

TEN DECISIVE YEARS FOR INDIA

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II¹

LIMITS OF AN AGRARIAN REFORM

The contradictions of rural India were and continue to be so great, the weight of parasitism so heavy, the living conditions of the great peasant masses so desperate, that the urgent need for an agrarian reform simply forced itself upon the country when it became independent. It was almost unanimously recognized that action had to be taken along the following main lines: eliminate intermediaries, guarantee stability to working peasants, limit landholding, and give the land to those who were unprovided with any. And it was indeed in this direction that the attempt was in fact made to take action, thanks to all the reforms carried out or projected in the different states of the Union² and by means of typically Indian movements such as the Sampattidan and the Bhooden Movement.

The first goal that was generally specified right from the beginning was the abolition of the zemindari system. All the Indian states have long since voted laws to this effect³.

But the parasitic classes that were directly threatened did not grow discouraged. They resorted to all legalistic and procedural tricks, first to postpone the vote of the laws that struck at them, and then to postpone their application. And though they did not succeed in completely blocking the reform movement, they did however almost always succeed in having the legislative measures formulated in such a way that they could be got around or permitted a return to the status quo from an economico-social if not from a juridical viewpoint.

Thorner, in his already mentioned essay, makes a detailed analysis of the agrarian reform in the different states. One example is particularly significant, that of the most populous Indian state, Uttar Pradesh, where the reform had a few results (in the majority of the other states, according to Thorner, the results were pretty insignificant).

In Uttar Pradesh the law for the abolition of the zemindari system was already decided on in

1946, but the final vote of the competent assembly did not take place till 1951 (in the Bihar, the overall procedure required not less than eight years!). The time that thus went by was skillfully profited by to set up various devices. But the law itself provided the zemindari with the possibility of saving themselves. In fact a part of their land — classified in the categories of unlet sir and khudhasht, characterized by the precarious conditions of the tenants — was exempted from the reform.⁴ It is true that this exception was made for the zemindari only on condition that they kept these lands as working farmers, but the criteria for defining “working farmers” were so broad that they made it very easy for landowners to be so considered.⁵ Hence very many zemindari were able to benefit by this exemption and thus be included in a new privileged category, that of the bhumidars. The old formula disappeared only in appearance; in fact, the same persons continued to own the land, and very often that part of the land that was far-and-away the most profitable. For the great majority of the peasants there had been no real change: conditions stayed the same — rent too, with the difference that it now had to be paid to the state in the form of taxes and no longer to the former zemindari.⁶ And lastly it must be added that, to the extent that expropriations did take place, they were also amply compensated by indemnizations.

For the zones covered by the ryotwari system (in the state of Bombay, for example), the reform tended above all to ensure the stability of the tenants and to establish a “fair rent.” The effective modifications were still more modest, for the reason that, even from a formal viewpoint, the ancient hierarchy remained in place, and the law, in this case as well, was got around in various ways. The example of the Bombay region is, in this matter, very significant. One of the consequences has been quite exactly the

⁴ Before the reform law the unlet sir and khudkasht in Uttar Pradesh added up to 6 million acres, while lands of the other categories totaled a little over one million (cfr Thorner, *op cit*, p 20).

⁵ The four basic criteria concern not only manual labor properly so called, but also the use of wage-labor, the direction and control of agricultural operations, and the risk of undergoing losses. On the other hand, some measures foresee the prohibition of renting land, but not of turning it over to share-croppers (cfr Thorner, pp 20 and 22).

⁶ Cfr Thorner, pp 20 and 25.

¹ The first half of this study appeared in our Spring issue.

² According to the Indian Constitution, agrarian reform is a problem that concerns the individual states and not the Union.

³ Even the Congress Party was favorable to the reform, all the more so in that the zemindari had furnished one of the strongest supports for British domination.

opposite of what the law was attempting to bring about: the area reserved to the tenants under more advantageous conditions of stability diminished and often even the tenants were eliminated.⁷

Measures of limitation of holdings are at an even more backward stage: it is in only part of the states that legislation for this purpose has been adopted. Where the law has been proclaimed, it most often concerns holdings that might be set up in the future and does not intervene in the status quo. And when the limitation has concerned also existing holdings, the privileged class has not failed to make its usual discovery of wangles to conserve essentially its own positions. Even the law that was adopted in Kerala by the Namboodiripad government — not long before it was dissolved — contains clauses which quite obviously play into the hands of the landowners.⁸

The redistribution of land has also taken another form quite peculiar to this country. One of Gandhi's disciples, Vinoba Bhave, in 1951 launched a movement whose goal was to get the big landowners to make a gift of part of their lands to the landless peasants. According to this reformer's calculations, if every landowner had given, on the average, one sixth of what he possessed, all the disinherited would have been able to have, on the average, a property of one acre. The authorities decided to back up this movement which had its obvious inspiration in ideas that were in a certain sense traditional for the Indian bourgeoisie.

