

INDIA,
IMPRESSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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PREFACE.

WHILST travelling in India in 1907, I contributed a series of letters to the *Labour Leader*, and these form the basis of the following chapters. That this method of writing has its drawbacks I know, but there are also some compensating advantages. Impressions recorded while they are warm are more virile than when laboriously compiled out of stale memories.

India and its affairs are now exciting a great deal of interest, and it is owing to that fact that this little volume sees the light. I have neither claim nor desire to pose as an authority on India and its affairs, but two months spent in the country during which every minute was occupied either in travelling or in interviewing officials or representative men of all stations in life and of all creeds, castes, and classes, led me to certain conclusions. These, with the reasons which led to their being formed, will be found set forth in what follows.

Much controversy has arisen over the question as to whether the condition of the people of India, especially the peasantry, has improved or deteriorated during the past one hundred and fifty years. Many contradictory statements of missionaries, traders, travellers, and officials have been quoted

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for and against. One quotation from an official document dated 1833 which I have seen given as an evidence of the benefits which British rule has brought is curious, and worth reproducing here as showing how progress and improvement presents itself to certain minds:—

“Labourers,” wrote the official who compiled the report, “whom nothing would have induced to work more than six hours in twenty-four (under native rule), and who often declined to work at all on a cloudy day, were willing to toil from sunrise to sunset” (under British rule).

This would be amusing were it not that it is seriously advanced as a proof of the blessings which our rule has brought to the peasants of India.

Whether for ultimate good or ill, we have entirely changed the conditions under which the people of India had lived for at least twenty-five hundred years prior to European occupation. Take, for example, the method of holding the land and the method of raising the revenue. The *Encyclopædia Britannica*, in its article on India, says that Akbar, the great and wise Mohammedan ruler, fixed the revenue from land at one-third the total produce. It was paid in kind, and here is how it was collected:—

The land was not held by private owners, but by occupiers under the petty corporation (village panchayet). The revenue was not due from individuals, but from the community represented by its headman. The aggregate harvest of the village fields was thrown into a common fund, and before the general

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distribution the headman was bound to set aside the share of the state. No other system could be theoretically more just or in practice less obnoxious to the people.

That method at least has disappeared, and now each individual cultivator of land has to pay his revenue direct, not as a collective part of the harvest yield, but as an individual rent for the particular piece of land he himself cultivates, and this has to be paid in coin and not in grain as formerly. This is a revolutionary change and one which I believe is playing havoc with the people.

The term “famine in India” is a misnomer. There are times and seasons when famine is spread over great areas affecting many millions of people, but at the same time in other parts of the country sufficient grain is being exported to feed all who are hungry if only it did not pay better to send it abroad. Thus, according to the Famine Commissioners’ Report upon the great famine of 1877-8, when scores of millions of people in Southern India were starving and five millions two hundred and twenty thousand (5,220,000) actually died of hunger, over sixteen million hundredweights (16,000,000 cwts.) of rice were exported from Calcutta to foreign lands. This illustrates what happens in connection with every so-called famine in India.

That there is discontent in India is not to be denied. What is denied by the officials and the army of ex-officials and hangers-on in London is that there is any legitimate grievance to justify

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agitation. To these I commend the opinion of Lord Cromer, who, addressing his fellow-peers in the House of Lords on a recent occasion, said :—

The position of India at the present time is almost unique. It is, so far as I know, the only important country in the world where education has considerably advanced, which is governed in all essential particulars by non-resident foreigners. It is also the only country where the Civil Service in all its higher administrative branches is in the hands of aliens appointed by a foreign country under stringent educational tests.

Those who are so prone to denounce all Indian reformers as seditious malcontents may find food for reflection in Lord Cromer's words.

In 1858, at the close of the great mutiny, the late Queen Victoria, in the healing manifesto which she issued to the people of India, said :—

It is our will that, so far as may be, our subjects, of whatever race or creed, be fully and impartially admitted to offices in our service, the duties of which they may be qualified by their education, ability, and integrity duly to discharge.

