

IV. The Poverty of India

"The poverty-stricken masses are today in the grip of an ever more abject poverty and destitution, and this growing disease urgently and insistently demands a radical remedy. Poverty and unemployment have long been the lot of our peasantry and industrial workers; today they cover and crush other classes also—the artisan, the trader, the small merchant, the middle-class intelligentsia. For the vast millions of our countrymen the problem of achieving national independence has become an urgent one, for only independence can give us the power to solve our economic and social problems and end the exploitation of our masses."
—Election Manifesto of the Indian National Congress, August, 1936.

I. FACTS

It is against this background of the real potential wealth of India and the failure to develop it that the terrible poverty of the Indian population stands out with ominous significance.

Indian statistics, though voluminous in quantity for all the purposes of the functioning of the administrative machine, are ex-

To get closer to the real facts today, however, it is necessary to make corrections for the factors left out of account.

The Government Index of Indian Prices fell from 236 in 1921 to 125 in 1936—a drop of nearly one half. This drop has affected most acutely agricultural prices, the main basis of Indian income. Between 1921 and 1936 the Index of retail prices of food grains shows a fall, for rice from 355 to 178, for wheat from 360 to 152, for grain from 406 to 105, for barley from 325 to 134—a general drop of more than one half.

Thus, allowing for this collapse of agricultural prices, the Simon Commission's 5d. a day for 1921-22 becomes for 1936 more like 2½d. a day.

This, however, is only a gross average income, not the actual income of the overwhelming majority. From it have to be deducted the heavy home charges and tribute of imperialism (interest on debt, dividends on British capital investments, banking and financial commissions, etc.) drawn out of India without return in the shape of imported goods. This drain is estimated by Shah and Khambata at a little over one tenth of the gross national income. The 2½d. thus becomes 2¼d.

Next, allowance has to be made for the extreme inequality of income covered in the average. Professor K. T. Shah and K. J. Khambata in their *Wealth and Taxable Capacity of India* (1924) showed that 1 per cent of the population gets one-third of the national income, while 60 per cent of the population get 30 per cent of the income. This means that for the 60 per cent or majority of the population any gross figure of the average national income per head must be exactly halved to represent what they actually get.

Thus, applying the statistics of the division of income to the Simon Commission's "most optimistic" estimate, after allowing for the subsequent fall of prices and the drain of home charges and tribute, we reach the conclusion that the average Indian of the majority of the population at the present day gets from 1d. to 1¼d. a day.

What do these figures mean in living conditions? The leading Indian economists, Shah and Khambata, express it as follows:

"The average Indian income is just enough either to feed two men in every three of the population, or give them all two in place of every three meals they need, on

condition that they all consent to go naked, live out of doors all the year round, have no amusement or recreation, and want nothing else but food, and that the lowest, the coarsest, the least nutritious." (Shah and Khambata, *The Wealth and Taxable Capacity of India*, 1924, p. 253.)

In 1929 the Government appointed a Royal Commission on Labor in India. It found that "in most industrial centers the proportion of families and individuals who are in debt is not less than two thirds of the whole... in the great majority of cases the amount of debt exceeds three months' wages and is often far in excess of this amount" (p. 224). It found wages ranging from the most favorable average for Bombay textile workers of 56s. a month for men and 26s. for women; for Bombay unskilled workers, 30s. a month; for coal-miners in the principal Jharria coal-field, an average of from 15s. to 22s. a month; for workers in seasonal factories, from 6d. to 1s. a day for men, and from 4d. to 9d. a day for women; for unskilled workers in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, 9d. a day for men, 6d. for women and 4d. for children, and in Madras and the United Provinces, as low as 5d. a day for men. It found that in the "unregulated" factories and industries, in which the overwhelming majority of Indian industrial workers are employed, and where no factory legislation applies, "workers as young as five years of age may be found in some of these places working without adequate meal intervals or weekly rest days, and often for 10 or 12 hours daily, for sums as low as 2 annas [2¼d.] in the case of those of tenderest years" (p. 96).

In respect of housing, the average working-class family does not even enjoy one room, but more often shares part of a room. In 1911 69 per cent of the total population of Bombay were living in one-room tenements (as against 6 per cent in London in the same year), averaging 4.5 persons per tenement. The 1931 census showed that 74 per cent of the total population of Bombay were living in one-room tenements—thus revealing an increase in overcrowding after two decades.