It is useless to insist on the obvious limits of a movement of a humanitarian nature which counts on the "generosity" of the owning classes rather than on the will to struggle of the disinherited.⁹ Suffice it to say that in June 1958 the acres "given away" did not reach four and a half million, half of them, incidentally, in a single state (where Vinoba had developed his personal activity). In many cases, what is more, it was a matter of "well-arranged charity": the philanthropists preferred to get rid of rocky or practically untillable land. In addition, at the moment of the distribution of these lands, grave difficulties arose: to such a degree that in June

1958 only 782,000 acres had been distributed.¹⁰

What is called the Community Development Programme, officially launched in 1952, did not even have a modification of the structure of the rural regions as its goal, which was rather to create certain substructures and render possible more decent living conditions in the countryside. In view of the fact that the plans were absolutely insufficient, the results even on this level have been pretty meagre. Even the good will of certain government agents collapsed when faced with the mass resistance of a peasant society whose most reactionary elements can still today exert a crushing control.

Hence what is ancient — and even archaic — continues to block the path to renovation in the rural regions of India. And the basic structures have at the most only been shaken a little, without having been really touched in what is essential. It is true that the first cut has certainly been made into the remains of pre-capitalism and feudalism, and that the position of the big absentee landowners has certainly been weakened. But the great mass of the peasants has not derived any advantage therefrom and still remains in the same position of instability and dependence, in the same situation of finding it impossible to bring about the elementary improvements without which a perceptible increase in production cannot be obtained.

In reality the genuine aim of the reform has been to create a solid stratum of enterprise landowners of the capitalist type or a capitalist tendency, and rich peasants. That was a requirement of the capitalist development, however slow, of a society like Indian society. It was and still is a political requirement for the ruling class, to the degree that the crystallization of a stratum of this type might be able to fulfil a function of relative stabilization, avoiding the risks connected with the permanence of forms that were *historically outlived* and incapable of ensuring the slightest improvement in the masses' living conditions.¹¹ But this goal has been reached only partially because of the weight that the parasitic landowners continue to have in

¹⁰ Cfr *India 1959*, p 278, and *The Agrarian Prospect in India*, pp 74-75. The Gramdam is a movement similar to the Bhoodan, and consists of donating entire villages. The Sampattidan, on the contrary, consists of donations in money or of other types.

¹¹ On the subject of this evaluation, two tendencies in the workers' movement are in agreement even though they have fundamental divergences about other questions — those represented by the Indian Communist Party and by the Revolutionary Workers' Party of India, very close to the Fourth International (cfr the already mentioned books, *Some Aspects of the Agrarian Question* and *The Programme of the R W P I*). The evaluations of a specialist like Thorner (cfr op cit) are similar.

⁷ In Bombay this reduction seems to have been 50%, and even more in the Hyderabad. In the state of Andhra, the majority of the tenants seem to have been expelled (cfr *Some Aspects of the Agrarian Question*, 1958, pp 67-67).

⁸ Cfr *Agrarian Relations Bill, 1959*. The limit of holdings is set between 15 and 25 acres according to the case.

⁹ A criticism from a Marxist viewpoint may be found in the pamphlet of C G Shah, *Sampattidan and the Bhoodan Movement*, 1955. It is fundamentally correct, but a little schematic.

Indian society and because of the links that exist between them and the capitalist sectors. The results of this state of affairs on the strictly productive level have already been pointed out. A new experimental confirmation has thus been obtained of the lesson that could have been derived for other countries or other continents: in a backward country, in the historical phase through which we are now passing, the bourgeoisie is incapable of successfully carrying through an agrarian reform that theoretically would not go outside bourgeois-democratic limits. Experiences like those of Russia, China, and Jugoslavia have already demonstrated what explosive potentialities arise from this chronic incapacity. There is no reason to doubt that this same law may be equally valid for India.

