

Developments in the Political Situation in India

G. A. K. Luhani

(Continued from last issue.)

Character of the Political Issue

THE process of "de-colonisation" naturally introduces a change in the character of the political issue before the national movement in India, so far as the various social classes are concerned. The various social classes participating in the national movement must and do differ as to its ultimate issue. Capitalism is sufficiently developed in India for there to exist a certain differentiation in the ranks of the Indian bourgeoisie.

There are bourgeois elements who have not made up their mind as to whether they are for or against British imperialism. But the upper bourgeoisie has, however, definitely gone over to the side of British imperialism. It means that they have come to a tacit agreement as to the joint exploitation of the masses of India, although it does not, however, mean that there does not exist any contradiction of interests between them.

There is a certain duality in the present policy of the imperial government: on the one hand to develop India capitalistically, and on the other hand, to retain control of the process in its own hands. In other words the policy is to give the widest possible elbow room to Indian capital to develop itself, but within the framework of the British Empire. Practically it means in the actual circumstances, an inevitable strengthening of the native capitalist class on the one hand, and an equally inevitable brake on its development on the other hand. From this springs the fundamental contradiction.

On the other hand, to the other classes, now subject to a more intensified process of double exploitation, the issue of the national struggle is becoming more and more synonymous with the revolutionary overthrow of British imperialism, while for the bourgeoisie the issue is one which evidently admits of solution by way of accommodation and compromise with the imperialist interests. We thus find the political characteristics of the present situation in India to be (a) active negotiation between the Indian bourgeoisie and the imperial government in view of the Royal Commission on Constitutional Reform; (b) the consequent reformist degeneration of the national movement under the leadership of the bourgeois political parties; (c) a move towards leadership of the national revolutionary struggle by the proletariat, and (d) the increasing revolutionisation of the petty bourgeois, intellectual, proletarian and peasant masses.

The Indian National Congress

To illustrate these general lines of development in Indian politics, we shall make a rapid survey first of all of the activities of the Indian National Congress during

the period under review. This body which meets ordinarily once a year is not the highest organ of any one party, but of the whole national movement, as it has developed up till now since 1880. As such, it has become a federation of the various nationalist parties, with the exception of the parties of the extreme Right or reactionary groups.

From 1921 onwards, the Congress has gradually moved towards the Right. At its session of 1925, at Cawnpur, it still retained some vestige of the earlier revolution orientation of 1919-20 when the masses were ready to change from "non-co-operation" with to active resistance against the imperial government. The Cawnpur programme did not formally discard the policy of mass action as the final means for the realisation of the aim of the national struggle, though the aim itself of the national struggle, so far as the Congress was concerned, had by then become tacitly synonymous with "Dominion Status."

The last plenary session of the Congress was held at Gauhati in December, 1926, and its decisions govern the policy and general line of work during the present year. These decisions constitute a further climb-down from the verbally revolutionary position of the Cawnpur programme and in fact a preparation for the full-blooded reformism of the Congress leadership during the present period. In the principal resolution adopted at Gauhati, there was talk of "a determined resistance to every activity, governmental or otherwise, that may impede the nation's progress towards Swaraj (self-government)". It was also resolved that the Congress Party (formerly the Swaraj Party) in the Legislatures should "refuse to accept ministership or other offices in the gift of the Government" and "oppose the formation of ministries by other parties until in the opinion of the Congress or the All-India Congress Committee, a satisfactory response is made by the Government to the national demand." But, on the other hand, the principle of co-operation with the imperial government was admitted in as much as the Congress Party was authorised to "move (in the Legislatures) resolutions and introduce and support measures and bills which are necessary for the healthy growth of national life and the advancement of the economic, agricultural, industrial and commercial interests of the country. . . ."

The president of the Gauhati session, Srinivas Lyengar, in his scheme of future Swaraj demanded "control over the army and the navy" as the furthest encroachment he could think of in the position of the imperial government; but he specifically left the control over "foreign relations with other countries" in its hands. At the same time the Congress rejected by a heavy majority a resolution demanding "the complete independence of India," though the resolution had had the support of two provincial organisations of the Congress, and was pressed by the Left rank and file.