As for sanitation, the Whitley report found:

"Neglect of sanitation is often evidenced by heaps of rotting garbage and pools of sewage, whilst the absence of latrines enhances the general pollution of air and soil.

Houses, many without plinths, windows and adequate ventilation, usually consist of a single small room, the only opening being a doorway too low to enter without stooping. In order to secure some privacy, old kerosene tins and gunny bags are used to form screens which further restrict the entrance of light and air. In dwellings such as these, human beings are born, sleep and eat, live and die" (p. 271).

The Bombay Labor Office inquiry into working-class budgets in 1932-33 found that in respect of water supply 26 per cent of the tenements had one tap for eight tenements and less, 44 per cent had one tap for nine to fifteen tenements, and 29 per cent had one tap for sixteen tenements and over (Report of Enquiry into Working-Class Budgets in Bombay, 1935). Eighty-five per cent had only one privy for eight tenements or less; 12 per cent had one privy for nine to fifteen tenements, and 24 per cent had one privy for sixteen tenements and over.

An Indian woman doctor, appointed by the Bombay Government to investigate, reported:

"In one room on the second floor of a chawl, measuring some 15 by 12 feet, I found six families living. Six separate ovens on the floor proved this statement. On enquiry, I ascertained that the actual number of adults and children living in this room was 30. . . . Three out of six of the women who lived in this room were shortly expecting to be delivered. . . . The atmosphere at night of that room filled with smoke from six ovens and other impurities would certainly physically handicap any woman and infant both before and after delivery. This was one of many such rooms I saw. In the rooms in the basement of a house conditions were far worse. Here daylight with difficulty penetrated, sunlight never." (*Bombay Labor Gazette*, September 1922, p. 31.)

The effects of these conditions—of semi-starvation, overcrowding and no sanitation—on health can be imagined. They are reflected in a recorded death rate of 23.6 per thousand in 1935, compared with 12.3 for England and Wales. The expectation of life for an Indian is less than half that of an inhabitant of England and Wales.

"The average length of life in India is low as compared with that in most of the Western countries; according to the census of 1921, the average for males and females was respectively 24.8 and 24.7 years, or a general average of 24.75 years in India as compared with 55.6 years in England and Wales. It was found to have decreased further in 1931, being 23.2 and 22.8 years for males and females respectively." (*Industrial Labor in India*, International Labor Office, 1938, p. 8, based on Census of India, 1931, p. 98.)

They are reflected in a maternal mortality rate of 24.5 per thousand live births compared with 4.1 in England and Wales. They are reflected in the contrast between the death rate of 41.05 per thousand for Ahmedabad City, where the Indian people live under the conditions just described, and 12.84 for Ahmedabad Cantonment, where the Europeans live with every lavish provision for their own health and convenience. They are reflected in an infantile death rate of 164 out of every thousand born within one year for India, during 1935, contrasting with 57 for England and Wales, and reaching to 239 in Calcutta, 248 in Bombay and 227 in Madras (much higher in the one-room tenements; thus in Bombay in 1926 the rate in one-room tenements was 577 per thousand births, in two-room tenements 254 per thousand, and in hospitals 107 per thousand).

Deaths in India are mainly ascribed in the official records to "fevers" (3.8 millions out of 6.6 millions in British India in 1935)—a conveniently vague term to cover the effects of semi-starvation, poverty conditions and their consequences in ill-health. That three deaths in four in India are due to "diseases of poverty" is the judgment of the standard economic authority on India, a writer sympathetic to imperialism:

"20.5 out of a total death-rate of 26.7 per thousand of the population, in 1926, were accounted for by cholera, small-pox, plague, 'fevers,' dysentery and diarrhoea—nearly all of which may be considered to fall under the heading of 'diseases of poverty,' and most of which may be considered to be preventable." (V. Anstey, *The Economic Development of India*, 1936, p. 69.)

This is the situation of the people of India after 180 years of imperialist rule.

It is important to note that this situation of poverty is not a static one. It is a dynamic and developing one. This worsening of the situation is connected with the growing agrarian crisis under the conditions of imperialist rule, which is the most powerful driving force to basic social and political change.

2. CAUSES

What lies behind this terrible poverty of the Indian people?

Before we can begin to consider the real causes, it is necessary to clear out of the way some of the current superficial explanations which are often made a substitute for serious analysis.

