soviet imagination. In the dawning days of Western modernization theory, the world's peasants, and its Asian peasants in particular, came to be seen as "the great masses of underdevelopment, [...] rousing from centuries of slumber to new consciousness of the possibilities of the modern world."<sup>23</sup> What was needed for that awakening, social scientists in the 1940s and 1950s came to insist, were peasants who would cast off the shackles of tradition and torpor and demonstrate, to their compatriots, the promise of new technologies and new attitudes. Western observers saw in postcolonial societies a pastoral stagnation that precluded the normative course of progressive industrialization, seeking out natural leaders whose initiative would galvanize others.

A paradigm with its roots in ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico came soon to apply primarily to Asia, viewed increasingly as a continent of peasants. In 1930, the cultural anthropologist Robert Redfield, progenitor of the word "modernization," noted that this was as

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18. Morris-Jones, "Shaping the Post-Imperial State: Nehru's Letters to Chief Ministers," 233.

19. Shani, "Conceptions of Citizenship in India and the 'Muslim Question,'" 152. More generally, see Chakrabarty, "In the Name of Politics"; Corbridge, *Seeing the State*, 52; Gould, "From Subjects to Citizens?"; and Newbigin, "Personal Law and Citizenship in India's Transition to Independence," 32. A genealogy of postcolonial citizenship is in Chatterji, "South Asian Histories of Citizenship, 1946–1970." On citizens and the food question, see Siegel, "Self-Help Which Ennobles a Nation."

20. Anand Pandian asserts that nationalist planners identified rural citizens as "subjects of development, [who] must submit themselves to an order of power identifying their own nature as a problem." Pandian, "Devoted to Development: Moral Progress, Ethical Work, and Divine Favor in South India," 159.

21. Chakrabarty, "In the Name of Politics," 48.

22. Pallot, *Land Reform in Russia, 1906-1917*, 57. The most enterprising peasants envisioned in the Stolypin reforms would win over their neighbors through lecture and example on new techniques and paradigms. After the revolution, the "new peasant" was the subject of adulation and admiration for India's earliest generation of planners. As the engineer and planner Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya noted in 1943, "The measures which have freed the Russian peasantry to a full enjoyment of the advantages of modern culture and education should be brought to the notice of our peasantry." Visvesvaraya, *Planned Economy for India*, 34.

23. Sackley, "The Village as Cold War Site," 481–2.

much a mental process as a technological one. Exposure to a new technique would develop in a peasant "a correspondingly new organ, a new mind," as it had in the Mexican village of his fieldwork.<sup>24</sup> A conference on the "Economic and Social Reconstruction of the Far East" in Stratford, England, held the same year as India's independence, saw the doyens of development theory decry the "traditional inertia" of peasant societies and the "conformity and subordination to the social will" that precluded rural development in Asia.<sup>25</sup> The work of American sociologist Talcott Parsons, suggesting that the economies of peasant societies were so sutured to culture and social structure that extant Western models were irrelevant, grew increasingly influential upon Western social scientists.<sup>26</sup> The influential Saint Lucian economist Arthur Lewis asserted in 1951 that peasants' "other-worldly philosophy" might preclude their interest in growth, declaring that "progress occurs only when people believe that man can, by conscious effort, master nature."<sup>27</sup> And anthropologists working in the shadow of modernization theory proposed the predominance of peasant value systems that precluded development, from the "amoral familism" that Edward Banfield identified in Southern Italy to the "shared poverty" that Clifford Geertz saw in Java.<sup>28</sup>

The "take-off" towards industrialization in agricultural societies that Walt W. Rostow and others imagined was not simply a question of introducing better techniques. Rather, those techniques had to be ushered in by a reform of rural mentalities, as well, and a shattering of the stagnant and passive qualities of the pre-modern peasant.<sup>29</sup> These theories dovetailed neatly with Indian nationalists' understanding of the peasant and his backwardness — a paradigm inherited from colonial masters, even if basic economic assumptions differed. And they suggested to planners in India, as elsewhere, that a revolution in peasant psychology was the necessary precursor to improved peasant production.<sup>30</sup> Those peasants already endowed with a certain restlessness and orientation towards improvement — the "progressive farmers" of late colonial rule — would be vital players in the modernization of Indian agriculture and the quest for national self-reliance.

### *Crop Competitions and "Master Farmers" in Early Independent India*

India's independence foregrounded the promises of abundance made by its nationalist leadership, and underscored the urgency of identifying progressive farmers whose attitude would anchor the new state's agricultural productivity. As planners formulated schemes for egalitarian land reform through bodies like the Congress' Agrarian Reforms Committee, the struggle for

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24. Cullather, *The Hungry World*, 27.

25. Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission*, 93.

26. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 82.

27. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 94.

28. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*; Geertz, "Religious Belief and Economic Behavior in a Central Javanese Town."

29. Cullather, *The Hungry World*, 4–5. See also the influential model for economic "take-off" from traditional societies in Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*. More recent anthropological rebuttals include Kearney, *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry*; and Piot, *Remotely Global*.

30. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 94.



self-sufficiency and self-reliance was nonetheless cast by India's leadership as a war requiring individual sacrifice.<sup>31</sup> Indians listening to an All-India Radio broadcast in 1949 would have heard a familiar refrain in the Food Secretary's declaration that the new nation was "at war against the food shortage. The battle line runs through every home and in every cultivator's field. Each one of us is a soldier in this fight."<sup>32</sup> Certain cultivators, however, would have mentalities better suited to the fight.

A month after independence, India's Food Minister and president-elect Rajendra Prasad delegated the assessment of India's food needs and the formulation of a national strategy to a Foodgrains Policy Committee, designating industrialist Purshotamdas Thakurdas its chairman.<sup>33</sup> Its results were informally released in October and November, before a final report was published in April 1948. Its members, drawn primarily from industry, settled upon a relatively conservative set of proposals: concluding that the Grow More Food Campaign of 1943-1947 had failed, they asserted the need for an end to food imports, the creation of a reserve stock of rice and wheat, and eventually, a state organization that would handle foodgrain imports and trading. India, they declared, would need increase its annual production by ten million tons of foodgrains — a third of which was to be grown on reclaimed land. A dissenting bloc on the committee, according to Thakurdas, expressed "doubts about the feasibility of such a large programme in view of the limitations of resources." Contending that the reform of attitudes was as essential as the reform of agriculture, these members "suggested the organization of crop competitions for creating a spirit of healthy competition among cultivators."

Crop competitions as institutions designed to promote improved agricultural techniques had their origins in nineteenth century Britain, and had been undertaken elsewhere in the British Empire. Yet in the context of a newly-independent India, competitions took on a new valence: the industriousness of their winners was not merely the quality underlying success, but the exemplification of the characteristics required of a reformed Indian peasantry. In March 1951, the central government in New Delhi announced the winners of a new crop competition who would henceforth be known as *Krishi Pandits* — India's new, exemplary "Master Farmers." "The relationship between the Government and the cultivator," a central government publicity brochure explained,

is undergoing a change. A community of interests is now being established between the farmer and the Government. The farmer realizes that increased production will benefit him as well as his country. To evoke the required response in the farmer the Government is creating an atmosphere in the country in which he who achieves the highest yield per acre is accepted as a hero deserving as

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31. The Agrarian Reform Committee was asked to consider "co-operative farming and methods of improving agricultural production, position of small holdings, sub-tenants, landless laborers and generally [the improvement of] conditions of agricultural rural population"; meeting over the course of the next year and a half, the Committee traveled to villages across India, and called as witnesses theorists and practitioners alike. Its final report was issued in July 1949. *Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee*, 4.

32. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Food Secretary's Broadcast on Ministry's Policy, New Delhi, in All-India Radio: A Government of the People [radio Series]," May 9, 1949, IOR/L/E/8/7230, British Library. On this paradigm see Siegel, "Self-Help Which Ennobles a Nation."

33. See Thakurdas, *Final Report, Foodgrains Policy Committee, 1947*, passim.

much honor as a soldier or politician. [...] With this end in view crop competitions are organized by the Centre and the States.<sup>34</sup>

The first three farmers lauded for their "outstanding contributions to the cause of agriculture" in the 1949 and 1950 season were Jogesh Chandra Pani of Midnapur in West Bengal, and Jagadish Prasad Kaushik and Rattan Prakash, both of Meerut in Uttar Pradesh. Kaushik was cited for his wheat crop and Prakash earned his title for his record haul of potatoes, each of which wildly exceeded local averages.<sup>35</sup>

Pani's method for attaining 73 maunds of paddy — as compared with the Indian average yield of 12.5 maunds, was profiled in the *Times of India*, with the farmer's mentality praised as much as his yields. "While learned scientists and economists," he wrote, "have long been straining at the problem of how to prevent India's huge and steadily increasing population from outstripping her production of food, a simple West Bengal farmer has strikingly demonstrated the obvious means by which his starving country may avoid its annual international round in quest of food."<sup>36</sup> The scion of a family that had farmed for generations, Pani owned 31 acres of land, a pair of ploughs, and two pairs of bullocks to draw them — a not insignificant bank of resources. Venturing to devote a third of his land to the competition, Pani had "broadcast-sown" a coarse, high-yielding variety of *abhiman* ["pride"] paddy. Following the best recommendations of the Department of Agriculture, Pani had manured his plot four times according to the best recommendations of the Department of Agriculture, subsequently applying 246 pounds of bonemeal and paddy straw from the last season's crop. These techniques, government-approved and propagated by extension workers, "have stood the test of time and [evidenced] a judicious use of manure and fertilizer." Industrious, diligent, and forward minded, Pani had made use of methods that were both inexpensive and clever. Broadcast sowing — hand-distributing rice over wet fields — is a more inefficient form of seeding rice as compared with drilling, even when furrows are dug beforehand. But his seeds and fertilizer were first-rate, and Pani had not only actualized a prize yield, but had exemplified a willingness to listen to extension workers over the dictates of custom or superstition.

Encouraged by public reception to the first round of the crop competitions, India's central and provincial governments rolled out an expanding network of competitions at *taluk*, district, state, and national levels. In June, holding a spade in his hand at the village of Sahibabad, fifteen miles from Delhi, Food Minister K.M. Munshi inaugurated the first recruitment center for India's "Land Army" and the "Crop Competition Fortnight" that would commemorate its founding.<sup>37</sup> As India worked to win "freedom from foreign bread," its peasants would need to "secure utilization of land on a rational basis, in order that [India's] available resources of land, water, and live-stock might be developed to the maxim extent." The forward-looking progressive farmer would be India's best foot soldier in this fight.

State governments began implementing their own schemes for the awarding of prizes that would qualify farmers for the ultimate title of "Krishi Pandit," awarded by New Delhi — such as

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34. *Projects for Plenty*, 16–17.

35. "Awards for Agriculture," *Times of India*, March 11, 1951.

36. "West Bengal Farmer Sets An Example to India," *Times of India*, March 11, 1951.

37. "Land Army to Aid Farmers: Recruitment Centre Inaugurated," *Times of India*, June 7, 1951.

Bombay state's plan which required a one, five, or ten rupee entrance fee depending on level.<sup>38</sup> The second round of titles were announced in November 1951, and a formal ceremony for the nation's new Krishi Pandits was held the following month.<sup>39</sup> The ceremony rolled into the commencement exercises for the graduates of the Indian Agricultural Research Institute and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research's joint training course in agricultural statistics: progressive attitudes and training in modern techniques were to be honored hand-in-hand, and the event was suffused with symbols of what an industrialized Indian agriculture might resemble. The guests of honor, K.M. Munshi and Jawaharlal Nehru, gifted the awardees with cash prizes, their first issue of a subscription to *Food and Farming* — a trade publication sponsored by the Agriculture Machinery Dealers and Manufacturers' Association of India — and Ferguson tractors donated by India's Escorts Ltd.<sup>40</sup> The Prime Minister, in a playful mood, amused onlookers by playing with a toy tractor, and joking about his own efforts to grow crops on the grounds of Teen Murti Bhavan, his official residence. "The yield there," he quipped, "has been 35 maunds of wheat per acre against the general average of only 7.5 maunds. But I find there is no certificate for me."

In a more serious vein, in an address to the gathered farmers and scientists, Nehru lamented the gulf separating the nation's planners from "those who had to operate their plans." If the yields of India's "master farmers" had so thoroughly dwarfed national averages, the implication was that it was not structural defects holding Indian agriculture in fetters, but the capacities and orientations of Indian farmers themselves. This conclusion was all the more pronounced in a year when India's plans for agricultural self-sufficiency were foundering: 1951 had been touted as the year when foreign imports would cease, a goal trounced by near-famine conditions earlier in the year.<sup>41</sup>

Paddy farmer K. Velliah Gounder of Madras' Salem district was the crowd favorite, so loaded down with prizes that "he returned to his seat in difficulty." His world-record yield of 12,000 pounds of paddy per acre had crushed the local average of 1900 pounds, as well as the Madras average of 1795. Gounder, like the other Krishi Pandits, had assiduously followed departmental advice, supplementing green manure, cattle manure, and compost with bonemeal, groundnut meal, *desi* manure of nightsoil, urine, and leaves, and a protective application of ammonium sulphate. Diligent and dutiful, Gounder had irrigated his land with tanks and wells,

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38. "Crop Competition in Bombay: Scheme Sanctioned," *Times of India*, June 11, 1951.

39. "Convocation at New Delhi," *Food and Farming* 4, no. 1 (January 1952). See also "Krishi Pandit," *Times of India*, December 21, 1951; and "Land Army Heroes," *Times of India*, December 19, 1951.

40. Escorts would continue to provide tractors as incentive prizes in subsequent years; see "Tractors as Prizes," *Times of India*, July 22, 1952.