The Right Wing of the Congress—organised as the

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"Responsivist Party"—had no difficulty in interpreting the Congress decisions as being a mandate for their own policy of closer co-operation with the imperial government on the basis and character of the latter's "response" (hence the name of the Party—"Responsivist"). The imperialists themselves noted that—

"sooner or later the Swaraj (Congress) Party will have to come into line with the Responsive Co-operators, the Independents, Moderates and others who want to work the Constitution, and although the journey of the Party from non-co-operation to co-operation may take some time and will be camouflaged as much as possible, nevertheless it must in the end be accomplished."
—(The "Round Table," March, 1927.)

To leave no doubt at all, Srinivas Lyengar himself admitted at the close of the legislative session at Delhi early this year that the Gauhati programme

"so far from sanctioning any extreme policy of obstruction or non-co-operation, commanded the members to co-operate with the Government in all matters of national improvement."

The sort of "improvement" of the "nation" which the Congress president had in mind was simply the advancement of the Indian bourgeoisie, as is amply shown by the legislative activities of the Congress Party.

Even the less ambiguous part of the Gauhati programme was very soon very flagrantly flouted in the province of Madras. In Madras, as it happened, it was possible for the Congress Party to offer "determined resistance" to the Government, because alone among the Provinces, Madras had returned a clear majority to the Local Legislative Council in the General Elections at the end of 1926. For some time, the temptation was very strong for some of the more opportunist leaders of the Madras Congress Party to "accept ministership or other offices in the gift of the Government," but the categorical prohibition of the Gauhati programme stood in the way. What the Party actually did flatly contradicted another and, no less important, part of the Gauhati programme. Instead of "opposing the formation of ministries by other parties," it allowed the frankly reformist Independent Party to take ministerial office, though there had been no "response," "satisfactory," or otherwise, "made by the Government to the national demand." There is a still more significant side of the Madras episode. At the May Plenum held at Bombay, of the All-India Congress Committee, the official leadership of the Congress seemed for a moment to bend its head before the storm of protest of the rank and file over the Madras "betrayal," only immediately afterwards to retrieve its position by passing a resolution in the Working Committee, completely exonerating the Madras Congressists and giving their action the official approval of the Congress. The Working Committee proceeded further to modify the Gauhati programme to suit the Madras experience.

In the Central Legislative Assembly at Delhi, the Congress Party, disposing of a substantial voting strength of 40 in a membership of 145, did not purposely press the "National Demand"—as was implied by the Gauhati programme and as was indeed the prac-

tice with the defunct Swaraj Party. This was for two reasons. In the first place, on account of the actual state of conflict between the Hindu and the Moslem, there was no agreement possible for the "National Demand." In the second place, it was intended to leave the door open for informal negotiations with the imperial government in view of the Royal Commission for the revision of the Constitution. The imperial government on its side has been watching with "relief" and "joy" the progressive detachment of the Congress from the masses. It has, however, demanded through the mouth of Lord Birkenhead still less "intransigence" and more consistent signs of "co-operation" before the demand for an extension of Swaraj in the direction of Dominion Status could be entertained.

The political significance of the May Plenum of the A.I.C.C. lay in the barely-concealed readiness of the Right leadership of the Congress to fall into line with the requisitions of the imperial government. The resolutions voted at the Bombay meeting were indeed meant to be a gesture of rapprochement such as Lord Birkenhead had been insisting upon.

The principal resolution was widely advertised as having solved the problem of the chronic antagonism between the Hindu and the Moslem which expresses itself in a series of bloody riots throughout India. What the resolution actually occupied itself with was "the future scheme of constitution"; in other words, the Royal Commission on Constitutional Reform. The resolution made certain concessions to the reactionary Moslem bourgeoisie in the matter of franchise and representation, with a view to secure their support for the proposals of constitutional revision which the Congress intends to put forward as "the national demand." In the very next resolution, the A.I.C.C. called upon its working committee "to frame a Swaraj constitution for India . . . with a view to its adoption to the Congress at its next session" (in December, 1927).

