

India: the legacy of imperialism

By Colin Foster

IN India today nearly five hundred million people live on the equivalent of less than one US dollar a day. More than one-third of all the people in the world at that extreme level of poverty — where they rarely get enough to eat — are in India. Over half India's people are illiterate; one child in eight dies before the age of five.

The big cities have millions of people living on the streets, begging, scratching a life from odd jobs. Most of the poorest are in the countryside, where over 70% of India's 970 million people live, though agriculture now produces only 30% of the country's total output. India has had more land reform laws than any other country in the world, but also less effective land reform than almost any other. Hundreds of millions of people still live in conditions not far from those of Europe's Middle Ages, even if there is now electricity and television in the villages.

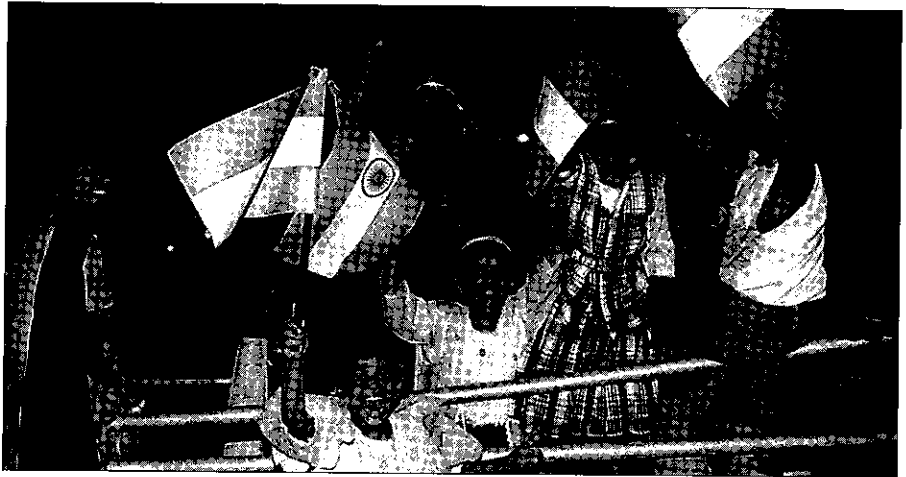
The right-wing upper-caste Hindu chauvinist BJP now vies with Congress as the strongest all-India party. Fifty years after the country was partitioned at independence to cut away a Muslim state, Pakistan, communalist violence against India's 120-million-strong Muslim minority is everyday.

Yet India has also had a "grey revolution". Industry has expanded fast. The country now has more trained scientists than any other in the world; and it has a huge, and often militant, industrial working class.

All these patterns have roots in the two centuries of British rule over India which ended in 1947. The ruling class of independent India has reshaped them in its own way since 1947.

The India which was conquered by Britain after 1757 was not an "underdeveloped" country by the standards of the day. Its administration (the Moghul empire) was in decay and collapse, and the mass of its people were poorer than in Europe, though by a much smaller margin than today. Its handicraft trades also made it the world's greatest industrial exporting centre. For the European imperialists, it was not barren territory to be developed, but a great treasure-house to be looted.

Much wealth was pumped out of India into Britain's country houses, board rooms, and government departments, and into the comfortable British homes of retired army officers, shareholders and bondholders. The cautious estimate of the economic historian



The ruling class in India has reshaped the India of British imperialist rule, which ended 50 years ago

Angus Maddison is that this flow took out of India one quarter of the resources otherwise available for industrial investment.

TO secure its hold over India cheaply, and thus with only a small British garrison there, Britain constructed an alliance with sections of India's wealthy classes, by reshaping the land system at the expense of the peasantry. Karl Marx commented: "In Bengal, we have a combination of English landlordism, of the Irish middlemen system, of the Austrian system, transforming the landlord into the tax-gatherer, and of the Asiatic system making the state the real landlord. In Madras and Bombay we have a French peasant proprietor who is at the same time a serf and a metayer [share-cropper] of the State. The drawbacks of all these various systems accumulate upon him without his enjoying any of their redeeming features... Eleven twelfths of the whole Indian population have been wretchedly pauperised..."