41. A confidential report written by the South Asia Branch of the United States' Office of Intelligence Research at the same time painted a grim picture of India's agricultural capacities: from an average of 328 pounds of grain per capita per year at independence, its officials calculated, grain output looked to be headed towards 307 pounds a person by 1956, and less than 300 by 1961. By this metric, the first Five-Year Plan's hopeful goal of 349 pounds a person seemed a cruel fantasy. Jerome B. Cohen, *Briefing Paper for TCA: The Impact of the Indian Five-Year Plan on Foodgrain Availabilities* (South Asia Branch, Division of Research for Near East, South Asia, and Africa, Office of Intelligence Research, November 30, 1951), RG 59 / 54D341 / Box 14 / Food, General Correspondence, 1951, United States National Archives.

weeding it frequently.<sup>42</sup> The *Economic Weekly* lauded Gounder's pioneering spirit. In a country where good deeds frequently went unnoticed, the journal declared, "it is some consolation to find that the man who broke all world records by growing 12,000 pounds of paddy on an acre [...] has at last been honored and given nationwide recognition."<sup>43</sup>

*Food and Farming* proffered similar praise to Madho Kripal of Uttar Pradesh's Meerut district, whose eight years of potato farming had culminated in this national achievement.<sup>44</sup> His record yield of 726 maunds per acre had made him "India's citizen number one in the fight for freedom from foreign food — so far as potatoes are concerned. Declaring that there was "no secret" to his success, Kripal lauded the recommended utilization of land, water, manure, and seed, and most of all, his participation in the government's plant protection service: at the cost of five rupees an acre, this scheme had provided Kripal with chemical fertilizers, spraying equipment, and technical supervision.

If, however, Kripal was a devoted student of the agricultural department's best practices, eager to farm in a manner best suited to a hungry state, he nonetheless used his podium to decry more radical state undertakings — most notably, the project of land reform and its concomitant antagonism to more privileged farmers.<sup>45</sup> Proclaiming himself a small farmer — he held "only" twenty acres of land, used bullocks instead of tractors, and employed contract workers in addition to four permanent laborers — Kripal decried the means of land ceilings and redistribution as antithetical to the national goals of greater production. "It is no good thinking that the redistribution of land of small holdings to landless laborers will result in bigger food production," he declared. "No poor villager could have produced a quarter of what I get from my twenty acres of land, since he lacks up-to-date knowledge and cannot afford to apply modern fertilizers in sufficient quantities. What is more, with my knowledge, supervision, and a small amount of capital, my twenty acres provide work, income, and food every year for more men and women than five such peasant holdings would be likely to provide."<sup>46</sup> Land reform had emerged as a watchword in early independent India, yet as the project's aims were subverted in practice, *Krishi Pandits* like Kripal could tap into an alternate vision of agricultural growth and abundance rooted in the enterprising qualities of the "progressive" ascendant peasant.<sup>47</sup>

As the scale of crop competitions continued to grow, *Krishi Pandits* continued to be

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42. "The Three Krishi Pandits," *Food and Farming* 3, no. 3 (December 1951): 2, 4.

43. "World Record Yield in Paddy," *Economic Weekly*, December 22, 1951, 1240.

44. "We Take Off Our Hat to Shri Madho Kripal of Hapur, Champion Potato Grower," *Food and Farming* 3, no. 2 (November 1951): 86, 88.

45. On land reform in India, see Herring, *Land to the Tiller*. An excellent provincial study is Neale, *Economic Change in Rural India*. The classic journalistic account is Nair, *Blossoms in the Dust*. On Indian land reform efforts in global context, see Low, *The Egalitarian Moment*.

46. Gounder and Kripal were flanked by Padam Singh as the third Krishi Pandit of 1951. Singh, also of Meerut, had cultivated 59 maunds, 25 seers, and 11 chattaks of wheat per acre on his three-fourth acre plot, as compared with an average national average of ten maunds an acre. "The Three Krishi Pandits," *Food and Farming* 3, no. 3 (December 1951): 2, 4.

47. An excellent review of land reform efforts is Chakravorty, *The Price of Land*, 94–95. The first round of land reform largely eliminated the *zamindari* class, and by best estimates, benefited around 20 to 25 million tenant households, but did little to change tenures or revenue systems, and "largely failed to live up to the planners' expectations." Tomlinson, *The Economy of Modern India, 1860-1970*, 191–192.

lauded for their determination and willingness to follow the best practices of modern agriculture. A "progressive farmer" from Karnataka's Dharwad district won a prize for his record crop of *jowar* (sorghum), asserting that his dry farming system suited to low-rainfall areas was "simple enough for any farmer to follow. There is no initial outlay required, no extra labour. Our farmers, who are averse to any big change in the traditional system of farming cannot find fault with my advice that if they adopt a few changes in the methods they follow, as I did, doubling the present farm yields is just easy."<sup>48</sup> Indian farmers' willingness to overcome their putative conservatism and superstition would find their efforts richly rewarded.

In June 1952, New Delhi announced a second "Crop Competition Fortnight," calculating that if twenty farmers from every Indian village tried new techniques on a single acre, the country would enjoy 3.7 million extra tons of grain.<sup>49</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru spoke on All-India Radio to tout the competition.<sup>50</sup> India's food situation was "getting slightly better," and the example set by *Krishi Pandits* was helping show a path beyond current anemic levels of food production. "Our yield at present," the Prime Minister declared, "is very poor, and there is no reason why we should not increase it as other countries have done. Our farmers are hardworking but sometimes they lack good seed or good manure or something else that is necessary. The [central and state] governments will certainly help them, but ultimate success can only come through self-help or, better still, through the cooperatives of farmers working together for their common good." Nehru lauded the 60,000 farmers who had joined the competition in Uttar Pradesh alone, but averred that "this is not enough. We want every farmer to enlist and to take part in these competitions." The "remarkable" yields that enterprising farmers had attained, Nehru declared, "show what we can do if we make up our minds to do it. Even if these figures are exceptional, the average is bound to go up and only a ten per cent increase in our average yield will solve all our food problems." (The report of the Grow More Food Committee, issued shortly after Nehru's speech, lauded the competitions, noting their value in promoting "a spirit of healthy rivalry among agriculturists [which encourages] them to raise per acre yields."<sup>51</sup> A further virtue was that the competitions were inexpensive to run — the ₹4.09 crores rupees spent on crop competitions paled in comparison to the ₹32.88 crores spent on more "technical" Grow More Food projects.)

A second group of progressive farmers ascended to the dais at Parliament House in January 1953 to be named *Krishi Pandits*, each agreeing to accept a Ferguson tractor valued at ₹7500 rupees in place of the ₹5000 rupee cash prizes.<sup>52</sup> There were six winners in gram, *jowar*, and *bajra* in addition to paddy, wheat, and potatoes, and each farmer, dressed in new clothes, saluted the Prime Minister as they met him on stage.<sup>53</sup> After introductory addresses by B.P. Pal, Director of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and the farmer leader Panjabrao

48. "Big Jowar Yield Per Acre: Enterprise of Farmer," *Times of India*, July 7, 1952.

49. "Bid to Increase Food Yield: Crop Competition," *Times of India*, June 2, 1952.

50. "Mr. Nehru's Broadcast," *Times of India*, June 14, 1952; and Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches 1949-1953*, 52–53.

