

PART II. BRITISH RULE IN INDIA

V. Myths and Realities

*"There yet remains a class, the general one,
Which has no merit, and pretends to none;
Good easy folk who know that eels are eels,
But never pause to think how skinning feels,
Content to know that eels are made to flay,
And Indians formed by destiny to pay...
And hence when they become the great and high,
There is no word they hate so much as—Why?"*

India: A Poem in Three Cantos.

By a Young Civilian of Bengal. London, 1834.

I. CENSORSHIP

Any serious approach to Indian problems has first to overcome a thick outwork of barriers and barbed-wire defenses, of censorship and prejudice, of official indifference and hostility, unscientific information and propagandist myths.

The conditions of war have deepened the censorship which at all times rest over India.

In a famous passage the leader of nineteenth-century English Conservatism wrote of English history:

"If the history of England be ever written by one who has the knowledge and the courage, and both qualities are equally necessary for the undertaking, the world would be more astonished than when reading the annals of Niebuhr. Generally speaking, all the great events have been distorted, most of the important causes concealed, some of the principal characters never appear, and all who figure are so misunderstood and misrepresented that the result is a complete mystification." (Disraeli, *Sybil*, ch. iii.)

If this is true of English history, how much more is it true of that history which deals with the deepest basis of power of the English ruling class, its inexhaustible reservoir of strength against every rival, and its decisive field of activity, governing all its policies for three centuries—the history of the British Empire,

which means, above all, the history of British dominion in India?

The most recent historians of India in an interesting Bibliographical Note have remarked on this transformation from "frankness" to what they term a "silent censorship" in the past half-century:

"Of general histories of British India, those written a century or more ago are, with hardly an exception, franker, fuller and more interesting than those of the last fifty years. In days when no one dreamed that anyone would be seditious enough to ask really fundamental questions (such as 'What right have you to be in India at all?') and when no one ever thought of any public but a British one, criticism was lively and well-informed, and judgment was passed without regard to political exigencies. Of late years, increasingly and no doubt naturally, all Indian questions have tended to be approached from the standpoint of administration: 'Will this make for easier and quieter government?' The writer of today inevitably has a world outside his own people, listening intently and as touchy as his own people, as swift to take offense. 'He that is not for us is against us.' This knowledge of an overhearing even eavesdropping public, of being *in partibus infidelium*, exercises a constant silent censorship, which has made British-Indian history the worst patch in current scholarship." (E. Thompson and G. T. Garratt, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, 1934, p. 665.)

But in fact this is not only a question of past history. It is, above all, a question of present treatment and information. Nor is it only a question of an ideal "censorship" in the anxious heart of the official apologist. It is a question of a very real censorship which is exercised with a most formidable mechanism alike within India and between India and the outer world.

Within India (even before war conditions) the existing press censorship, inaugurated in its modern form with the Indian Press Act of 1910, and successively sharpened and intensified to the draconic Press Law of 1932 (incorporated in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1932, Sections 14, 15 and 16), which openly proclaims the aim, not only of censorship, but of "control of the press," alongside a host of subsidiary regulations, such as the

Foreign Relations Act of 1932 and the States Protection Act of 1934, heavily shackles the press.

At the same time a rigid and arbitrary censorship debars most Left literature from India, thus endeavoring to cut off Indian thought and opinion from contact with the outer world. Further, the supply of news from the outer world is virtually monopolized by a single agency (with an associated agency for internal Indian news), which receives heavy financial payments and other privileges from the Government.

This attempted iron ring of isolation round India works both ways. It also cuts off the outside world from effective news of what is happening in India. Cable monopoly prevents any but the most misleading, hand-picked and censored news of what is happening in India reaching the British public, conceals the worst realities of imperial exploitation, and excludes any real reflection of Indian opinion and expressions.

The English citizen who wishes seriously to acquaint himself with conditions and happenings in India, or with Indian opinion, must accordingly be prepared to face considerable difficulties, and to approach his inquiries with the understanding that the facts are likely to be considerably different from the bland official pictures.

2. THE ROLE OF IMPERIALISM

While a barbed-wire entanglement is thus set up between India and the outer world to hamper any adequate serious interchange of information and opinion, at the same time a riot of imperialist propaganda, from school textbooks to broadcast reports, builds up in the minds of the British public a mythical picture of the real situation in India and the British role in India.

The general character of this picture is familiar.

British rule is presented as a pioneer of civilization, engaged with self-sacrificing devotion in the uphill task of bringing peace, enlightenment and progress to the ignorant and backward Indian people, steeped in degraded religious superstition and racial rivalries.

British ideals of liberalism and democracy are supposed to be in process of being implanted in this ungrateful soil, along the path of gradual constitutional reform to the final aim of full democratic institutions.