The intention is clear in spite of the dementi of the Congress leaders—a dementi which they were forced to make in face of the indignation of the Left rank and file.

Indian Bourgeoisie and British Imperialism

The policy of compromise with imperialism which the Indian bourgeoisie is following was concretely illustrated in the activities of its political parties in the legislatures. If the task of British imperialism in the present period has been to consolidate its financial control over the whole economy of India, it has indeed succeeded very well with the active help and the connivance of the various bourgeois parties. The Finance Bill of the Government of India was passed. In return for protection for the Indian steel industry, the principle of "imperial preference" was accepted by the Legislative Assembly. On the question of protection of the Indian textile industry, after a great deal of agitation and threats on both sides, a compromise has recently been reached. The question of the Federal Reserve Bank for India is being still discussed between the representatives of the imperial government and those of Indian capital, Indian representation on the directorate of the Bank remaining as the only contentious point.

A reformist bourgeoisie seeking an alliance with

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imperialism on the basis of class interest is bound to play an objectively counter-revolutionary role in the development of the national revolutionary struggle under the stress of the action of the exploited masses. It is evident that the upper strata of the bourgeoisie are prepared to play such a role. Already they closely identify themselves with the imperial government in the name of "law and order" whenever the industrial action of the proletariat and the discontent of the peasantry threaten their vested interest. But more recent evidences show that the Indian bourgeoisie, in logical development of its class affiliation, may not confine its counter-revolutionary role within India; it may extend its alliance with imperialist reaction on an international scale.

The occasion for an anticipatory expression of this tendency is furnished by the latest phase of the international situation. The Conservative Government in England is taking a leading part in preparing war against the U.S.S.R. on an international scale. The many-millioned rank and file of the national movement in India would unmistakably be on the side of the U.S.S.R., when the Anglo-Soviet conflict breaks out as military intervention. Their sense of solidarity with the U.S.S.R. is at once a provocation and an embarrassment for the war policy of British imperialism. But, by the side of this, we have a not inconsiderable section of the Indian bourgeoisie which has with ominous and instinctive haste seized upon the occasion of the British pre-occupation of war against the U.S.S.R. for a further development of its bargaining policy with British imperialism.

In the issue for July 7, 1927 of "The People" (of Lahore) the organ of the reactionary bourgeoisie in North India and edited by Lajpat Rai, a well-known Nationalist leader, we read:

"If Afghanistan makes a common cause with Russia in a conflict against Britain, it will not be easy for the British to cope with the situation The best way to defend India is to arm the people of India to undertake the work of national defence. Will the British authorities change their military and administrative policy towards India in such a way, that the people may genuinely feel that it would be to their advantage to make a common cause with Great Britain in case of an Anglo-Russian conflict on the Indian frontier?"

The underlying train of thought in the foregoing quotation is not an accidental outburst confined to one journal. It is more elaborately developed in a long article entitled "Anglo-Russian Contest—Where does India Stand?" published in "Forward" of Calcutta (1-7-27), one of the official organs of the Congress. The writer of the article, a widely-read Indian journalist examines the British "bid for German and Japanese support" for war against the U.S.S.R., and comes to the following conclusion:

"It is very doubtful that a Russo-British conflict can be averted in the future; and in that crisis, Britain will have to depend upon India for the very existence of the Empire. British statesmen may well analyse for themselves, if it would be to the best interest of India to sacrifice her

man-power, economic interests just to serve Great Britain. It may be well for the Indian statesmen to enquire from British statesmen if the latter are willing to pay the price of Indian support in international politics. The least consideration that any self-respecting Indian statesmen can demand is that the humiliating conclusion of the last Imperial Conference, in which India has been placed inferior to all the so-called White dominions, be wiped out by immediate granting of full dominion status to India. Are the Indian statesmen aware of the potentiality of securing this concession, if they are united enough to make an effective demand, through vigorous participation in world politics?"