51. Krishnamachari, *Report of the Grow More Food Enquiry Committee*, 39.

52. "Students Should Work Among Farmers, Says P.M.: Krishi Pandits Awarded Prizes," *Food and Farming* 4, no. 11 (January 1953); "Increasing Output of Food: Mr. Nehru Calls for Full National Effort," *Times of India*, January 7, 1953.

53. "Six Krishi Pandits," *Food and Farming* 5, no. 2 (February 1953).

Deshmukh (newly appointed as Minister of Agriculture), Nehru spoke of the dignity of manual labor and the disappointment he felt that India's oft-stated goal of self-sufficiency in food by 1951 had not been met. If it were to be achieved by, say, 1954, it would undoubtedly be because "the Krishi Pandits have shown how this could be done."

*"Natural Leaders" in the Community Development Era*

The institution of crop competitions and the awarding of the title of *Krishi Pandit* continued to expand throughout the 1950s, with winners touted for their exemplary agricultural prowess and progressive, daring nature. Yet the tensions between egalitarian uplift and the individual productivity of certain ascendant agriculturalists grew clearer throughout this decade. An uneasy dynamic ensued, evident in both mounting skepticism over the generalizability or equability of the *Krishi Pandit's* accomplishments, and a widening cleave between "progressive farmers" and their more laggard compatriots, exacerbated by the rise of the institution of Community Development.

Crop competitions continued to enjoy the official limelight. In 1952, a retired Indian Administrative Service member, Cedric Mayadas, won Uttar Pradesh's top prize for wheat crops; two years later, he published an account of his feat, linking it to a larger assessment of India's food crisis. Mayadas sketched a pen portrait of the small farm he had built on "useless ravine land," sloping down towards a river near Lucknow.<sup>54</sup> Working "as a small farmer among neighbors who are also small farmers," Mayadas made modest investments in manures, fertilizers, and irrigation — no investment "which my neighbors could not afford." Winning the state competition proved to him that "the Indian farmer is capable of producing yields comparable with the highest obtained anywhere in the world."<sup>55</sup> India's bureaucrats and politicians continued to heap plaudits on progressive farmers like Mayadas, whom they hoped would be eager to deploy their ingenuity in the service of greater production. Ram Krishna Singh of Uttar Pradesh's Bulandshahr district was fêted with a Ferguson tractor for his bumper crop of potatoes in 1954.<sup>56</sup> An Indian agricultural handbook declared that year that crop competitions have "have [acted] as a healthy factor among farmers for increasing the yield."<sup>57</sup> Vyankat Bhaga Patil of Maharashtra's Yawal *taluk* celebrated his title in *jowar* the year afterwards with a visit from Panjabrao Deshmukh.<sup>58</sup> Touring a drought area near Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh in July 1958, Nehru made a point of meeting with Sohanlal, a local *Krishi Pandit*, declaring him "the living example of increasing agricultural produce."<sup>59</sup>

Yet observers had begun to recognize, as they interrogated their results further, that the

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54. Mayadas, *Between Us and Hunger*.

55. *Ibid.*, 90.

56. "64 Maunds Wheat on One Acre: Farmer Wins Prize," *Times of India*, December 31, 1954.

57. Thirumalai, *Post-War Agricultural Problems and Policies in India*, 172. The crop competitions would be mentioned in agricultural textbooks and reviews throughout the decade; see also Maheshwari and Tandon, "Agriculture and Economic Development in India," 212.

58. "Krishi Pandit Feted," *Times of India*, November 24, 1955; "Dr. P. Deshmukh," *Times of India*, January 3, 1956.

59. "All-Out Drive to End Poverty Urged: Work Hard and Step Up Output, Says Premier," *Times of India*, July 16, 1958.

"progressive" qualities of competition winners might reflect privileged access to capital, land, and inputs as much as a modernizing spirit. A delicate review by the agricultural economist M.L. Dantwala suggested that what Cedric Mayadas, a progressive farmer "with his training and opportunities, could accomplish may not have universal applicability."<sup>60</sup> Eager to generalize the work of *Krishi Pandit* K. Velliah Gounder some years prior, the Central Rice Research Institute found that they could not replicate his results; the paddy grew quickly with nitrogen treatments, but lodged long before producing grain.<sup>61</sup> A soil specialist from the University of California, Davis, working for a joint Rockefeller Foundation - United States Department of Agriculture mission to India, wondered in a letter to colleagues what factors, beyond improved technique, underlay competitors' implausibly high yields.<sup>62</sup> And the stagnant number of participants meant that awards were not given in certain years for certain crops.<sup>63</sup> A 1957 piece in the *Times of India* wondered whether crop competitions were losing their appeal.<sup>64</sup> It was true that "the results of this year's crop competitions once again shows how, given the will and the means, a farmer can produce almost twelve times the average yield." But there was a sense that only certain agriculturalists could aspire to these competitions: why, for example, were winners only coming from certain districts in the states of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh?

The tensions inherent in the institution were increasingly apparent in light of the rise of Community Development as the primary state instrument of rural uplift in the 1950s.<sup>65</sup> Born of the developmental conceits of Western modernizers associated with the United States' Point Four Program, as well as the desire of Nehruvian planners to weave Gandhian idioms of village into the fabric of the state itself, Community Development envisioned self-governing villages working for shared uplift — though these projects were invariably stifled by deeply entrenched rural hierarchies. The American architect and urban planner Albert Mayer's "pilot project" in the north Indian district of Etawah was the model for these schemes, and Mayer's understanding of village communities, rooted in Gandhian idioms, nonetheless dovetailed with Western

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60. Dantwala, "Review: Between Us and Hunger."

61. "In the *Krishi Pandit* Plot," the CRRRI report found, "the crop had prematurely lodged which affected the grain setting and resulted in poor yield. The *Krishi Pandit* method has depressed the yield to the extent of 546 lb per acre. The results obtained here correspond to the general conclusion that heavy application of manures and fertilizers beyond 40 lb acre does not give any further increase in yield." *Annual Report for 1953-1954*, 14–15. See also Panikkar, *Coordination of Agricultural Research in India* 2, 16.

62. B.A. Krantz, "Letter to Ralph Cummings, E.W. Sprague, K.O. Rachie, and L.R. House," August 20, 1959, RG 6.7, box 102A, folder 688, Rockefeller Archive Center.

63. "Raising Production of Food Grains: Mr. Jain Stresses Role of Agricultural Experts," *Times of India*, May 12, 1957.

64. "Crop Competition," *Times of India*, May 13, 1957.

