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, beggar, scratching a life from old 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, communal 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 in distill 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 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 middle-men 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 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 millicity 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 fore-runner 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-
The Indian Independence movement was a turning point in the history of India, as the country gained its independence from British rule. The movement was driven by a desire for self-rule and an end to colonialism, and it was marked by a variety of tactics, including non-violent resistance and armed rebellion.

One of the key figures in the Indian Independence movement was Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was a vocal critic of British colonialism and advocated for non-violent resistance to gain Indian independence. He led a campaign of civil disobedience, which included satyagraha—insistence on truth in the face of injustice—and other tactics aimed at highlighting British mistreatment of Indians.

The movement gained momentum in the 1920s and 1930s, with the Quit India Movement of 1942 being a significant event. The movement culminated in the Independence Act of 1947, which resulted in the creation of two independent nations: India and Pakistan.

In commemorating the Indian Independence movement, it's important to remember the sacrifices made by those who fought for freedom—both on the battlefield and through peaceful means. The enduring legacy of this movement is a testament to the power of non-violent resistance and the importance of self-determination in shaping the world we live in today.