"Forward" itself, in its earlier comments on the Anglo-Soviet conflict, did not seem to be aware of this aspect of the question, condemned the British policy of war and hailed the U.S.S.R. as the hope of the oppressed peoples of the East. Now, however, it strikes another tune, evidently inspired by the writer of the quoted article. In its editorial comments, in its issues of the 5th and 9th July, 1927, it says:

"A fraudulent constitution is certainly not best calculated to inspire that patriotism in Indian hearts so essential for making them feel that attack by Russia or any other Power on the British Empire in India is an attack on their own Motherland.

"The best solution of the Russian problem does not lie in the policy of 'offensive forward spring' No wonder, the problem of the defence of India is becoming more and more complicated. As long as the problem of defence of India is, in its last analysis, found to be synonymous only with the safeguarding of the commercial interests of Britain in India and the perpetuation of the bureaucratic system of rule, the mercenary troops will be the only pillar of the British Empire."

"Left" Nationalism of the Petty Bourgeoisie and Intelligentsia

As against this sinister tendency of the bourgeoisie,—"born and brought up in the lap of British imperialism"—to rush headlong to counter-revolution, we have, within the official national movement, the lower middle class, the petty bourgeoisie, and the intelligentsia who are seeing their economic situation worsening in the wake of the Congress policy of more and more open compromise with British capitalist interests. They form the vast majority of the rank and file of the Congress. Their discontent with the Congress leadership has driven them to form a Left wing. Within the Congress they are the partisans of the policy of "complete independence," and consequently the policy of war à outrance against British imperialism. Their evolution as a political force is recent. But they have been able already on several occasions to arrest a too rapid overwhelming of the Congress by the representatives of the bourgeois interests. At the time of the Gauhati Congress, they achieved a political expression, denied to them on the Congress platform, by assembling in a "Political Sufferers' Conference" where they put before the country a clearer formulation of the revolutionary

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character of the national struggle. In the Provincial Congress organisations, their influence is considerable. During the last months at the provincial conferences of congress local committees, namely, at Kerala and East Godavari in the province of Madras, they have repeated their demand for "complete independence," and for the old Gandhist formula of "civil disobedience." In Bengal they have been particularly strong, but their organisation has been greatly weakened since 1924 by the operation of the "Bengal Ordinance Act" under which the most prominent of the leaders to the number of about 140 are in prison in conditions of indescribable brutality.

The discontent of the Left wing has found a more concrete and a characteristic expression in the "republican movement" at Nagpur in the central provinces. Starting with the slogan of "Release the Bengal Prisoners," the City Congress Committee of Nagpur revived the method of 1920-21 in offering "civil disobedience" to the local authorities of the imperial government. The particular law which they "disobeyed" was characteristically chosen. It was the "Arms Act" under which the carrying of arms by Indians is prohibited. A considerable number of volunteers would march through the streets of Nagpur carrying swords and defying the police to arrest them. A "republican army" was finally formed with the slogan of freeing India from British control. The movement had begun to receive a large amount of mass support and to spread to other centres, when the government authorities arrested the leaders and momentarily succeeded in putting a stop to it. At the May Plenum of the A.I.C.C., the Left wing proposed a resolution committing the Congress to the support of the Nagpur republicans. The resolution was shelved and the A.I.C.C. very hastily washed its hands of the Nagpur affair by appointing a commission of enquiry.

The Nagpur revolt is a symptom that the Left wing is groping for a way out of the impasse in which the national movement has been brought by the bourgeois leadership. At the same time, the Nagpur revolt and other political essays of the Left wing show the defects of its mentality and organisation. On the one hand it is not yet free from the domination of the social-reactionary Gandhist ideology, on the other hand it carries with it the anarchical tradition of the terrorist past of some of its elements. The social classes comprising the Left wing are destined yet to play a considerable revolutionary role. But in its capacity for organisation and concerted political action, the Left wing has grievously failed. It has failed in some cases to rise above the feudal issues of the Hindu-Moslem religious conflict. The causes to which this failure is due can be eliminated by a closer contact with the masses and a more thorough and more intimate identification with the class interests of the industrial proletariat and the oppressed peasantry.