65. On Community Development, see Banerjee, "U.S. Planning Expeditions to Postcolonial India"; Frankel, *India's Political Economy*, 101–106 and passim; Neale, "Indian Community Development"; and Sackley, "The Village as Cold War Site." Daniel Immerwahr argues convincingly that the "small" scale of Community Development in India was not at odds with the conceits of "big" modernizers, but rather "part of a counter-tendency within Indian politics: a profound enchantment with the idea of the 'village community.'" Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 69–71. Subir Sinha sees in the rise of Community Development as an overarching ideology in postcolonial India the importance of "forms of power located outside the nation-space [which] played key roles in shaping India's postcolonial state and agrarian politics." Sinha, "Lineages of the Developmentalist State," 60.

modernizers' twinning of the projects of economic and psychological transformation.<sup>66</sup> Exposed to better practices, peasants would quickly move past the "initial stages of awakening," soon coming to champion "systematic planning and organization, village outlook, [and the] practice of effective human relations, self-reliance and resourcefulness, and teamwork."<sup>67</sup> This vision was consonant with parallel visions of rural modernization, but was in practice frequently sabotaged by the designs of rural elites.

The 16,500 villages covered in the initial incarnation of the Community Development program, launched on Gandhi's birthday in 1952, were the first communities in a project which swelled, within a decade, to 446,000 villages and 253.2 million peasants — ten percent of the world's population.<sup>68</sup> Even if the project represented development "on the cheap," it strained the institutional resources of the Indian state. The workers charged with supervising ten to seventeen villages each sought to identify "natural leaders" who would guide projects on the ground — leaders who were also asked to provide resources required beyond the seeds, livestock, or construction materials provided by the state.<sup>69</sup> Unsurprisingly, the capital and clout required of these leaders, charged with identifying and partially funding the "felt needs" of a community, meant that they were at the top of rigid rural hierarchies, and their interests at odds with egalitarian aims and idioms. "Many [newly-identified] leaders," the agrarian economist Walter Neale noted retrospectively, "were glad to adopt modern technologies but were much less enthused about adopting the New India's egalitarian ideals."<sup>70</sup> It was perhaps predictable that there would be great overlap between "natural leaders" and "progressive farmers," and in the era of Community Development, these rural elites began to perceive in their enterprising qualities the potential for political influence — particularly as the romance of rural uplift began to lose out to idioms of productivism by the decade's end.

Crop competitions grew increasingly bound up in the latticework of Community Development and its focus on the village. In 1957, Congress organizer Sunil Guha called for larger prizes to be awarded to India's *Krishi Pandits* in light of the example their determination and prudence made in a mounting food crisis, and suggested that villages be recognized collectively for their exceptional production, as well.<sup>71</sup> Competitions were touted on the pages of official publications like *Extension*, a mouthpiece for India's rural outreach service.<sup>72</sup>

Yet Community Development workers' identification of progressive farmers and *Krishi Pandits* as the "natural leaders" of their communities did little to improve their local influence. Evelyn Wood, a consultant with the Allahabad Extension Training Centre resident in India for three decades, wrote from his vantage in an Uttar Pradesh village.<sup>73</sup> Official adulation in the form of title-giving, he contended, impeded rather than lubricated the process of technological

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66. On Mayer's unlikely influence on Indian planning, see Thorner, "Nehru, Albert Mayer, and Origins of Community Projects." More generally, see Sackley, "Village Models."

67. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 71.

68. Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 77.

69. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

70. Neale, "Indian Community Development," 685–686.

71. Guha, *India's Food Problem*, 35.

72. Kadam, "Indian Crop Competitions," 23.

73. Wood, "Leadership in Community Development."



transfer. The cash rewards gleaned by "progressive farmers" in crop competitions "makes their fellow-villagers regard [these farmers] with even deeper suspicion," and the title of *Krishi Pandit* ran against the "humility" that agricultural emulation might require. In an unnamed village near Delhi, targeted for Community Development schemes, Wood spoke of an "old farmer friend's" fear of "the *Krishi Pandit* being installed as a *neta* [leader]." When the *Krishi Pandit* was indeed named titular village *pradhan*, or head, this "ambitious fellow" found that he could not marshal any particular collective enthusiasm for his schemes, having bypassed, with Delhi's encouragement, the traditional consensus-building that village decisions might have once required. "This unfortunate *Krishi Pandit*, as *pradhan*," Wood concluded, "is still struggling to work the oracle on Western lines. And his people won't play: his use of this unfamiliar bag of tricks only deepens their distrust in the poor fellow — who is actually an excellent man as well as an excellent farmer."

Whether because their own interests were at odds with egalitarian aims, or because they could not gain traction as leaders in their own villages, progressive farmers and *Krishi Pandits* were increasingly conceptualizing themselves as an interest group with political clout beyond their communities. *Kisan Sabhas* [peasant assemblies] and landowners' associations had been fixtures of the late colonial past, but as the 1950s advanced, these "progressive farmers" were juxtaposing their own goals of increased productivity against schemes seen as impeding that growth. In 1954, a group of "scientific, progressive farmers" wrote to a conference of Agriculture Ministers to protest against land ceiling bills, declaring that such legislation had "created conditions of confusion and uncertainty and [had] thrown scientific farming into a state of nervousness," thus preventing the group "from playing its destined role effectively in the national realization of the objective of self-sufficiency in food."<sup>74</sup> Two years later, a group of progressive farmers, among them "some of India's present and potential *Krishi Pandits*," met in Delhi for a meeting of a new "Farmers' Forum."<sup>75</sup> The group met at the President's residence, Rashtrapati Bhavan, in recognition of their rising influence, and India's President, Rajendra Prasad, spoke to hail the example of their courageous spirit. The *Economic Weekly* echoed Prasad's laurels, declaring that progressive farmers' continued victories in crop competitions demonstrated that there was "no basis for the belief that Indian farmers are conservative by nature and that, therefore, it is difficult to popularize new ideas and practices among them." Indian farmers had taken readily to innovations like the new Japanese methods of paddy cultivation, handily winning district and state-level competitions.<sup>76</sup> More crop competitions, the editorial averred, would undoubtedly help make lesser farmers more aware of better practice. The gathering of the Farmers' Forum (soon renamed the *Bharat Krishak Samaj*) was heralded as being among "the first signs of a growing awareness among our farmers of the wider possibilities open to them to improve their condition and of their wider responsibilities to society in cajoling land to yield more than it is now doing."

Yet progressive farmers were already well aware of wider possibilities to advance their own interests, and were doing so with deepening savvy. The year prior, the Farmers' Forum — which had been launched with funds from the American Technical Cooperation — had brought the director of the American Farm Bureau to India in a consulting capacity.<sup>77</sup> George H. Wilson,

74. "Scientific, Progressive Farmers' Memorandum," *Food and Farming* 6, no. 7 (July 1954).

75. "Krishi Pandits and Productivity," *Eastern Economist*, April 6, 1956.

76. "Japanese Method of Cultivation in Vindhya Pradesh," *Eastern Economist*, June 3, 1955, 889.

77. George H. Wilson, *A National Farmers' Organisation in India* (New Delhi: Farmers' Forum, 1956),

who had headed the influential lobbying group for nineteen years, had begun his career as an extension agent in California, had accepted the invitation from Panjabrao Deshmukh, who perceived no overly burdensome conflict in his roles as Agriculture Minister and head of the Farmers' Forum. Asked to survey Indian farming and assess the possibility for an Indian farmers' interest organization on American lines, Wilson was bullish. "We as American farmers," he declared, "are confident that increased production and a better life for the Indian farmer is very much in our best interest. Farmers of the world have similar problems. They think alike, they react alike." Wilson envisioned a farming organization that would "[build] men to take their place as effective producers, builders, and contributors to the general welfare," and he lauded, as a starting point, the "many groups in India known as progressive farmers who carry out research or demonstration projects on their farms and [who] meet to discuss the results."