Agriculture stagnated. According to Angus Maddison, "From the beginning of British conquest in 1757 to independence... per capita income... probably did not increase at all. In the UK itself there was a tenfold increase in per capita income over these two centuries". Average life expectancy in India, poor enough today at 59 years, was only 30 years in 1947.

India's handicraft industries were destroyed by turning the country into a captive market for British factory production. As Marx commented: "The English cotton machinery produced an acute effect in India. The Governor-General reported in 1834-5:

"The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India."

The British also brought elements of the new system of capitalist factory production to India. In the middle of the 19th century, they built railways. Marx commented: "The ruling classes of Great Britain have had, till now, but an accidental, transitory and exceptional interest in the progress of India. The aristocracy wanted to conquer it, the moneyocracy to plunder it, and the millocracy to undersell it. But now the tables are turned..."

"You cannot maintain a net of railways over an immense country without introducing... industrial processes... The railway system will become, in India, truly the forerunner of modern industry..."

Marx warned that this industrial advance would not be straightforward. "All the English bourgeoisie may be forced to do will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social condition of the mass of the people, depending not only on the development of the productive powers, but on their appropriation by the people. But what they will not fail to do is to lay down the material premises for both... The Indians will not reap the fruit of the new elements of society scattered among by the British bourgeoisie... 'til the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke..."

The warning was apt. Industry grew slowly. British capitalists, with India as a captive market, saw no need to move their factories there; Indian capitalists had no gov-

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ernment of their own to give protection and aid to new enterprises; in fact the British regime positively discouraged Indian capitalists from developing as competitors to British business.

India had a spurt of industrial growth during World War 1, stagnated interwar, then another spurt in World War 2. By 1947, thanks to those spurts of growth and to the legacy of a more advanced starting-point, India had a bigger native bourgeoisie than, probably, any other "Third World" country. But it had been made "backward" and "underdeveloped" in a way it had not been in 1757.

To remain cheap, British rule in India had to educate and train a layer, small relative to the whole Indian people but big in absolute numbers, of Indian officials. The growth of the classes of bourgeois-educated and bourgeois-wealthy Indians produced a vigorous bourgeois-nationalist movement, Congress, founded as early as 1885. It was led after World War 1 by Mahatma Gandhi, and his campaign is still quoted as a model of how to win political change by non-violent methods of passive non-cooperation.

In fact the movement for independence — from the mass demonstration at Amritsar in 1919, which turned into a massacre when the British opened fire, to the naval mutinies, general strikes and peasant rebellions of 1946-7 — was driven forward by the militant action of workers and peasants. Gandhi's achievement was not to create the movement, but to damp it down and channel it (partially) into passive and inert forms of protest. He was quite clear about the class meaning of this: "In India we want no political strikes... We seek not to destroy capital or capitalists but to regulate the relations between capital and labour. We want to harness capital to our side. It would be folly to encourage sympathetic strikes". Or again: "I cannot ask officials and soldiers to disobey... If I taught them to disobey I should be afraid that they might do the same when I am in power... when I am in power I shall in all likelihood make use of those same officials and those same soldiers".

Though Gandhi himself died in 1948, the Congress governments of independent India after 1947 did indeed "use those same officials and those same soldiers". The independent Indian state was the old machinery of British rule, with all its bureaucracy and elitism, only with Indians in place of the thin top layer of British officials and commanders.

Britain had used "divide and rule" in India. After the first great Indian rebellion against British rule, the Mutiny of 1857, groups which had been less rebellious, like the Sikhs, were carefully favoured and selectively recruited into the army. Britain fostered Muslim support by posing as a protector

against the (real) forces of Hindu obscurantism and by setting up separate Muslim electoral rolls (from 1905), with a wider franchise than the Hindu rolls.