Indian mass discontent and revolt are presented as the artificial product of a handful of extremist agitators. The Indian National Congress is pictured as a handful of middle-class intelligentsia, wholly unrepresentative of the "voiceless millions" of the Indian peasantry (whose true protector and representative is supposed to be the British ruling class official).

Without foreign rule, it is claimed, Indians would be immediately at one another's throats (having not yet learned the standards of European civilization signally demonstrated since 1914); India would be a sea of blood and anarchy, and fall immediately a prey to a foreign invader.

It is unnecessary to continue further the familiar picture.

A fuller examination of the facts will reveal what are the realities behind this mythology.

But in view of the prevalence of the familiar myths of the "civilizing mission," behind which the realities of imperialism are always and in all countries habitually concealed, it is especially important for English readers, in approaching Indian questions, to be vigilantly on their guard against facile preconceptions or unconscious assumptions of superiority, which are in fact only a mental reflection of a temporary relationship of domination.

Those familiar with the general workings of imperialism are aware that the real driving force which impels the capitalist invaders to subjugate foreign peoples and territories with fire and sword is neither love of the peoples nor abstract missions of civilization, but very concrete aims of the drive of capitalism for extra profits.

It is true that capitalist world domination, in India as elsewhere, has also in fact in the past, alongside its work of destruction and spoliation, accomplished an objectively revolutionizing role, in that, by shattering the old economy, building railways and establishing a unified system of exploitation, it has laid the foundations for a new stage.

This accomplishment, however, has been achieved, not only through wholesale destruction and suffering, but under such reactionary conditions as thwart progress and retard the development of the subjected people.

All that has been done in India, in the way of building railways, electric telegraphs, ports and entrepôts, etc., has been done, not

to meet the needs of the given stage of development of the people, but to meet the needs of commercial and financial penetration. It has been done on the basis of the most extreme exploitation and impoverishment of the Indian peasantry. In order to maintain its rule, imperialism has allied itself with the most reactionary feudal elements, which, but for British protection, would have been long ago swept away; it has held the people down in ignorance and has fostered religious and racial rivalries. Hence, the peculiar character of the situation in India, of combining the most archaic forms of feudal exploitation below, with the most advanced finance-capitalist exploitation above, skimming the cream of the spoils, and thus subjecting the Indian masses to double exploitation.

The economic and social needs of the people, the needs of India's own economic development, have been neglected, or even thwarted, for fear of developing the competition of Indian capitalism.

Imperialism has retarded the economic development of India. Before British rule Indian civilization ranked relatively high in the world scale. The products of Indian industry were more than a match for European products. It is *since* British rule that India has been reduced to an extreme backward level in the world scale, to a world slum.

For this reason those who try to reach a judgment of the "civilizing role" of imperialism in India on the basis of such facts as the erection of a tragically scanty supply of hospitals (actually one hospital bed per 3,840 of the population in British India in 1934, as against one per 384 of the population in the Soviet Union in the same year) are like those who try to judge the beneficent role of landlordism by the distribution of blankets at Christmas.

A careful examination of the facts will compel the conclusion that, despite all the talk of its "civilizing mission" (and despite the sincere endeavors of a few high-minded individual medical officers, missionaries and others), imperialism as a system is the main buttress of reaction in India today and the main obstacle to progress, and by the inner laws of its existence cannot function otherwise.

This conclusion may be unwelcome to those who still hope

to distinguish between a "beneficent" and a "predatory" imperialism. But the evidence for it will be presented in the following pages.

VI. The Plunder of India

"There is no end to the violence and plunder which is called British rule in India."—Lenin: "Inflammable Material in World Politics," 1908.

In order to understand the role of imperialism in India it is necessary to cover certain historical ground.

During recent years the real history of British rule in India is beginning to be disinterred from the official wrappings. But it still remains true, as Sir William Hunter, the editor of the *Imperial Gazette of India*, declared in 1897:

"A true history of the Indian people under British rule has still to be pieced together from the archives of a hundred distant record rooms, with a labor almost beyond the powers of any single man, and at an expense almost beyond the reach of any ordinary private fortune."

For our present purposes we are not concerned to follow in any detail the chronicle of British rule in India, which would require a separate volume for any useful treatment, and the conventional facts of which can be studied in any of the current standard works. We are only concerned to bring out some of the decisive forces of development which underlie the present situation and its problems.

The past is past. The record of British rule in India, when truthfully told, is not an edifying record. It is important that Englishmen should be acquainted with some of the facts of that record (which are normally suppressed from the school-books) in order to free themselves from imperialist prejudice; and it is important that Indians should be acquainted with them in order to equip themselves as uncompromising fighters for Indian freedom.

Three main periods stand out in this history of imperialist rule in India. The first is the period of merchant capital, represented