As the failures of Community Development grew more evident, and the end of agricultural productivity began to eclipse the goal of shared village uplift, progressive farmers were coming to see themselves more and more as a national bloc, rather than early adopters in their own communities. Even before the Ford Foundation-sponsored Intensive Agriculture Development Programme began to concentrate inputs in already-productive districts at the turn of the decade, certain states were registering lists of progressive farmers seen as more capable of eking out greater yields. Specific criteria were laid down for these designations, and in some states, the title of "Model Farmer" was given to "the progressive farmer who stands top-most in each Taluka or Mahal."<sup>78</sup> Surveys of Indian agriculture noted that examples of "progressive farmers" could be found the length and breadth of India. Progressive farmers, one account noted, "of the different states of India have probably much more to learn from each other than those of other countries with entirely different classic, social, and economic conditions."<sup>79</sup>

As the decade neared an end, the egalitarian aspirations of Community Development were beginning to cede conceptual ground to the notion that agricultural production would need to be boosted, no matter the cost. Food output temporarily plummeted in 1957-1958, and a pair of influential reports from the Ford Foundation and the United Nations contended that Community Development had less and less to offer in the face of a mounting risk of widespread starvation.<sup>80</sup> The Foodgrains Enquiry Committee, in its own report of 1957, held that "unless agricultural production was given the highest priority in the National Extension and Community Development programme, it would not be possible to achieve the higher targets of agricultural production."<sup>81</sup> Nehru had first suggested to the Lok Sabha in 1956 that Community Development must "turn its attention much more pointedly and aggressively towards this agricultural development and make it almost its chief function."<sup>82</sup> The Prime Minister still managed to stop and meet with Jagir Singh en route to Chandigarh in 1958. But by the following year, if he could cursorily laud the Community Development program for "waking [villagers] up," Nehru was

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RG 469 / P 161 A / Box 7 / India Agriculture Reports, 1954-1956, United States National Archives.

78. *Report of the Team for the Study of Community Projects and National Extension Service*, 3 (Part I), 254-255.

79. Randhawa and Prem Nath, *Farmers of India* 1, 11.

80. Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 97; Sinha, "Lineages of the Developmentalist State."

81. Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Government of India, *Report of the Foodgrains Enquiry Committee, November 1957*, 33.

82. Sackley, "Village Models," 28.

also delivering its eulogy in a speech to an International Federation of Agricultural Producers conference, where he suggested inputs had been "spread out rather too thinly."<sup>83</sup> And the progressive farmers and *Krishi Pandits* who had begun to mobilize for themselves in the middle of the decade began to flex their muscle at its end. In 1959, the Bharat Krishak Samaj hosted the World Agriculture Fair in Delhi, touting the accomplishments of "progressive farmers" to a worldwide audience.<sup>84</sup> The year afterwards, the BKS sent a delegation — including a *Krishi Pandit* for *jowar* — on a tour of the United States to view best practices there.<sup>85</sup> If progressive farmers had been at the heart of ideas of village uplift at the beginning of the decade, they had little to do with these egalitarian ideals by its end.

### *Inputs and Interests in India's Green Revolution*

"Progressive farmers," attuned to new techniques and with the capital and connections needed to make good on them, had been frequent awardees in India's network of crop competitions. In a new nation, they had been identified as promising modernizers ready to buck superstition and custom in the name of shared welfare. In a subsequent era of egalitarian uplift, exemplified in the Community Development program, these same progressive farmers continued to bag awards, but bucked planners' expectations that they would serve as "natural leaders" in villages, instead grouping together as an ascendant political block. And as India's bureaucrats and politicians pivoted away from an ethos of egalitarianism, and towards a consensus that agricultural productivity would require an inequitable concentration of inputs, "progressive farmers" stood poised to gain even further as individuals and as a group.

The Community Development program's *coup de grâce* came in the form of a *Report on India's Food Crisis and Steps to Meet It*, issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation under the direction of experts from the Ford Foundation.<sup>86</sup> The report's proposals for price incentives to farmers, and the concentration of new hybrid seeds, irrigation, and chemical fertilizer technologies, led to a pilot program which sowed the institutional seeds for the Green Revolution. The program's results were mixed, but W. David Hopper, an agrarian economist who had started his career with fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh in the 1950s, and later became the IADP's official chronicler, lauded its success in transforming mentalities, in words that harkened back to earlier notions of a modernizing peasantry. Once an agriculturalist, he wrote in 1965, "is convinced through extension effort [...] that a particular innovation is both useful and within his means, he is as prompt as farmers in any other part of the world to accept it."<sup>87</sup> It was perhaps unsurprising that farmers extolled in this era as exemplary

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83. Jawaharlal Nehru, "To the International Federation of Agricultural Producers," December 5, 1959, in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru [Second Series]* 55, 151–158.

84. See *A Sample Survey of Progressive Farmers Visiting The World Agriculture Fair; World Agriculture Fair Official Souvenir*; Jawaharlal Nehru, "At the World Agricultural Fair," December 11, 1959, in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru [Second Series]* 55, 174–176; Jawaharlal Nehru, "To The Bharat Krishak Samaj: Agriculture and Growth," February 14, 1960, in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru [Second Series]* 57, 199–219; and Schröder, *Der Kisan lebt!*, 13–48.

85. "India Farm Leaders Visit Here," *Watervliet Record*, June 22, 1961.

86. Agricultural Production Team, Ford Foundation, *Report on India's Food Crisis & Steps to Meet It*.

87. Rosen, *Western Economists and Eastern Societies*, 79.

modernizers often hailed from IADP districts. "What is the secret of big crops," a reporter for the *Food and Farming* trade publication asked in 1963. "Is it good seed? Fertilizers? Careful cultivation? Or all put together?" It was all of these combined, and the skillful combination thereof was exemplified in the results gleaned by Radhikaraman Chaubey, a "progressive farmer" of Bihar's Shahabad district — a major IADP trial site.<sup>88</sup> Chaubey's wheat crop had dwarfed that of a nearby Japanese-style experimental farm, and his prodigious use of fertilizers like ammonium sulphate and pesticides like BHC5 likely had much to do with this success.

The award of the *Krishi Pandit* title continued as India forged forward with its "new agricultural strategy."<sup>89</sup> The accomplishments of crop competition winners were sometimes used to bolster the claim that there was little "new" in the strategy itself; if earlier farmers had been able to eke out grand yields, then perhaps India's transformative strategy was merely old wine in new bottles.<sup>90</sup> What these analyses seemed to miss, however, was that *Krishi Pandits* and progressive farmers had long made use of concentrated inputs in a manner that was only then becoming acceptable to the majority of planners and politicians.