The pages which follow will give some idea how this solemn pledge was kept. Then in 1908, fifty years after, King Edward, in the jubilee proclamation, used almost identical language :—

Steps are being continually taken towards obliterating distinctions of race as the test for access to posts of public authority and power. In this path I confidently expect and intend the progress henceforward to be steadfast and sure, as education spreads, experience ripens, and the lessons of responsibility are well-learned by the keen intelligence and apt capabilities of India.

If the pledge of Queen Victoria had been carried out the language of the second proclamation would

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not have been that of repetition of a promise but that of credit for the fulfilment of a royal undertaking given fifty years before. What sincerity lies behind the second pledge time will show.

The difficulty in the way of introducing political reforms is alleged to be in the main due to difference of race, caste, and creed. These difficulties are more imaginary than real, and I have shown how they have been and are being overcome in the more progressive of the native states. The two main divisions of population are Hindus and Mohammedans. Out of a population of say 300,000,000 the Mohammedans muster about 60,000,000, of whom only some hundreds of thousands are Mughals or Pathans, who came in as invaders and conquerors. Most of the rest of the Mussulman population are Hindus who have been converted to Mohammedanism, many of them in the olden days at the point of the sword. The Mussulmans predominate in the north, but when the Punjab is left behind it is rarely that a Mughal is seen, though when he is there is no mistaking him because of his superior physique and proud, erect bearing. Among the peasantry, Hindu and Mohammedan, belonging as they do to the same race, mingle freely, attend each other's religious festivals and social functions, and when left alone behave as good neighbours should. The policy now being pursued by the Government is to show special favour to the Mohammedans, and it looks with a complacent eye upon, even if it does nothing to foster, outbursts of fanatical

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strife between the two sections of religious belief. Great Britain may one day have to pay a long price for this folly. The Mussulmans are a warlike people come of a conquering race. They are united by ties of religion rather than nationality, and as there are two hundred millions of them in the world they may one day take it into their heads to try once again to win supreme power for Allah in the East.

I am fully conscious of the many imperfections which the following pages contain. That the book will excite criticism goes without saying. That I shall welcome. Everything which serves to call attention to the condition of India and its peoples must be of advantage to the patient toilers and thinkers of that far-off land, for the well-being of whose suffering millions the democracy of Great Britain are now responsible.

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desperate deeds, the guardians of law and order were marched off to the security of their barracks. These special men are called the punitive force, and are quartered on villages, which are saddled with the cost, as a punishment for some offence, real or imaginary, against the majesty of the law.

Here I had another illustration of the way in which the dignity of Great Britain is upheld by those who represent her in this far-off land.

The Lieutenant-Governor was about to visit Mymensingh, and a committee was formed to prepare a reception. On that committee, by special invitation, were two agents of a local landowner of some considerable standing. Some time prior to this, there had been some petty disturbance in the village, and the house of this local landowner had the sides torn out by the police, who entered, without any warrant, under pretence of searching for arms and incriminating documents. I was supplied with photographs of the scene. The landowner, who himself resides at Calcutta, entered a suit for damages against the authorities, for the wanton destruction of his property, and this suit was still pending when the Governor paid his visit. The landowner, or, as they are called, the zemindar, had been asked to subscribe towards the fund for suitably receiving the Governor, and had subscribed Rs. 150, whereupon he received a card of invitation to attend the function of the Governor's reception. A few days before the reception, however, he was informed by a local official that unless he withdrew his action against the authorities for

damage done to his property, the invitation would be withdrawn.

He appealed to the Governor, but all in vain; and in the end was not allowed to attend the reception. The case for damages was finally decided in his favour. Thus for refusing to assent to an illegal outrage, involving the destruction of property, this local gentleman was branded as a rebel not only by the local officials, but also by the Lieutenant-Governor himself. Such a thing would of course be impossible at home, though in India it was done apparently as a matter of course. Mymensingh is one of the proclaimed districts in which no meetings are permitted, and the police, armed and unarmed, were, as already stated, in evidence all day long.

