

British Imperialism in India

By J. RYAN (Director, Labor Research Bureau, Sydney)

EARLY in the 18th century British ships sporadically visited India and carried on trade with the people of that country. Later the East India Company was formed in London and regular commercial relations were established. This company was given wide powers by the British Government. It was permitted to annex territory and employ soldiers—Indian and British—to guard the plundered possessions.

A similar policy, however, was being pursued by the French East India Company, backed up by the French Government. A series of battles took place between the rival plunderers. In these battles first one, then the other, would have the advantage. Finally, by 1761, the French were definitely defeated and the British could proceed to subdue the Indians practically without hindrance. Some annoyance was caused by the Dutch, who endeavored to gain a foothold, but they were speedily disposed of.

Consolidation of British supremacy over the Indian rulers was achieved by the time-honored method of pitting one section of the people against another, sometimes judiciously assisting each side to annihilate their opponents. When necessary, open attacks were made upon recalcitrant princes or kings, and great slaughter was inflicted on the unfortunate, crudely-armed Indians. In many cases native rulers were induced to liquidate their standing armies and place themselves under the protection of the British. Eventually the British East India Company became the supreme authority in India.

It seems strange that a company should rule over a whole country, employ a standing army to suppress opposition, impose taxation and make treaties, etc., nevertheless that is what actually occurred. And it was a profitable business, too; many handsome dividends were distributed among the shareholders.

So repressive was the company's rule that when a mutiny occurred in the native army in 1857, over a comparatively small matter, the contagion spread like wildfire and thousands of British soldiers had to be sent from England to quell it. This they did with incredible savagery.

So great was the scare caused by the mutiny and its repercussions that the British Government decided to take the government of India from the East India Company and place it under the crown. The debts incurred through suppressing the rebellion were fastened on to the new "Government of India." A Vice-Roy was appointed and executive councils, composed of nominees, were formed. The country was divided into nine provinces—each with a provincial governor and an executive council.

This autocratic form of government continued until the "reforms" of 1919 were instituted as a result of the agitation carried on by the Indians during and after the "great war." The new constitution provided for a legislative council and executive council in each province, and a legislative assembly and executive council for the central government. On a very restricted franchise—7,000,000 voters out of 240,000,000 people—wealthy Indians have the right to elect representatives to the lower houses; the workers and poor peasants have not the right to vote. In addition to elected members there are nominated members in the lower houses. The restricted franchise and the large percentage of members, who are nominated by the governors, make the lower houses comparatively safe for British Imperialism.

In any case the lower houses are merely debating societies, because anything they decide upon can be vetoed by the executive councils which are appointed by the governors. In the central government, for ex-

ample, the ministers are appointed by the Vice-Roy, and no matter how often their proposals are defeated in the Legislative Assembly they do not resign nor do they abandon their proposals. It is significant that the Government of India spends over 50 per cent of its revenue on the military.

These reforms" aroused the resentment of all classes of Indians and gave rise to the "non-co-operation" movement—but that is another story which can be incorporated in another article, an article dealing with the national independence movement.

British capitalists derive wealth from India in four main ways: by selling British goods, by buying or producing cheap raw materials, by taxation, and by investment of capital in Indian industries. While the Indian market is no longer monopolized by British goods, nevertheless they still occupy the most important place, and in other respects British capital is predominant. The direct holding of capital from Britain in the big companies, usually registered in London, gives British capital a virtual monopoly of railways, shipping, banking, and the jute and tea industries. London interests also dominate in coal, steel and engineering.

Invested Capital

Local British companies, mainly in Bengal, have strong interests in electric power, docks and transport, flour mills, rice mills, timber and construction, etc. Indian capital is predominant only in cotton among the large industries, but owns small firms in all branches of industry and controls most retail distribution. Of the capital invested in joint stock companies, over 80 per cent. is British. There is, of course, much unregistered Indian capital in small and private firms. The penetration of other foreign capital, particularly American, although not a serious factor yet, is growing. General Motors opened an up-to-date mass production motor manufacturing works at Bombay while I was there last December. The Tata Steel firm is now partly British and partly American.

The central financial institution is largely under Government control, with participation of British and Indian industrial and financial representatives. Indian capitalists have been pressing for popular control—greater representation of their interests—but have been foiled up to the present.