These techniques were readily apparent in the descriptions of the new *Krishi Pandits* in the Green Revolution years. The 1966 awardee for paddy, for instance, was Ganganna, a mononymous farmer from Andhra Pradesh's Kurnool district, and also an awardee of the new Subramaniam Prize, given in the form of a tractor.<sup>91</sup> Ganganna, a winner at district and state levels before, had dutifully worked with extension officials, "keen to learn the new ideas in farming," and those ideas now included using GEB-24, an improved local rice breed, as well as compost, superphosphate, groundnut cake, potash, ammonium phosphate, urea, and several healthy sprayings of Endrin pesticide to prevent stem borers from ruining his crop. "The crop grew with such a vigor," a reporter noted, "that Ganganna had to support the plants with strings tied to bamboo poles fixed at a distance of one meter each." Other *Krishi Pandits* followed suit, trying new seeds and increased doses of pesticides. Ganganna shared the *Krishi Pandit* title with Narayan Aba Patel, a farmer from Maharashtra's Sangli district, who had made use of similar modern techniques.<sup>92</sup> Haji Abdul Gaffar Bhat, an award-winning farmer from Kashmir, broke all state records in 1968 by planting the China-1038 paddy seed at the advice of local extension

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88. M.L.N. Iyengar, "Profile: Farmer with a Sixth Sense," *Food and Farming* 15, no. 5 (May 1963).

89. Some early accounts of this shift include G.V. Chalam, "High Yielding Varieties: Core of the New Agricultural Strategy," *Yojana* 10, no. 4 (March 6, 1966): 5–7; Harrar, *Strategy for the Conquest of Hunger*; Daya Krishna, *The New Agricultural Strategy: The Vehicle of Green Revolution in India*; Cleaver, "The Contradictions of the Green Revolution"; Ladejinsky, "How Green Is the Indian Green Revolution?"; and Subramaniam, *The New Strategy in Indian Agriculture*. See also Trivedi, *Bhāratīya khetī*.

90. One skeptical agricultural economist in 1966 recalled a conversation with another agricultural researcher: "When asked, 'Haven't the *Krishi Pandits* got large yields even from our local varieties,' the scientist replied, 'That is only for prize winning. Actually they cultivate very small plots of land and the results are blown up.' He was reported to have implied that it was statistics and little else. Comment is unnecessary except that the plots on the performance of which *Krishi Pandits* are chosen are at least one acre in size and it behoves ill of scientists fiddling with 1/1100th acre experimental plots to criticize this and roundly condemn statistics." V.G. Panse, "A Critical Study of New Food Strategy," *Yojana* 10, no. 16 (August 21, 1966): 19–20.

91. "Top Scorer: Ganganna Is a Rice Expert," *Yojana* 11, no. 3 (February 19, 1967).

92. "Crop Competition: State Farmer Wins Prize," *Times of India*, May 9, 1969.

officers, using new fertilizers and weeding at least four times to achieve a record yield of paddy.<sup>93</sup> Bhabhabhai Mandanbhai Parmar of Gujarat's Amreli district used the celebrated Kalyan Sona wheat variety — the champion strain of the Green Revolution — to win a title for wheat in 1972, making use of tractors, spraying pumps, and mechanized sowing implements.<sup>94</sup>

India's president, V.V. Giri, invited *Krishi Pandits* and other crop competition winners to New Delhi in October 1970 to a twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the founding of the Food and Agriculture Organization, declaring that their example would "be emulated by millions of farmers all over the country."<sup>95</sup> Later, the *Krishi Pandits* themselves were honored at another ceremony at the campus of the Indian Agricultural Research Institute. A.P. Shinde, India's Agriculture Minister, lauded the figure of the *Krishi Pandit*, "the farmer who has taken wholeheartedly to scientific farming."<sup>96</sup> Yet fieldwork done in even relatively booming districts like East Godavari in Andhra Pradesh at this date suggested that few farmers even knew of the existence of the *Krishi Pandit* award.<sup>97</sup> And as productivism emerged as the order of the day, the investments made by competition winners came to resemble those available to more modest farmers less and less. Emblematic of this transformation was the farmer Girdharilal of Bhopal, who was 1978's *Krishi Pandit* for wheat.<sup>98</sup> Girdharilal had planted high-yielding seeds procured from the National Seeds Corporation, doused them in compost, potash, superphosphate, and urea, irrigated the land eight times with pumps purchased with cash and bank loans, and had sprayed the land repeatedly with Dithane-Z. "When the experts arrived to conduct the crop cutting experiments," one report read, "there were so many onlookers from the neighborhood that it looked like a fair." By that late point in the decade, titles were being given for commercial crops, as well: the *Gopal Ratna* [Master Cowherd] prize for sugarcane, eggs, and milk, and the *Udyan Pandit* [Fruit Master] title for mango, banana, sweet orange, grapes, mandarin, apple, pineapple, and guava — awards that had little, if anything, to do with the project of national self-sufficiency.<sup>99</sup>

Breathless contemporary accounts of the Green Revolution trumpeted the remaking of Indian farmer's spirits, not just their yields — as if to write a premature epilogue to the story of agricultural modernization. The Rockefeller Foundation, in a 1969 report, declared that "some of the [Green Revolution] story can be told in bushels and tons, dollars and rupees, but perhaps the most important phase of it is beyond any measurement. Whereas Indian farmers once felt that there was little they could do about their fate, now they feel a spirit of possibility. They are excited about what they can do."<sup>100</sup> C. Subramaniam, the primary architect of the "new agricultural strategy," wrote with satisfaction in 1979 about a popular shift in farmer

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93. "Big Deeds, Humble Men," *Yojana* 12, no. 25 (December 22, 1968).

94. Minakshi Shah, "Two Award Winners," *Kurukshetra*, September 1, 1972.

95. *Report of the National Commission on Agriculture*, 26.

96. Y. Malla Reddy, "Our New Krishi Pandits and Udyan Pandits," *Kurukshetra*, November 16, 1971, 12–14.

97. Muthayya, *Panchayat Taxes*, 55–56. Ironically, East Godavari was among the first districts to be proclaimed a Green Revolution success story; see Thorner, "Coastal Andhra."

98. "M.P. Farmer Is Krishi Pandit," *Times of India*, October 12, 1978.

99. *Report of the National Commission on Agriculture*, vol. XII, 77–78.

100. Streeter, *A Partnership to Improve Food Production in India*, 7.

mentality.<sup>101</sup> "Our experience has shown," he contended, "that even illiterate farmers are able to provide leadership in managing their affairs, sometimes much more effectively than the most sophisticated and educated persons."

Proclamations like these suggested that the spirit of an earlier generation of "progressive farmers" had transformed the whole of rural society. This unlikely supposition was thwarted by mounting evidence that Green Revolution gains would worsen rather than better rural hierarchies, and by contemporary observations that "progressive" qualities seemed more a shorthand for peasants endowed with the capital and connections needed to take advantage of new technologies. A 1972 comparative study of Mysore and Punjab still held that "wherever the development process becomes more dynamic, a group of progressive farmers appear, who get higher net returns from their holdings than do the mass of farmers because they make a more rational use of their production factors and adopt technical innovations more quickly."<sup>102</sup> But its author argued for a redefinition of "progressive" that would account for peasants' differential economic means.