Industrial Proletariat and Peasantry

The most interesting fact of the present situation is that this approach to the masses is at long last taking place.

The 2½ million of industrial workers in India are not all organised in trade unions. The existing trade

unions cannot represent more than one-fourth of this number. The All-Indian Trade Union Congress which unites about 54 trade unions does not thus speak for all the organised workers. Moreover, the A.I.T.U.C. is under the leadership of the reformist bourgeoisie, as also most of the bigger unions. Furthermore, both the Indian capitalists and the British Government meet the industrial action of the organised workers with severe and bloody repression. In spite of these characteristic handicaps, the trade union movement in India registers continued progress, and the organised workers show a capacity for initiative far in advance of their backward condition, but quite in keeping with the intense degree of exploitation to which they are increasingly subjected. Small strikes are a permanent feature of the industrial life of the country. Larger strikes in the big industrial centres have been numerous. In the beginning of last year the strike of railwaymen on the Bengal-Nagpur railway brought out 20,000 men. The strike was declared at the initiative of the workers and was repressed by the armed forces of the British Government and the interested intervention of the bourgeoisie. The strike did not end to the satisfaction of the workers. But they showed, as usual in Indian strikes, great solidarity, endurance and courage. Most remarkable of all, at the end of the strike they took steps to remove from the trade union executive committee the leaders who had been lukewarm and betrayed their interests. In the more recent case of the strike of the oil workers in Madras, there was better organisation, and by the threat of a general strike in the city of Madras, the workers gained a complete victory.

These strikes and the still larger strikes during the last two or three years have given a practical training in class struggle to the young proletariat of India. That the industrial workers of India are already a big political factor is recognised by the Indian bourgeoisie, the British Government and even by the Second International, which latter has been trying, for some time past to form a Labour Party in India. The Indian capitalist class is genuinely alarmed at the growth of the Labour movement; it would have none of these "Western quarrels between capital and labour in our country." The nationalist press shows its repeated anxiety "to avoid a class struggle in this country." The President of the National Congress proclaims:

"There is perfect identity of feeling and interest between the national movement and labour. None need fear that in India the legitimate interests of labour will be sacrificed to capitalist interests; or that the Congress can neither reconcile them nor be just to both."

The peasant question is particularly acute in the "Native States," the territory comprising one-third of India under the direct rule of the feudal class. In some of these "States," agrarian discontent is chronic, and has to be repeatedly put down by armed forces. In British India a great part of the Hindu-Moslem riots are peasant risings against landlords and usurers. There is also sporadic but organised attempts of the peasants at non-payment of taxes.

A beginning has been made in the political organisation of these vast masses of peasants and industrial workers. The petty bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia are gravitating towards the exploited masses under the pressure of a community of misery. The advanced

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elements in the Left wing of the national movement are increasingly active in this direction. Out of the debris of the bourgeois-led national movement, there is arising a vast revolutionary coalition of social forces, in which the proletariat is destined to play the leading role and which can attain its objective only through the definite liquidation of imperial control.

In the three major provinces of Bengal, Bombay and Madras, and in the smaller area of Rajputana, "Workers' and Peasants' Parties" have come into existence with identical programmes. In the programme of the Bengal Party we read:

"The imperial government which is established in India is not based on the wishes of the masses of Great Britain. The unique purpose behind the maintenance of this imperialist government is to assist in the exploitation of the proletarian, peasant, and lower middle class masses of India for the benefit of the capitalist class of Great Britain. Consequently under a government maintained in the interests of the capitalist class, there can be no advancement of the proletariat, the peasantry and its lower middle class.

"The Indian National Congress, the parties included in it, and the Liberal and Independent and similar parties from time to time, no doubt, speak a word or two about the well-being of the masses. But in point of actual practice, they give no attention to the political, economic and social demands and needs of the peasants and the workers. On the contrary, the action of these parties proves that they are, as a matter of fact, the defenders of the interests of the foreign and native capitalist class. . . .