NEHRU'S "REFORMISM" AND BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY

We have been speaking of the Indian ruling class as of a class that is indisputably bourgeois capitalist. Indeed, it does not seem to us necessary to prove this, for the demonstration is to be found in the overall history of India for many decades down to our day. We are not overlooking certain airy interpretations of which we spoke at the beginning of this article. But let us say frankly that prattlings about an India that is entering the "socialist world" or that is heading along its own road toward socialism under the direction of its present leadership, seem to us so absurd that it is rather up to those who engage in them to furnish the proofs therefor. We are quite willing to run the risk of being treated as "schematists," but we are convinced that nobody — however skilful he may be in juggling — can succeed in demonstrating that India no longer has a capitalist leadership or that with such a leadership it can be headed toward socialism.

It nevertheless remains to explain why Nehru's India has followed so special a course, which led it to start five-year plans, to sketch out an agrarian reform, to pursue a neutralist policy, and to speak of "socialist models." This task is not in reality very difficult if the slightest thought is given to a few givens in the Indian situation.

India reached political independence by what may be called, if one insists, "peaceful paths," especially because Great Britain was convinced that its economic interests could be safeguarded and that in that country there had been formed a native bourgeoisie sufficiently strong to prevent independence's being immediately followed by a social revolution. The British calculations turned out not to be false, but the Indian bourgeoisie has had to use every whit of its trickery to

maintain an equilibrium which in any cause could not be anything but precarious.

This dominant class, as has been said in passing, was and still is relatively strong for a colonial or semi-colonial country. If we are not mistaken, there exists no other example of a country of this same type. And the Gandhi movement and the Congress Party were able to create a whole leading stratum which, though quite weak compared to the capitalist countries, is nevertheless relatively important in the given situation. It is hardly necessary to say that the relative industrial development created the basic conditions; the contacts with European culture, the unifying function of Great Britain, etc, did the rest. It would be well, no doubt, to recall — even if it is a detail — that there exist in India newspapers of a higher level than in certain countries of Western Europe. The maturity of a dominant class is to be judged also by the organs that it knows how to produce, the forms that it adopts for the education and information of its cadres.

At the moment when the country reached independence, the Congress Party — the political expression of the ruling class — enjoyed very broad support by the masses. For these masses independence meant not only a formal political transformation but also a transformation of an economic and social nature. Neither Nehru nor his collaborators could ignore this element, all the more so in that, at the moment that Great Britain was giving up India, there was developing in China a mighty revolution which was to exert an ever greater influence on all the Asiatic masses.

The path for Nehru's India, therefore, could not be that of Chiang Kai-Shek: it had to be that of a prudent "reformism," even if this was to be found more in projects than in accomplishments. And in view of the still fresh memories of the anti-imperialist struggle, the very geographic position of the country, and its well-considered economic interests,¹² a neutralist foreign policy could only seem far-and-away preferable to an Atlantic policy. It is in fact thanks to all these positions — which the Soviet leaders have not failed to underwrite — that Nehru's party and even more Nehru personally continue to be supported by a broad popular base.

That is, in substance, the Indian "path", to which speeches about the "socialist model" have provided a propaganda accompaniment which, it was rightly supposed, would be palatable to

¹² Its neutralist policy has enabled India to profit by the economic aid of both the capitalist states and the USSR. In this aspect, India has found itself in a favorable situation, much better than that of China.

the masses. Some persons perhaps had illusions about this; others perhaps worried. Needless, for, as a top Indian leader specified in effect to a distinguished meeting of capitalists: "It is a question of an ethical aspiration which up to now has had no specific content."¹³ It will not have any more in the future, either.

It would be difficult to deny the fact that the most immediate economic and social problems have not been solved, and that the gap between India and the more developed capitalist countries has only grown greater. Furthermore, the parallel with China has now become so plain that it is a commonplace. Doubts may be entertained about the way in which the Chinese manipulate statistics. But nobody questions the fact that China has recorded a qualitative difference in its favor.