As observers pointed out the defects in the "new agricultural strategy," they wondered if a focus on "progressive farmers" underlay the same. A 1972 study of Coimbatore District noted that that farmers identified as progressive invariably had bigger and more secure holdings, irrigation and power, as well as assured subsidies, purchasing prices, credit, and education.<sup>103</sup> "Progressive farmers," a 1978 review contended more bluntly, "are inevitably mostly big and rich. That is because the technology of high-yielding varieties with intensive use of irrigation water and fertilizers in optimum proportions calls for a great deal of working capital; and it is only the big and rich farmers who can command such working capital, whether from their own surplus or from sources of credit."<sup>104</sup> The backgrounds and aims of "progressive farmers" in the Green Revolution era had diverged greatly from the hopes of an earlier generation of planners, and the winners of crop competitions — and the winners in a changing agricultural economy — would certainly not have satisfied the hopes of modernization theorists or bureaucrats identifying them as agents of change in rural India.<sup>105</sup>

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101. Subramaniam, *The New Strategy in Indian Agriculture*, 76–77.

102. von Blanckenburg, "Who Leads Agricultural Modernisation?," A94.

103. Rangaswamy, Ramasamy, and Guruswami, *India's Changing Farmers*, 170–1.

104. Rudra, "Organisation of Agriculture for Rural Development," 383–4.

105. Lakshman Yapa argues for an epistemic transformation wrought of the Green Revolution, whose social theory "came out of the work of modernization theorists. The promotion of high-yielding varieties spawned a whole new vocabulary that included terms and expressions such as 'progressive farmers,' 'backward farmers,' 'betting on the fittest,' and so on. Capitalist farmers with access to large areas of irrigated land who could purchase the expensive inputs were culturally and linguistically transformed into 'progressive farmers.' Poor farmers who could not afford to respond and intelligent farmers who actively rejected the new seeds for ecological reasons were transformed into 'backward farmers,' or into laggards' through the language of the sociology of innovation diffusion." Yet this article should suggest a somewhat earlier genealogy for notions of progressivism and backwardness in Indian agriculture. Yapa, "What Are Improved Seeds? An Epistemology of the Green Revolution," 269.

## Conclusion

In the wake of the Green Revolution, India's national politics were radically remade by the rise of a new class of "bullock capitalists," in the evocative phrase coined by Suzanne and Lloyd Rudolph.<sup>106</sup> Somewhere between smallholders and large landowners with the means to fully mechanize their production, these producers were the primary beneficiaries of new agricultural technology: self-employed and self-funded peasants who provided the physical capital needed in farm production, their cost of production frequently more efficient than large landowners. If they confounded scholarly assumptions about the "middle peasantry" by eschewing both passive and revolutionary tendencies, these enterprising and efficient "bullock capitalists" were and remain the inheritors of the qualities of "progressive farming" imagined by late colonial and independent Indian planners alike.

Emboldened by new gains, these producers grew increasingly capable of demanding pro-agriculture policies from the state, particularly in the form of guaranteed remunerative prices for their produce; their rise as a demand group and political bloc in the 1970s and 1980s brought agrarian politics to the national level. But rather than the radicalism of the rural poor, it was the cry for assured prices and pro-farmer policies that echoed out in state capitals and in Delhi.<sup>107</sup> This "new agrarianism" had its origins in Uttar Pradesh, with the ascent of Charan Singh and the subsequent rise of the agrarian-oriented Janata Party to national power in the wake of the Emergency.<sup>108</sup> Imagining themselves in sectoral, rather than class terms, India's "bullock capitalists" came to envision a widening cleave between rural and urban interests, and their demands for higher prices for agricultural produce frequently came at the expense of lesser farmers and the equitable distribution of food itself. The Indian planners who hoped that "progressive farmers" would exemplify the aim of greater production in the service of the nation would have recoiled to hear the 1993 address of peasant leader Sharad Joshi at Aurangabad placing state aims and agricultural productivity at odds. "You are free," he declared, "from slavery to the state. Sell your crops wherever you want. Process your own products without waiting for licenses. Don't pour milk into the ground when there's too much to sell to the cities; make dairy products out of it. Make *gur* out of your sugarcane instead of giving it to the factories. [...] If officials or the police try to stop you, resist them!"<sup>109</sup>

Yet the tension between the interests of "bullock capitalists" from those of smallholders, subsistence farmers, and agricultural labor was already evident in the contestations of early independent India, when colonial and Indian notions of "progressive agriculture" and productivism were brought into state designs for equity and abundance. The adulation of "progressive farmers" and *Krishi Pandits* was predicated upon models of modernization that cast Indian agriculture as psychologically, as well as technologically, deficient. The winners of crop

106. Rudolph and Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*, 333–392.

107. On India's "new agrarianism," see Brass, "Introduction: The New Farmers' Movements in India," 3–4; Chowdhry, "From Dependency to Self-Reliance"; Franda, *An Indian Farm Lobby*; Nadkarni, *Farmers' Movements in India*; Patnaik, *Agrarian Relations and Accumulation*; and Varshney, "Ideas, Interest and Institutions in Policy Change."

108. On the rise of agrarian politics in Uttar Pradesh, see Bentall and Corbridge, "Urban-Rural Relations, Demand Politics and the 'New Agrarianism' in Northwest India"; Brass, *An Indian Political Life*; and Duncan, "Agricultural Innovation and Political Change in North India."

109. Omvedt, "Farmers' Movement," 2708.

competitions were celebrated for their daring character, experimental mindset, and industrious spirit. Yet planners' hopes that they would inspire others seemed ever more risible as "progressive farmers" began to view themselves as an ascendant bloc, well before they emerged as a major demand group in national politics.

The institution of the *Krishi Pandit* award lumbers on in post-liberalization India, with titles and relatively small prizes given according to priorities of the day: there are currently prizes given for "comprehensive farming," organic farming, innovation in agricultural tools, and effective use of water. Likewise, the term "progressive farmer" is frequently deployed, in government publications and the press, to refer to producers working in export-oriented agriculture. These contemporary designations belie the manner in which notions of enterprising, productive farmers were held out, in a scarcity era, as producers whose example would lead to the reform of peasant mentalities and capacities alike.

Those producers cast as daring, entrepreneurial, and free of the superstition and passivity assumed of the Indian peasant, were just as often producers endowed with the capital and connections needed to progress to new agricultural technologies. First identified as laudable exemplars of agricultural productivity in a new state, their competitiveness defied the overarching national ethos of Fabian socialism, before their interests diverged more radically in the Community Development era. In the wake of Green Revolution transformations, these earlier cleaves grew greater, and the transformation of progressive farmers into bullock capitalists confirmed that India's most efficient agriculturalists offered little to more modest peasants. India's progressive farmers and *Krishi Pandits* speak to the paradoxes of a developmental state seeking to balance growth and equity, and the agrarian groups which emerged and maneuvered skillfully within this conflict.



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