From Mymensingh the next stage in the journey was Barisal, which we reached in the evening, and where apparently the entire population had turned out to offer their welcome. The way to the Dak bungalow was brilliantly illuminated, and the streets were filled with cheering crowds. I addressed a few words of thanks from the bungalow steps.

Among the information received at Barisal was the fact, subsequently substantiated by personal investigation, that in one part of the district, where, owing to the strength of the Swadeshi movement, nobody could be got to sell foreign goods, two policemen, who were still in the pay of the authorities, had been set up as shopkeepers. There were also further tales of houses being ransacked and pillaged by policemen without warrant or

But Mr. Cummings argued that two shots had been fired, one of which killed a man, and though it would probably never be known who had fired the fatal shot, he felt it his duty to condemn the person before him to death. When the case came before the High Court of Appeal the judges ridiculed Mr. Cummings's methods in probably the most scathing indictment ever indulged in by a court of justice. They showed that important official witnesses who had offered themselves as evidence were not allowed to testify, the presumption being that they would have been on the side of the accused, and in the end they upheld the appeal and set the condemned man at liberty.

I give this as typical of the way in which justice is administered by many of the officials in the disturbed districts in Eastern Bengal. I declare in the most emphatic manner that at the time of my visit *there was no sedition in Eastern Bengal*; there was resentment, deep and bitter, against the partition; there was a longing patriotic desire to have the partition order revoked, or at least modified in such a way as would restore Bengal to its former unity. The way in which the Government met this perfectly legitimate agitation and demand was to declare all identified with it as seditious rebels, and treat them as so many outlaws. In the end this can have only one result. The Hindu is by nature loyal, patient, and long-suffering; but there are limits even to Hindu endurance, and those limits have probably been reached in the eastern districts of Bengal. The Swadeshi movement

grows and spreads on every hand. Where the Government interferes with private schools, which receive a Government grant, these are cut off, sometimes voluntarily, from the receipt of all Government aid, and are then carried on as purely voluntary agencies. Hindu colleges on similar lines, including the Technical College in Calcutta, are being staffed by trained teachers, who have given up valuable and lucrative appointments to serve their people. Schools and colleges for women are being opened, and altogether the misguided action of Lord Curzon and his advisers is having the effect of stimulating the Hindu people into a degree of energetic activity hitherto unknown and deemed to be all but impossible.

The partition of Bengal was a huge blunder; the method adopted of bringing it about a greater blunder still. Those who think the agitation against the partition is confined to the Babu class little know the facts of the case. I had opportunities of meeting in private consultation with members of the titled aristocracy, the landed gentry, of the Legislative Council, judges and leading lawyers, and although most of these were strong in their condemnation of the agitation and the methods connected with it, they were no less strong in their feeling that partition was a great mistake which ought to be rectified at the earliest possible moment. One method by which the blunder might be retrieved would be the adoption of the plan proposed by Lord MacDonnell: the transference from Western to Eastern Bengal of two revenue

marble pillars. The latter were defaced by the Mohammedans, who in some cases contented themselves with chipping away the features of the Hindu deities, whilst in others they transformed them into floral decorations. Here also stands an iron pillar, the origin of which is a mystery. Its age has been variously estimated at from one thousand to fifteen hundred years. Nowadays, its production would be a mere commonplace item; but even a hundred years ago it would have constituted a marvel in the way of production. It is a standing proof that the metallurgic arts had attained to a high degree of development in India many centuries ago. Delhi, more than any other part of India perhaps, is a microcosm of the past. Two thousand five hundred years ago—that is, five hundred years before the birth of Christ, and half a thousand years before the Roman invasion brought the first gleams of civilisation to Western Europe—art, science, learning, and religion flourished in the ancient Hindu kingdom of which Delhi was the capital. But I must not dwell on these things, or I shall be led too far afield.

The further north one travels in India, the more is the soldier in evidence. Even from the railway carriage the military cantonment is the most common object which meets the eye. The fear of a Russian invasion is responsible for the fact that all up through the north and the north-west the military authorities have had pretty much their own way. Millions have been expended in the erection of cantonments and fortifications, and

millions more are being squandered in their maintenance and upkeep. I am no military man, and therefore my opinion may not be worth much in matters of this kind, but others competent to form an opinion hold strongly that most of this is so much money wasted. Whatever may have been the danger in the past, now that a friendly Afghanistan stands as a barrier between Moscow and Delhi, and since we are at peace with Russia, surely the crushing burden of militarism under which India groans might be sensibly relieved.