Typical of these is the explanation of Indian poverty in terms of the social backwardness, ignorance and superstition of the masses of the people (conservatism in technique, caste restrictions, cow-worship, neglect of hygiene, the position of women, etc.). Undoubtedly these factors play a formidable role in Indian poverty, and the overcoming of all such retrogressive features is a leading part of the task of reconstruction before the Indian people. But when these factors are declared to be the explanation of Indian poverty, then the cart is put before the horse. The social and cultural backwardness is the expression and consequence of the low economic level and political subjection, and not vice versa. Illiteracy can be the condemnation of a government which refuses education and holds a people in ignorance, but not of the people which is refused the opportunity to learn. The root problem is economic-political, and the cultural problem depends on this. The social and cultural backwardness cannot be overcome by preaching uplift or giving lectures on health, while the grinding poverty remains the same and defeats all such efforts. It can only be overcome by a change in the material basis of organization, which is the key to open every other door.

The truth of this analysis has been abundantly shown by the example of the Soviet Union. The poverty and low level of the people under Tsarism were commonly explained by the learned as the inevitable consequence of the supposed innate backwardness of the Russian peasantry. But once the workers and peasants combined to throw off their exploiters, they showed themselves capable of a technical and cultural progress which outstripped the rate of the most advanced countries. The same will be shown,

through whatever different forms and stages of development the process may have to pass, in India.

No less widely current is the oft-repeated explanation of Indian poverty as the supposed consequence of "over-population."

Of all the "easy lies that comfort cruel men" the myth of over-population as the cause of poverty under capitalism is the grossest. Its modern vogue dates, as is well known, from the reactionary parson Malthus, who, indeed, came out with nothing new, but produced his theory appositely in 1798 as a political weapon (as the title of his work declared) against the French Revolution and liberal theories, and was rewarded with a professorship at the East India Company's college. His theory "was greeted with jubilation by the English oligarchy as the great destroyer of all hankerings after human development" (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, ch. xxv.), and, though laughed at by scientists and economists of all schools, has remained the favorite philosophy of reaction. Its argument rested on the assumption of placing arbitrary iron limits to the possibilities of productive development at the very moment when productive development was entering on its greatest expansion. The experience of the nineteenth century smashed it, when the expansion of wealth so glaringly exceeded the growth of population and revealed the causes of poverty to lie elsewhere. In the twentieth century, especially after the World War and with the world economic crisis, attempts were made to revive it. The existence of international statistics, however, killed it again; the fact that, despite the wholesale destruction of the war and after, world production of foodstuffs, of raw materials and of industrial goods showed a continuous increase far exceeding the growth of world population compelled men to look for the cause of their miseries in the social system. The ruling class began to find their problem how to restrict the production of wealth, and produced many ingenious schemes for this purpose; while in respect of population, their complaint became that the peoples of Europe and America were not producing enough babies for the needs of cannon-fodder. Less wealth and more human beings became the cry of the modern ruling class, reversing Malthus.

Driven from Europe and America, this discredited theory of old-fashioned reaction now tries to find its last lair in Asia. The poverty of India and China is solemnly ascribed, not to the social system, but to "over-population." The beneficent effects of im-

perialist rule, it is declared, having eliminated war from the Indian continent, have unfortunately removed the blessed "natural checks" to the growth of population and permitted the improvident and prolific Indian people to breed beyond the limits of subsistence. Hence the growing pressure on the land and semi-starvation conditions which are the inevitable natural consequence of the benevolence of British rule. These can only be changed when the Indian people learn to limit their rate of growth to something more like the proportions of the sensible European peoples.

What are the facts?

In the first place, all the above arguments convey the picture of an enormously rapid increase of Indian population under British rule, extending far beyond the rate of increase of other countries, and therefore leading to a situation of extreme poverty owing to this abnormally rapid multiplication of population. How many realize that the actual facts of the history of India under British rule reveal the exact opposite?

The actual rate of increase of population in India under British rule has been markedly less than that of almost any European country, and is even near the bottom in the general scale of world increase.