Nevertheless, if it is desired to count in India's favor its political structure, i.e., its parliamentary democracy, it is true that certain formal democratic rights — which can be appreciated especially, if not exclusively, by the ruling classes — still exist in the Indian Union, where it is possible to organize parties and trade unions, arrange mass meetings and conferences, publish newspapers and magazines, and where the deputies are chosen in *free* elections. But the conditions of the country — such as they have been determined by its historical evolution and rendered specific in the period of independence — are such that the play of parliamentary institutions and of democratic guarantees attached thereto turn inevitably in favor of the dominant, and even the most reactionary, strata. One of the greatest specialists in Indian problems recently wrote:

From the fact that the great majority of deputies is composed of big landowners, usurers, or their representatives, it follows that the parliamentary system is an obstacle to agrarian reform. [Tibor Mende: retranslated from French].

The genuine class nature of Nehrus's democracy could hardly be defined with greater synthesis and efficiency. And we shall not consider those Indian peasants wrong who are convinced that, in spite of all bureaucratic and authoritarian deformations, the Chinese communes represent a more effective form of democracy.

On the other hand, it is all too often agreeable to overestimate one aspect of political conditions in India. Though the aforementioned relative guarantees exist, repression is, on the contrary, almost always rapid and pitiless whenever mass movements, even of a trade-union nature, loom up. It is a matter not only of arrests carried

out on a wide scale, but also of the frequent use of arms with fatal results. During last September's food demonstrations in Calcutta, the dead were counted in the hundreds, the wounded in the thousands, the arrests in multiple thousands. The city had all the appearance of a zone occupied by an enemy army.¹⁴

But in any case the most serious problem remains that of the prospects for development. Will it be possible for India to keep its present structures much longer, to continue to be a parliamentary democracy, and, are we to observe, even by the intermediary of the necessary evolutions, a passing over to socialism by the "democratic" and "peaceful" path?

Some indications in the recent past — and we allude not only to certain very harsh repressions and to the arbitrary action carried out in Kerala, but also to certain manifestations of an internal crisis in the dominant class — might constitute premonitory signs — even though still far off — of a new course. Everything will depend on the evolution of the situation, first of all the economic situation, in these next years, and, naturally, of the dynamic evolution of the mass movement. If the economic stagnation were still to continue, and if certain elementary requirements of the masses were not to be satisfied, the margin still at the disposal of Nehru and the Congress Party might be narrowed down, and in this hypothesis the Indian bourgeoisie could hardly afford the luxury of parliamentary democracy. The Kerala experience, for that matter, has demonstrated what reply it makes when the play of democratic forces tends, even partially, to turn against itself.

Anticipations have already been made about what the Third Five-Year Plan ought to be, and the projects seem ambitious.¹⁵ Unquestionably the future of India depends to a great extent on what it will be possible to accomplish during the last years of the plan now in process and the five following years. The prognosis, on the basis of the experience visualized, ought to be pessimist. But it is not possible to set aside the hypothesis of a more favorable, or less unfavorable, evolution — one that in any case may be able to postpone certain deadlines in the case that, in a prolonged climate of *détente*, the United States contributes aid of a very great scope.¹⁶

¹⁴ The author was an eyewitness of these events.

¹⁵ A criticism in this sense was made by R K Dutt in *New Age*, monthly review of the Indian C P (August 1959).

¹⁶ In the aforementioned article R K Dutt claims that it will be "not only possible but even easy for America to finance the plan as a whole," a plan which should reach 10,000 crores of rupees \$20,000 million, or £714,285,000. If it is considered that the amount of the three debit chapters of the US balance of payments in 1959 reached \$7,500 million, this claim certainly seems exaggerated.

¹³ Cfr *The Japan Times*, 18 October 1959 (in *Far East Economic Problems*).

It is probable that Nehru will try to manoeuvre in this direction, and, in any case, we have in these last months witnessed a slant of his policy in a more "pro-Western" direction.

TOWARD DECISIVE DEADLINES

It is not possible to tackle here the problem, though it is a fundamental one, of the mass movement in India and its most recent developments. It will suffice to indicate that very important obstacles stand in the way of the development of its immense potential power, obstacles which have constituted and still continue to constitute a delaying factor. The geographic extent of the country, the manifold linguistic, religious, and other sorts of differences, the diversity of historical experiences even in recent periods — all these render the effective and efficacious unification of the movement on a national scale extremely difficult. Thus the forces of even the most important parties, including the Communist Party, are very unevenly distributed, while local parties and organizations flourish, strong in one region or state and practically unheard of in the others. In the last analysis, this state of affairs produces one of the most important weaknesses of the movement: the inadequacy of the peasant organizations. And, what is stranger, is just among the rural laborers that this lack is the most pronounced.¹⁷

Aside from the still considerable influence exerted by the Congress Party (the prestige enjoyed by Nehru is a determinant factor), no workers' organization has succeeded, up till now, in exerting a decisive influence on the national scale upon the majority of the mass movement. We have here a characteristic element that differentiates India from, for example, Indonesia.

