

The Proletariat and Peasantry in the Indian Revolution

By Max Shachtman

The essence of the colonial nationalist's theory is that the pressure of imperialism on the colonies has welded together a nation, all of whose native inhabitants have identical social and historical interests in a joint fight for liberation from the foreign yoke. This is a "theoretical" trait common to Chinese, Indian and all other petty bourgeois nationalist movements. According to them, the colonial domination of imperialism abolishes the class struggle in the colonies and creates a united front of all layers of the population. This conception, embodied for example in Sun Yat Senism, is the theoretical justification of the colonial bourgeoisie for its domination and suppression of the working class and peasantry in the struggle against imperialism.

It was reflected in the Communist International in the period of the Chinese revolution (1925-27) in the theory of the "national government of the bloc of four classes" (Martinov-Stalin-Bucharin-Roy), which was the "justification" for chaining the proletariat and peasants' movement to the war chariot of Chiang Kai-Shek. This theory, in any of its multitude of variations, is a gilt-edged guarantee in advance that the coming Indian revolution will be strangled in the blood of its own working class and land slaves.

In the previous article, we described the position of the Indian big bourgeoisie and feudal and monarchial lords, the full-fledged allies of British imperialism, and the petty bourgeois nationalists, at present dominating the movement and ready at any and every opportunity to make a compromise with the British in order to prevent the rise of a genuine mass movement. There remain the basic forces of the Indian revolution, the workers and peasants.

The Indian Proletariat

The Indian workers are among the most scandalously exploited in the world. The last Factory Amendment Act recognizes a maximum working week of 60 hours and an 11 hour day; needless to say, the actual working day frequently runs as high as 15 hours. Tens of thousands of women and children work not only in the light industries (textile, etc.) but in even heavy, dangerous industries, like mining. Wages are hideously low, frequently making anything but the barest existence impossible.

"Records of wages," writes Dutte in "Modern India", "show the average wage of a Bengal coal miner in 1922 as 12 annas (an anna is about 2 cents, U. S. coin) per day, of an Assam plantation laborer as 4 annas, and of Bombay skilled textile workers as 12 annas to rupees .8 (about 50 cents) per day. What these figures mean, even in the case of the better-off Bombay workers, is shown by the enquiry of the Bombay Labor Office into 2,473 working class budgets. The enquiry showed:

That no less than 56 percent of the income went on food. 2. That even so the quality of food obtained did not reach the prison standard. The general conclusion is that industrial workers consume a maximum of cereals allowed by the Famine Code, but less than the diet prescribed in the 'Bombay Gaol Manual'. 3. That 97 percent of the families were living in overcrowded single rooms. 4. That 47 percent of the families were in debt."

Housing conditions in the city are frightful. "In the Bombay one-room tenements, the Medical Officer's Report for 1921 declared that 13 percent contained ten or more persons and 73 percent of the workers' children are born in these one-room tenements." (Ibid).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the profits of industrial enterprises in India rival the most gorgeous fantasies of the first conqueror of the country.

The Spoilation of the Peasantry

The conditions of the Indian peasantry are even worse if possible. The ryot (peasant) is constantly on the verge of physical annihilation. The ruthless destruction of all handicrafts, the driving of the artisan and even many thousands of industrial workers back to the land has resulted in an overcrowding of agriculture. In one section of the country, inquiry showed that the average holding had decreased from 40 to 7 acres in less than 50 years. The corollary to this situation is the immense expanse of land not placed at the service of the peasants, (in big landed estates, etc.) which is neither fallow nor cultivated, and amounts to practically 25 percent of the total cultivable and uncultivable acreage of British India. The land hunger of the Indian peasants is as acute as it is remediable.

Not only that, but the meager holdings of the 210 millions of peasants and landless laborers are usually squeezed to exhaustion by heavy rents, exorbitant taxation, and the ruthlessness of the village usurers. Any typical taxation year indicates the brutal exploitation of the peasantry. Where, in England proper, direct taxation for 1923-24 covered 54 percent of the tax revenues, it covered less than 10 percent in India. Indirect taxation in India for 1924-25 (customs, excise, stamps, salt, opium) brought in 63 percent of the whole, and taxation on land, an additional 2 percent. The results of this practical course are shown in the conclusions of a noted British investigator (Dr. Mann). In one of the first villages, he found that 81 percent of the buildings "could not under the most favorable circumstances maintain their owners." In another village, far from an industrial center, he found 85 percent of the population in literal misery. Further, the peasants are usually heavily in debt. Then they are attacked by the landlords, who frequently take half of what the cultivator is able to produce.

These are some of the reasons why the Indian masses have the highest death rate in the world. These facts account for holo-causts of famine and epidemics sweeping the country, and as in the influenza epidemic after the war, killing off 13,000,000 people at virtually a blow.