Delhi and the surrounding district were alleged to be storm centres of the seditious movement, and many were the gruesome tales of treasonable plots and risings which were dished up in the columns of the *Times*. That there was some unrest is certain, and a brief examination of the causes will enable readers to form a fair estimate of the reliance to be placed upon press estimates of what constitutes sedition in India.

Several main causes contributed to the unrest. The growth of an educated middle-class, the deepening and growing poverty of the ryots, the prevalence with monotonous continuance of plague and famine, the irksome restrictions imposed by Government, and the growing alienation between East and West, all had their share in producing the discontent which journalists and officials classed as sedition. But more than all these put together was the growth of the military spirit, which is yearly becoming an increasing factor in the administration of Indian affairs. Freedom and militarism are

mutually antagonistic forces, and where the former flourishes the latter cannot thrive. Not only is this the case, but the military forces, neither knowing nor understanding the spirit of civil freedom, take alarm at the slightest display thereof.

This fact was curiously brought to light in Delhi during April and May of the year 1907. As a matter of fact, there can be no doubt that the military developed a state of "blue funk" as the jubilee of the Great Mutiny approached. Plague was raging within the city and as many as two hundred and fifty funerals were to be seen passing through the streets in one day. For the province of which Delhi forms the chief city the deaths from plague were for a period *seventy-five thousand per week*.

Whilst the plague was thus raging and fear was in the minds of the people, the municipal authorities of Delhi saw fit, for some reason or another, to double the municipal assessment, which led to a strong agitation by way of protest, during which public meetings were held and memorials were sent to the authorities. This was in April; and as May 10th was the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Mutiny, prejudiced newspaper correspondents and easily-imposed-upon military officers coupled the agitation with the jubilee, and came to the conclusion that a second rising was impending.

One of the best of the civil officials that I met in India gave me this warning: "Always," he said, "make allowance for the fact when listening to statements from peasants that the native mind

is so constituted as to know intuitively what you want to be told, and to make his statement fit in with your wishes." If this friendly hint was needed for a mere wayfarer like myself, how much more so was it in the case of police officials? But the military authorities ignored it and thus it happened that alarming tales were freely poured into the credulous ears of Anglo-Indian journalists, who not only swallowed them greedily, but retailed them again with a truly Oriental wealth of imagination. As May 10th approached, the agitation against the municipal assessment in Delhi still continuing, the military authorities made up their minds for the worst. The gates of Delhi were strongly guarded by military patrols, and no Indian was allowed to pass out or in after dark. Guns and ammunition were put in special positions and trained on the city, ready for use at a moment's notice.

It so happened that at this same time a new tramway was being laid through the city, and on the evening of May 10th one of the contractors tried to cheat his workmen of a portion of their wages, whereupon they set upon him and gave him a good pommelling, which, doubtless, he richly deserved. A half-drunken Eurasian (who was subsequently placed under restraint) saw the fight, and rushed off, hot foot, to the European Club, and informed the panic-stricken inmates that Delhi had risen, that Europeans were being butchered, and that already the streets were drenched with English blood. The alarm spread from the club

to the cantonment, and for twelve mortal hours a real reign of terror existed in the European quarters.

Fortunately for the city, the young magistrate who had charge of civil affairs kept his head, and prevented a development which might have led to the most disastrous results. Whilst Europeans were barricading their houses, patrolling their premises, shot-gun in hand, and preparing generally to sell their lives dearly, the native quarter of the city itself was going about its business and pleasure as usual, knowing nothing of all the terror which was being exhibited in the outside English quarters. Those who remember the blood-curdling reports which were cabled home at the time through Reuter's and other agencies about sedition and mutiny in Delhi will be astonished to learn that these had no other foundation than the drunken imagination of the dissolute character referred to above, coupled with the over-wrought mental condition of the military authorities. Nothing could better illustrate the aloofness of the military authorities from the people than the incident here set down.