During a certain period immediately after independence, the hypothesis could be put forward that, because of a whole series of factors, the mass movement might be channeled in the Socialist Party. But this was not verified, and the Socialist Party — which went through different splits and now has to face the competition of other similar parties, sometimes strong on the regional scale — has maintained a relatively limited influence which is far oftener exerted in petty-bourgeois than in worker or peasant circles. This is to a large degree the result of its conservative policy which led it under certain circumstances to attack Nehru from the right. The Communist Party is unquestionably strong-

er, even though more than half of its 27 deputies¹⁸ were elected from only two states, which clearly shows the unevenness of its development. This year feverish discussions, on the occasion of the Kerala and Calcutta events, have opened up about its strength and its future possibilities. In Calcutta, the food movement was attributed to its initiative, though this movement in reality had a much broader leadership and many characteristics of spontaneity stood out in it.¹⁹ In Kerala, which is, however, one of the smallest states in the Union, Communist influence is predominant. Some persons suppose that in the last analysis the repression may strengthen that influence, while others — in leftist circles — claim that the timid policy of Nambudiripad and the non-fulfillment of certain promises have had a negative effect on the popular base and objectively helped the reactionary mobilization.²⁰ It is hard to form a well-defined opinion on the point. But though almost nobody thinks that the C P will have a vigorous development within a short time, very many are nevertheless convinced that it is following a rising curve. What is essential plainly depends on the positions that its leadership will advocate, especially on the fundamental problems.²¹

In any case the situation inside the mass movement is far from being crystalized, and in the process of development there will be new polarizations and new groupings. It is only in this later stage that the Indian revolution will be able to say that it has found its own leadership.

If there are taken into consideration all the factors that are operative and are destined to be accentuated, it is possible in fact to speak of an Indian revolution in the most specific sense. Explosive elements of every sort and in gigantic proportions are present in this subcontinent of 400 million inhabitants. The roads of neo-capitalism, of gradual reform, of an attenuation

¹⁸ The Socialist Party has 20 deputies, the Congress Party 366.

¹⁹ The agitation was led by a committee formed by some ten parties of the left, many of them calling themselves Marxist. It is unquestionable, however, that the C P was the strongest element in this committee; still, it would not alone have been able to determine the situation that was created.

²⁰ It has been particularly emphasized that, despite its formal promises, the Nambudiripad government mobilized the police for anti-worker repressions. In July 1958 at Quilon there were workers killed.

²¹ The line of the Indian C P in this post-war period has undergone different oscillations, but it is now aimed toward a sort of critical support for Nehru. This support has been ensured, thanks to obvious concessions to the wave of nationalism, even on the occasion of the border incidents with China. The Indian C P has also emphasized the theses of the XXth Congress about the democratic and parliamentary path to socialism.

¹⁷ Agrarian reform has also been limited because there are not important mass movements in the rural regions. In the state of Andhra, where a strong peasant organization exists, the reform was much more thorough and effective than elsewhere.

of economic imbalances and social contrasts, are, more than ever, closed. And the immediate prospects for the Indian masses in the existing framework continue to be prospects of destitution and domination.

But the imbalances and contradictions, though they can be maintained for certain periods, are operating in the direction of a break in certain other periods. If account is taken of the dramatic problems raised — within a not very distant period, as we have seen — by the stagnation in agriculture; if it is taken into consideration that the fears and prejudices on which the dominant classes have based their power are, in spite of everything, being inexorably worn away; if it is not forgotten that the Indian masses form part of a colonial world in continual ebullition, and that especially the example of China exerts a

more and more formidable attraction upon them; if the fact is not neglected that the state (in the broadest sense of the word) and “civil society” have in capitalist and bourgeois India roots that are less deep than in the advanced capitalist countries — then it appears legitimate to be convinced that certain historical deadlines are no longer so far away. And the social transformations which may be produced in India during 1960 and which it is absolutely ridiculous to believe can develop in a more or less “democratic” or “constitutional” framework without a break-up of all existing structures, will be destined to leave in the history of our century a mark comparable to those already left by the two revolutions of Russia and China.

1-3 January 1960