The policy of British Imperialism in India to retain its position of dominance is a three-fold one. It secures firm control of the chief industries, communications, administration, etc., and extends the area of its support among the land-owning and bourgeois classes. Secondly, by encouraging internal conflicts of various kinds, it disintegrates the forces of opposition to it. Finally, it conducts a policy of direct suppression of movements dangerous to its rule.

As stated previously, the British control a large proportion of the active capital operating in India; and with it the apparatus of the law, the administration, the educational system, the chief commercial organs of the press, the police and armed forces. In addition there is practically complete control of the rulers of the native states, who are despotic, and are allowed wide powers in their own territories. Imperialism is opposed to the introduction of democratic forms of government within the states, and assists the native rulers in the suppression of internal revolt. Further, imperialism has firm support from the big land-owning class and from those sections whose capital is invested in British firms.

The Anglo-Indians

Imperialism receives strong support from the Anglo-Indian community, which supplies a substantial part of the skilled artisans, and to a lesser extent from the Indian Christians who are under the influence of the missionaries.

Nevertheless, the support of those sections of the population is not sufficient, and, especially after the great agitation of 1917-'22, further means have been adopted, not so much to gain support as to weaken opposition. There has, throughout the period of imperialist control, been a systematic encouragement of differences of religion, community castes, etc., and it has been a settled policy to perpetuate religious and customary evils, which retard physical, intellectual and social development. The mass of the people is kept illiterate and severe restrictions are placed upon the education given to the middle classes in schools and universities.

The most important case of this policy of fomentation of differences is that of the Hindu-Moslem divergence. While partly an artificial result of the agitation of the British-owned press on the alleged atrocities during the Malabar rising, the dangers of a

Moslem invasion from the northwest, and of the communal electorates, the trouble has a certain class basis. In the Punjab most of the peasantry is Mussulman, while the exploiting moneylenders are mainly Hindus. As also in Bengal, most of the peasants are Mussulman and the Zemindars (landlords) and moneylenders largely Hindus. These are the chief centers of communal feeling. Further, a considerable class of communal leaders has sprung up, whose popular influence and income depend upon the inflammation of communal passions, and the direction of the natural discontent of the exploited masses away from political avenues into the communal channel.

At the same time the policy of imperialism has been one of continued suppression of efforts to extend the basis of the national movement to include the masses. Men returning from Russia with radical or communist ideas have been practically all imprisoned. Others with similar ideas have been treated in the same way—as in the Cawnpore conspiracy case. There is an unbroken series of prosecutions in different parts of the country of writers and speakers for "inciting" the masses to hatred against the Government. A vigorous censorship of mails, especially foreign, is maintained, and wholesale proscription and seizure of literature with a radical tendency.

Nearly one-fourth of the population of India is included in the native states, which constitute on the whole the most economically and culturally backward and politically reactionary section of the country. In practically no case is there any important industrial development, and even communication is poor. Almost all states are under complete despotism, only a few being tempered with some rudiments of democracy. The

rule is harsh and arbitrary to an intolerable degree, and outbreaks of opposition by peasants often occur. Almost all rulers of native states are supporters of imperialism, and vice versa.

A large part of British India is also under the dominance of big landholders, who in some cases wield powers approximating to those of the states' rulers. In many districts forced labor and other feudal dues are still extracted from peasants, and arbitrary expropriation of peasants' holdings is common. Rents are forced up usually to the maximum possible limit, often many times higher than the Government tax assessments.

The princes and the big Zemindars (landlords) of the eastern (and to a smaller extent of the western) provinces are the chief owners of the land of the country, and the chief obstacle to the economic advance and prosperity of its main occupation, agriculture. The Chamber of Princes and the various Zemindars' Conferences, the organs of these sections, are practically without exception loyal to British Imperialism and for long represented its chief support within the country. It is part of the policy of Imperialism to maintain the native states and to some extent the Zemindary system, as a stronghold of reaction and political backwardness within the country. Political advance within the states is discouraged, and suppression of opposition movements supported.

This article is an attempt to sum up—all too briefly—the forces at the disposal of British Imperialism in India. In succeeding articles I will endeavor to give an outline of the position of the Indian capitalists, the middle class, the peasants and the workers.

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