When the municipal authorities saw that their proposed new assessment was being so hotly resented by the people, and was likely to lead to a passive resistance to all taxes on the part of the tradesmen and householders of the city, they withdrew their proposals, and the agitation at once subsided. It is on such slender foundations that the outcry about sedition and mutiny has been built

up round Delhi. As the matter is of some importance, I will give one or two other illustrations from other centres, because it is of the first importance that the British people should understand the true facts of the situation as I saw them with my own eyes, and secured documentary and official evidence to prove, during my brief sojourn in India.

improved if the Viceroy had as one of his secretaries an educated Indian gentleman, who would understand the people and their claims, and give a sympathetic interpretation to their grievances. Surely this small concession to Indian opinion might well be inaugurated during Lord Minto's reign, and the fact that one Indian gentleman now finds a seat on the Viceroy's Executive Council encourages the hope that an Indian Assistant Secretary will follow.

Such, then, is the Government of India, bureaucratic in form, and, as a consequence, harsh and exacting in all its relations towards the people. To the heads of departments the people of India are but so many seeds in an oil-mill, to be crushed for the oil they yield. It may be that all the provinces of India are not yet fit for the colonial form of self-government, but between that and the present soul-less bureaucracy there are many degrees of expansion in the direction of modifying bureaucratic power and enlarging the rights and liberties of the people. Sooner or later a beginning must be made towards enfranchising the masses and opening up the way for the educated Indian to fill the higher and better paid positions. A native head of a department would be more in touch with the people than an Englishman, and less easily imposed upon by the lower paid officials, and would generally make for the better government of the country. It may be seditious even to suggest such a thing, but it must not only be suggested, but pressed, if India is to be pacified

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and kept loyal to the British Raj. The framework of popular government is there, and it is only necessary to clothe it with the flesh, and breathe into it the spirit, of effective popular control.

POVERTY AND PLAGUE.

To understand the condition of the people of India it is necessary to keep one fact constantly in mind. That fact, given on the authority of Lord Curzon when he was Viceroy, is this—that the *average income of the people of India is only two pounds per person per annum*. This includes the incomes and salaries of rich and poor, official and non-official. The corresponding figure for other countries is:—

Russia	...	...	...	£11 per head
Germany and Holland	...	...	...	22 " "
France	...	...	...	27 " "
America	...	...	...	39 " "
England	...	...	...	42 " "

Mr. William Digby—no mean authority—estimated the income of India to work out at only £1 5s. 1½d. a year per person. But even accepting the higher official estimate, it is easy to see that in a country where the income of the people is less than one-fifth that of Russia, itself a poor country, and less than one-twentieth that of England, perpetual poverty is bound to be the lot of its inhabitants. Separating the peasants, who form 85 per cent. of the people, from the business

and official classes, their income works out on Lord Curzon's official estimate at 26s. a year, or 12s. 6d. a year on the lower non-official one.

Of late years plague, famine, and pestilence, have stalked through the land, carrying death and destruction in their wake. The authorities are at their wits' end to account for the persistent prevalence of plague, which seems to have come to stay, and are scouring the laboratories of the world for a serum which will exterminate the plague bacillus. They are also making war on rats (which, it appears, carry the plague from village to village), and like famous Dick Whittington, are introducing ship loads of cats to exterminate them. After a hundred years, more or less, of prosperous British rule, during fifty of which Parliament has been kept annually informed, mainly in glowing terms, of the "material and moral progress of India," it is a trifle annoying to find that people die of plague and famine even more persistently than ever. But for the rat, and the flea which torments him, and which, so it is said, is the real disseminator of the plague, I know not what the British administrator would do. So long as he has the rat and the flea to fall back upon, his reputation as a heaven-sent administrator is safe. Having conquered all the other enemies of peace and order in India, he has but to prove his metal, or poison, against the rat and the flea, and peace and health and plenty will reign, and the brightest jewel in the British crown will shine flawless. Such appears to be the theory; alas for the reality!