"There can be no final solution of the problem of the exploitation and subjection of the peasant, proletarian and middle class masses, unless they have in their hands full political power. The ultimate aim of the W.P.P. is to establish a Federated Republic in India, a republic in which the means of production, distribution and exchange would be in the possession of the masses and be used for social purposes. . . .

"Whereas, the only way in which the foregoing programme can be realised is the securing of complete national freedom of India from British imperialism:

"Therefore, the Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party is not disinclined to co-operate with any other Party which accepts these opinions and is willing to work for the realisation of this programme."

As a sample of the political activities already shown by these parties, it may be mentioned that an attempt was made in the name of the Bombay Workers' and Peasants' Party to change the policy of the Indian National Congress and give it the character of a revolutionary mass organisation. The attempt did not succeed for the time being. But it is significant as the first attempt of the Left wing to capture the Congress apparatus. The resolution of the Bombay Party submitted to the May Plenum of the A.I.C.C. ran:

"The present Congress activity and programme are completely divorced from the everyday life of the masses, and in consequence the bulk of the population, the disenfranchised 98 per cent. have lost all interest in and sympathy for the Congress, which has become a feeble body. The present leadership of the Congress has tied itself and the Congress machinery to a programme of work which is of benefit only to an insignificant section of the people. The big capitalists and their allies, the intellectual and professional upper classes. As a consequence, on the one hand, Congress circles are divided by personal ends, and on the other, the masses are allowed and even encouraged to express their indignation against their hard lot in the form of communal fights.

"In the interest of the vast majority of the people it is urgently necessary to free the Congress from the narrow shackles of [bourgeois] class interests, and to yoke it to the task of attaining national freedom from the imperialist bondage, as a step towards complete emancipation of the masses from exploitation and oppression."

The resolution then proposes the following changes in the programme of the National Congress:

"The aim of the Indian National Congress is the attainment of complete national independence from imperialism, and the establishment of Swaraj based upon universal adult suffrage.

"It reiterates its faith in civil disobedience, i.e., direct action, as the only effective weapon that will ultimately free the people of India from their subject position, but realises that a great general awakening will have to be brought about before this weapon of direct action can be effectively used."

More particularly a Communist Party of India has come into legal existence. We quote the following from its programme of action within the National Congress:

"Whereas, in the opinion of the Communist Party of India, it is only the dynamic energies of the toiling masses that can bring Swaraj to India, and whereas the present bourgeois leadership in the Congress has proved itself to be gradually compromising with imperialism, and as such is directly in opposition to the interests of the masses, this party calls upon all its members to enrol themselves as members of the Indian National Congress, and form a strong Left wing in all its organs for the purpose of wresting them from the present alien control.

"This Party further calls upon the Communists to co-operate with the Radical Nationalists there, to formulate a common programme on the lines of the following minimum programme laid down by this Party:

"(a) Complete National Independence, and the establishment of a democratic republic based on universal adult suffrage; (b) abolition of landlordism; (c) reduction of land, rent and indirect taxation; higher incidence of graduated income tax; (d) modernisation of agriculture with State

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aid; (e) nationalisation of public utilities, industrialisation of the country with State aid; (f) eight-hour day and minimum wage.”

Influence of “Colonial Environment”

In the increased activities of the Left wing in the national movement and the emergence of the mass parties of workers and peasants with revolutionary programmes, we certainly see the influence of the “colonial environment” at work, more particularly the Chinese revolution. But in the actual state of the national movement in India, the repercussion of the Chinese revolution could not have gone beyond a strengthening of the Left wing and the initiation of attempts at the political organisation of the workers and peasants. A

“sympathetic” revolutionary upheaval in India in response to the Chinese revolution was out of the question, so long as the national movement in India was led—as it has been led up till now—by the bourgeoisie. The upper strata of the Indian bourgeoisie stand in closer relation of class interest to imperialism than was the case in China. The Indian capitalists feel themselves strong enough not to call for the help of a revolutionary working class in their “domestic” quarrel with imperialism.

The organisational form in which the awakening revolutionary forces are to crystallise is the concrete core of the problem presented by the present situation in India. That form can only be based on the specific nature of the relations of the classes within India and the relation of the classes in India with British imperialism.