For the period as a whole estimates only can be used, since the first census was not taken in India till 1872. The population of India at the end of the sixteenth century has been estimated by Moreland (*India at the Death of Akbar*, p. 22) at 100 millions. Today the figure is 400 millions. This makes an increase of four times in over three centuries. The population of England and Wales in 1700, according to the first careful estimate (that of Finlaison, the Government Actuary in the Preface to the Census Returns of 1831), was 5.1 millions. Today the figure is 41 millions. That makes an increase of eight times in a shorter period of two and one-third centuries. The increase in England has been at a rate considerably more than double that of India.

More important is the modern period, after the special expansion in Europe associated with the industrial revolution had begun to slow down. We may take first the comparison of India and Europe up to the war, in order to keep out of account the complications resulting from the war and the changes of territories in the European countries. Here are the figures for the rate of increase

of population for India and the leading European countries between 1870 and 1910.

INCREASE OF POPULATION, 1870-1910

	Increase per cent
India	18.9
England and Wales	58.0
Germany	59.0
Belgium	47.8
Holland	62.0
Russia	73.9
Europe (average)	45.4

Source: B. Narain, *Population of India*, 1925, p. 11.

With the exception of France, the rate of growth in India was less than that of any European country.

Only in the recent period since 1921 has the rate of increase in India (10.6 per cent in 1921-31, as against 14.2 per cent for the United States in the same period and 17.9 per cent for the Soviet Union; and 15 per cent in 1931-41) been higher than that of England and the Western European countries. But the problem of poverty in India does not date from after 1921.

Summing up for the three decades 1900-30, Professor Thomas writes:

"Between 1900 and 1930 population in India increased by 19 per cent, but production of foodstuffs and raw materials increased by about 30 per cent, and industrial production by 189 per cent.

"All this indicates that population has not outstripped production. . . . The alarm about population outstripping production is not supported by statistics. Those who are alarmed about the 'devastating torrent of babies' in India will do well to direct their attention to improvements in the distribution of national income, in the quality of consumption, and in the geographical distribution of population, and to other allied matters." (Professor P. J. Thomas, in *The Times*, October 24, 1935.)

The verdict of facts thus shows that the cause of poverty in India cannot be ascribed to the increase of population going

forward more rapidly than the increase in the production of means of subsistence, since the latter increased more rapidly. The cause of poverty must be sought elsewhere.

This is not to say that the existing production of the means of subsistence, under the existing conditions of ownership, tenure, technique, parasitism and waste of the available labor forces of the population, is adequate for the needs of the population. On the contrary, it is grossly inadequate. Professor Radhakamal Mukerjee, in his book, *Food Planning for Four Hundred Millions* (1938), has shown that, while existing food requirements in India may be estimated at a minimum daily ration of 2,800 calories per head, existing food supplies, on the basis of 1931 returns, give 2,337 calories. The total food requirements for all India in 1935 are estimated by him at 321.5 billion calories, the actual food supplies in the same year at 280.4 billion calories—a deficiency of 12.8 per cent, apart from the question of food exports and maldistribution.

These facts are an indictment of the existing social and economic organization, which fails to utilize and develop the abundant natural resources of India to supply the needs of the population. But they are not a proof of over-population. On the contrary, it is universally admitted by the experts that a correct utilization of Indian resources could support on an abundant standard a considerably larger population than exists or is in prospect in any near future in India. More than one-third of the existing cultivable area in India has not yet been brought into cultivation; the existing cultivated area is cultivated under such restricted primitive conditions as to result in a yield per acre about one-third of that obtained for a similar crop (comparing wheat yields) with less man-power in the United Kingdom. The overcoming of the obstacles which stand in the way of such a full utilization of Indian resources is the real heart of the problem for overcoming Indian poverty.

The decisive difference between India and the European countries is not in the rate of growth of population, which has been more rapid in the European countries. What makes the difference between the conditions of India and Europe is that the economic development and expansion of production which have taken place in the European countries, and have facilitated a more rapid growth of population, have not taken place in India, and have,

as we shall see, been artificially arrested by the workings and requirements of British capitalism, driving an increasing proportion of the population into dependence on a primitive and over-burdened agriculture. While the wealth of the country has been drained, while industrial and other outlets and development have been checked and thwarted, the agriculture which has been made the over-burdened sole source of subsistence for the mass of the people has itself been placed under crippling conditions and condemned to neglect and deterioration.

Herein, and not in any natural causes outside human agency or control, nor in any mythical causes of a non-existent over-population, but in the social-economic conditions under imperialist rule, lies the secret of the extreme poverty of the Indian people.