If only one could shut one's eyes to facts, this rat-and-flea theory would be very comforting. It appears, however, to be the fact that rats and fleas were not introduced into India by John Company or his successors, and that, despite their presence, and without the aid of serum, plague did not persist then as it does now. In forty years—1860-1900—thirty millions (30,000,000) of people died of hunger in India—that, too, under the benign rule of the British Raj. What number died of disease in the same period will never be known, but all are agreed that the plague is now persisting and continuing in a way and manner hitherto unknown, and I believe the cause to be the *growing poverty of the people*.

I have read Lord Curzon's famous defence of British rule and of its beneficent influence upon the condition of the people, and have listened to much talk on the same subject, backed by official tables and percentages, without being convinced. That the condition of the peasants was ever worse than it is now is difficult to believe; that it was much better at no very distant date is, I am convinced, true. That the native rulers extracted all they could, and often much more than they should, out of the people is certainly true; that their methods were often the reverse of gentle is also true; but that they were able to apply the scientific methods of precision now in force for extracting the last pie from the peasant, and keeping him in abject poverty all the time is equally not true.

For one thing, the machinery did not exist for

BRITAIN AS ABSENTEE LANDLORD.

FOR further proof of my contention that the lot of the peasant has worsened under British rule, let us consider his present condition. His rent is a fixed quantity, payable in coin, not in kind, whether the crop be good or bad. In wet lands, *i.e.*, irrigated lands, if there is no water and no crop no rent is charged, but if there is a one-anna crop—and a twelve-anna crop is reckoned the average, sixteen annas being a pukka or bumper crop—the rent to the Government must be paid in full. For the past ten years only three have been average years, all the rest being under. As the rent or revenue, as it is called, is fixed on the assumption that the yield will average twelve annas (that is, twelve annas to the rupee) a year, it requires no great stretch of imagination to see what this means to the peasants, who, even at the best of times, are always at close grips with poverty, with hunger only one degree, and not always that, removed from them.

When the peasant wants fuel he has to go to the Government depôt and buy it, or obtain a licence, on payment of a fee, of course, to go and cut it, even when the trees grow on his own land!

Before he can catch a few fish for his own and his children's supper he must take out a licence. The pasture land on which his cattle formerly grazed is now being enclosed as forest, and he has often to go long distances to find pasturage, and then has to pay. If one of his beasts should stray within the *unfenced* area of the forest it is liable to be impounded and he himself fined. Wild pigs and other animals may root up and otherwise destroy his crops, but he is not allowed to carry a gun to frighten them away. He is usually up to the neck in debt to the money lender, who claims a lien upon the crop ere it is reaped, the railway system giving facilities for having it carried to market. Thus the binns in which the surplus grains were formerly stored now stand empty or have totally disappeared. If his irrigation system is out of order, he is bandied about from one official to another to find out who is responsible, since, incredible as it may seem, in almost every department there are several sets of officials, each acting independently of the other.

As already indicated, the subordinates of each of these departments require to be bought off, and woe betide the luckless tenant who fails to stump up properly. If the ryot wishes to see an official he has often to walk miles to the nearest district office, wait there for hours, and then probably learn that he has gone to the wrong place. He will often spend days in this fashion, and only too often all to no purpose.

The Indian peasant is often sneered at as being unprogressive and shiftless. But what incentive

imperfectly understands his language, who knows nothing, or next to nothing, of the conditions of his life, and who sees in his petitioner only a fresh cause of annoyance in an already overworked official life?

By one means or another the peasant must be given a corporate organ through which he can make his complaints manifest; must be given some effective control over the affairs which concern him; must be given some hope and assurance that if he exerts himself and seeks to improve his position, his efforts shall not end in being turned into a reason for still further adding to the kist of the Sircar. What I say of the ryot applies to the weaver and the artisan also, though if the peasant could be put well on his legs, that of itself would go a long way towards helping all the others. Meantime, amongst the many hapless poor whom commercialism is crushing into a shapeless mass, there are few more helpless than the patient, voiceless Indian ryot, with his one scanty meal a day, which in times of famine becomes no meal.