A movement in India that does not place on the agenda as one of its leading tasks the solution of the agrarian problem (the agrarian revolution) cannot be designated a revolutionary movement, or even, for that matter, a movement that conducts a genuine struggle against imperialism. But what class can lead the struggle for the agrarian revolution? In the answer to that also lies the reply to the question of the character and leadership of the Indian revolution.

What is clear from all modern history is that the peasantry itself, as a "class" (a petty bourgeois layer of society whose social and economic base tends to diminish steadily), can play no independent role in the class struggle. The "peasant" government of Stambulinsky in Bulgaria, the Croatian "peasant" movement led by Raditch, the North-Western farmers' movement in the United States which is dominated by the bourgeoisie and its social conceptions (not to speak of the Russian peasantry in the March and November revolutions)—all these demonstrated that the peasantry is either an instrument of the bourgeoisie or an ally of the proletariat; any other position is a deception and a dream.

Peasantry and National Bourgeoisie

The more than 200,000,000 Indian peasants are today principally under the command of the national bourgeoisie, for whom they are nothing else—considered essentially—than troops. The nationalist bourgeoisie of India cannot carry out the agrarian revolution, and will not carry it out, for they are joint exploiters with imperialism of the misery existing in Indian agriculture. The "national democratic revolution" carried out by the "revolutionary democratic alliance" under the leadership of the petty bourgeoisie—the program for India envisaged by Roy (Revolutionary Age, No. 7)—cannot and will not solve the problem of the peasantry by carrying out the agrarian revolution.

All recent history proves this. The Chinese revolution, in which the workers and peasants were led by Chang Kai-shek and the national bourgeoisie (assisted, alas! by the Comintern) did not solve the agrarian problem, which is just as acute today as it was before the establishment either of the Canton, Nanking or Wuhan governments. The bourgeois democratic movement of Kerensky equally failed to solve the problem of the agrarian revolution. That task was executed only after the Bolshevik revolution, during its so-called "democratic" period, (1917-18) when the land program was put through by the collaboration of the Communists and the Left Social Revolutionaries. In Russia, the agrarian revolution was accomplished only under the leadership of the proletariat. That holds true with equal force for India, despite the fact that, unlike Russia, it is a colonial country. Otherwise the whole lesson not only of the Russian revolution but also of the Chinese revolution, has passed by unobserved by the revolutionary movement.

But for the Indian proletariat to be capable of leading the peasantry behind it, it must have, as its first pre-requisite, political and economic organization, i.e., trade unions and a revolutionary proletarian party. Without these all talk of the leading role of the proletariat is just so much wind. It is precisely in this capital question that the leadership of the Communist International has shown its most catastrophic bankruptcy in the last few years, to such an extent, in fact, that the whole immediate future of the Indian revolution is imperilled. At the present moment, there is no spokesman for the Stalin faction in any C. P. that can say with authority just what is the Comintern's policy in India. The *Daily Worker* is a typical instance of hopeless confusion. Its "specialists" write on India one day that the aim of the revolution is the "democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants", (Browder); and other day that the "Left wing" in the trade unions (!) will lead the masses of the workers and peasants to Soviet power (J. W. Ford).

The Absence of a Communist Party

The fact is that the decisive element required for a successful revolutionary struggle is lacking in India, primarily because of the policy pursued by the Comintern in the last five years: a revolutionary proletarian (i.e., a Communist) party. For years in which splendid opportunities for the creation of such a party were at hand, the policy of the Comintern in India was in no essential different from that followed in China, that is, the creation of a Kuo Min Tang on an Indian scale. The most prominent spokesman for the C. I. policy in India was M. N. Roy, the heat of whose nationalist passion burns through the thin coat of Bolshevik veneer acquired by rubbing shoulders with Lenin while the latter was alive.

It is pitiful to read the diatribes directed against Roy today by the very same people in the International who defended his views for four or five years previous to his expulsion. The only crime of which Roy is guilty is that he is faithfully continuing the policy officially sanctioned by Stalin, Bucharin and Martinov for the Chinese revolution, and for India as well, during the whole struggle against the Russian Opposition. Roy continues this policy; Stalin has not yet entirely dissociated himself from it. And the party members have every right to ask Stalin and Co:

Why is the policy of the Comintern in the Chinese revolution, never condemned or rejected, inapplicable to a similar situation in India today? Why is Roy wrong for advocating a "revolutionary democratic alliance, which under present Indian conditions will embrace well over 80 percent of the population"—without saying a word about working class domination of the bloc—when that is what Stalin-Bucharin-Martinov carried through in the Chinese "bloc of four classes"? Why is Roy wrong for warning that the "process must proceed in stages," when it was precisely with the same "theory of stages" that Bucharin and Roy justified the suppression by the Kuo Min Tang of the agrarian revolution and workers' strikes during the Chinese revolution? Why is Roy wrong for forgetting entirely the elementary requirements of proletarian leadership of the movement, of the creation and strengthening of a Communist Party, training the young movement to regard the nationalist bourgeoisie with suspicion, when Stalin and Bucharin overlooked all these requirements in the Chinese revolution? What is wrong with Roy's completely "forgetting" the slogan of Soviets in India, when the official Comintern virtually expelled the Russian Opposition for demanding that slogan in China at the moment of a rising revolutionary tide? Finally, what is wrong with Roy's conception of providing the masses "with a program of National Democratic Revolution and (leading) them by stages in the struggle for the realization of that program"—a conception that conceals the real aim of the victory of the bourgeois counter-revolution and the subjugation of the workers and peasants—when that was precisely the conception that animated all the activity of the C. I. in the Chinese revolution?

Where Roy is Right and Wrong

Considered from the standpoint of the officially endorsed policy of Stalin in the Chinese revolution, Roy is to this day consistent and correct, while his Stalinist con-

tics are wrong. Considered from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism, Roy remains what he has been for years; a Menshevik of the colonial type, i.e., shot through with nationalist ideology.

That the ruling regime in the C. I. has changed its position from the days of the Chinese revolution, is incontestable; that it has not, however, adopted the correct revolutionary standpoint,—which would be an acknowledgement that the whole struggle against an alleged "Trotskyist deviation" in the Chinese revolution "was a monstrous fraud—is equally true. Every possible course has been adopted by the Centrists and the Right wing in the International—except that of the burningly urgent formation of a Communist Party. The "Communist Party of India" is today a myth; it is non-existent. No serious attempt has been made by the Comintern to aid in its organization. On the contrary, it has been deliberately neglected. The policy of the C. I. in India, as expressed officially by Roy for years, has been:

"What is needed is a revolutionary People's Party which is alone capable of defending the immediate as well as the ultimate welfare (so!) of the toiling masses."

Or else: "The organization of a party of the workers and peasants has become an indispensable necessity. The Communist Party of India (?) is called upon by history (!) to play this role."

And: "We will endeavor to push the middle class nationalists forward in the struggle . . . We will force the (National) Congress to declare boldly for a Republican India."***

And more: "Where then is the 'Bolshevism' in our programme? Wherein lies its danger to the established order of capitalist society?**** (Yes, that is what we would like to know: Wherein?)

Roy's Line Was Stalin's Line

This was not Roy's line of thought and action; it was the line of the whole official Comintern (Stalin-Bucharin) applied in India and in China. Through Roy, the Comintern flirted with the national bourgeoisie for years. It proposed an alliance with the bourgeois League for Independence. It formed and assisted the hybrid caricature of Marxism, the "All-India Workers Party" to "lead" the Indian revolution, and kept it going until less than a year ago, when it died of theoretical and social mal-nutrition. It gave the clever bourgeois politicians at the head of the Indian Trade Union Congress innumerable opportunities to refresh their fading reputations at the apparently inexhaustible fountain of the so-called "League against Imperialism" in order to protect them with a "Bolshevik" coloration from the attacks of the masses. In short, every sulturage has been tried to avoid the only possible road to revolution: the consolidation of a Communist Party which alone can lead the proletariat, and through the working class entrain the peasantry behind it and utilize the lower sections of the urban petty bourgeoisie. The absence of a Communist Party to this day is objectively the greatest obstacle in the road to a victorious advance of the Indian revolution.

But for that, there is a revival of the exploded theory—which also breaks with Bolshevism—that the trade unions or a section or wing of the unions will lead the revolution. This theory tentatively advanced in 1924 by Zinoviev, was applied to England. It is not certain, wrote Zinoviev, whether the revolutionary movement will come through MacManus (i.e., the British Communist Party) or through the General Council of the British Trade Unions. The British General Strike two years later removed even Zinoviev's doubts. . . .

A variation of this theory is now being advanced in India. The Stalinist press speaks of the Left wing in the Indian Trade Union Congress as of the organizing and directing center of the proletarian revolutionary movement. The only thing that can come out of such a conception is incalculable harm. The proletarian political party can not take the place of the trade unions; but the trade unions—or any section of it—can certainly not take the place of the revolutionary party. The political party of the proletariat is its principal arm in the strug-

*"The Aftermath of Non-Cooperation" by Manabendra Nath Roy, Published by the Communist Party of Great Britain, London, 1926. Page 37.

** Ibid, Page 47.

***Ibid., Page 48.

****Ibid., page 89.