The climax of this "divide-and-rule" came when the British government, deciding to cut and run in 1947, partitioned India to give the Muslim League (built up as a British-sponsored rival to Congress) its own Muslim state, Pakistan. Communal violence at the time of partition killed a million people, made ten million refugees, and left a vicious legacy: three wars between India and Pakistan, bloody conflict continuing today in the disputed territory of Kashmir, communal strife in India, Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan.

Gandhi was horrified by the violence; Congress always proclaimed itself secular and opposed "divide-and-rule". Yet Gandhi's campaigns had always linked India's national cause with Hindu symbols and concepts, in a way that could not fail to help communal division.

The first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, had been on the left of Congress. Under him, the same government machine that for so long had served Britain to siphon wealth from India and stifle Indian industry was turned to being an instrument of "socialist planning", loosely modelled on the Soviet Union but with neither Stalinist terror and dictatorship nor the urgent Stalinist tempo of forced-march industrialisation.

Industry grew, rapidly compared to its record under British rule though only moderately compared to some other "Third World" states. The spread of education and health care was far faster than under British rule, far slower than needed. The state steadily became more bloated and corrupt.

The Brezhnev of this regime was Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi, who tried to save Congress's decaying power by declaring a state of emergency and suspending many democratic rights in 1975-7. She was ousted in 1977 by independent India's first-ever non-Congress government, regained power in 1980, then was murdered in 1984. Her son Rajiv tried to be the Gorbachev, reforming from above in a technocratic, market-oriented spirit. He too was murdered in May 1991. Congress has continued to lose ground. It won less than 30% of the vote at the last election, in May 1996, and the present government is a complex coalition of small parties.

The rule of the privileged and Anglicised Congress elite was always a shoddy business, and life-crushing for the Indian poor. Yet the way it is unravelling now points to no progress. While no-one should defend the old "licence raj" system of industrial development through government permits and subsidies, India's reorientation

to free-market economics, accelerated since 1991, has widened its already huge social inequalities and imposed on the poor huge price rises for fertilisers and food. As the political initiative shifts to a variety of middle-class, particularist, often populist parties, India's long-shaky but real civil liberties could be shattered, and its ramshackle federal unity transformed into bloody fragmentation on the model of ex-Yugoslavia or the ex-USSR.

Can the Indian working class, hundreds of millions strong, and with a history which includes many huge and protracted mass strikes, take the initiative, and construct under its own leadership a new federal unity, against communalism? Its main handicaps are the fragmentation of the trade union movement, and the rotten politics of its most significant party — the Communist Party (Marxist), ex-Stalinist but now effectively social-democratic and geared to the construction of "left" and "secular" blocs and alliances with bourgeois parties. A new workers' party is needed.

In Assissi

Midst the avarice and sanctity
In Assissi, white in sun and years,
Two flushed, pale bloused, young breasted
girls,
Their mouths half-open, smiling, watch
Two pigeons fucking in the sun.

Breath held in Francis-empathy,
Delighted, knowing hands entwined,
Unconsciously at one, they catch
Life fired by the pantheistic sun.

And then, their eyes cloud and drop,
As the shade-faced, fussing shepherd nun
Comes at a dry, stiff trot — cast down
Like the dead saint's communist friends
Who broke the sacredotal line
To set life over property:

They burned, in priest-set fires, whose
minds
Too soon had seen a precious sight:
But they saw as true as the children see
These pigeons loving in the light.

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* St. Francis of Assissi, who might be described as a pantheistic primitive communist, preached poverty, the community of all life and the love of all living things. He divested himself of property, and aligned himself with the poor. Very soon after his death in the early 13th century, his friend Pope Bernard had him canonised as a saint, for the consolation and edification of the people. Franciscan friars are today a strong world-wide order. At about the same time as Francis was being canonised, those of his co-thinkers who refused to soften the ideas they had shared with Francis, ideas which might have been developed in the direction of revolutionary social conclusions, were, at the instigation of Pope Bernard, burned at the stake for heresy.