THE INDIAN REVOLT OF 1857

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[On the centenary of the 'Indian Mutiny' we print part of a longer study by the late W. S. Adams, which will appear in full in a symposium now under preparation for publication in India later this year.—ED., L.M.]

THE picture of the Indian revolt of 1857 which has been repeatedly impressed on generations of British school children is of the British people united in horror at the 'atrocities' committed by ignorant and superstitious Indians on British men and women, who were dutifully carrying the burden of Empire in the distant sub-continent. Very little research seems to have been done to determine from contemporary sources the actual reaction of the people of Britain: the omission is itself a fact of some historical significance. But it is becoming clear that the picture of British opinion, hitherto widely accepted, does not correspond with the facts.

The East India Company had few friends left. 'We all know,' wrote Cobden, 'the motive which took the East India Company to Asia—monopoly, not merely towards foreigners, but against the rest of their own countrymen'. He denied that there was any advantage in maintaining the company 'which has shown itself capable of crimes, which would revolt any savage tribe of whom we read in Dr. Livingstone's narrative and which had never seen a Christian or European till he penetrated among them'. The Indian Reform Society, which served as a forum for people of differing views but was mainly the expression of those Manchester manufacturers who wished to build in India an alternative cotton supply to that from the United States, called for a curtailment of the Company's powers, and for reforms both in the treatment of the natives and in their taxation. The *Daily Telegraph* attacked the Company as being the abandonment of Government to 'a single class'; and Lord Palmerston, according to the Greville Diary, showed himself 'very flippant and offhand in his views of Indian affairs and had jumped to the conclusion that the Company must be extinguished'.

As to the reported atrocities committed by the rebels in the revolt, there were varying opinions in the ranks of the bourgeoisie.

Richard Cobden, the Radical, accepted the atrocity stories but wrote to John Bright: 'It is clear that they (the Indians) cannot have been inspired with either love or respect by what they have

seen of the English . . . I find the common epithet applied to our fellow subjects in Hindostan is *nigger*. . . . To read the letters of our officers at the commencement of the outbreak it seemed as if every subaltern had the power to hang or shoot as many natives as he pleased and they spoke of the work of blood with as much levity as if they were hunting wild animals'. Cobden wrote privately: 'The religious people who now tell us that we must hold India to convert it, ought, I think, to be convinced by what has passed that sending redcoats to Christianise a people is not the most likely way to insure the blessing of God on our missionary efforts'.

John Bright, seeking re-election to Parliament at a by-election at Birmingham declared: 'The success of the Indian revolt would lead to anarchy in India and I conceive that it is a mercy to India to suppress it.'

The Christian Socialists passed through a severe personal crisis because of the revolt. Charles Kingsley wrote to F. D. Maurice that his faith had been shaken by the Indian massacres. . . . 'The moral problems they involve make me half-wild. . . . What does it all mean? Christ is King nevertheless.' What troubled Kingsley and Maurice was how God could have allowed his 'Christian' people to be massacred by 'heathens'. In the *Five Sermons* Maurice preached on *The Indian Crisis,* he expressed the view that 'we must struggle to keep that empire' of India. Kingsley recovered from his panic but seems to have remained publicly silent, and J. M. Ludlow, Maurice's friend, was soon writing that 'with a happy and prosperous India . . . with Saxon thews and sinews in the West and faithful Mussulman or Sikh . . . in the East, ready to be flung over the Indian ocean . . . England may safely bid defiance to the world'. Christian socialism was coming to terms with imperialism.

Disraeli suspected (but he kept his suspicions for the private ear of Lady Londonderry) that 'many of the details of the atrocities which have so outraged the sensibility of the country are manufactured'. *The Times* editorially, was among the foremost of those papers which called for 'a terrible example . . . an example which shall be spoken of in the villages of British India for generations to come'. The Radical *Newcastle Chronicle*, now reflecting the growing imperialist fervour of its proprietor, Joseph Cowan, spoke of 'this magnificent dependency of the British Crown' and criticised Canning's 'clemency', saying: 'It is no time for mercy now; our vengeance should be sharp and bloody, and of such a nature as to make our Indian subjects tremble in future at the name of Delhi . . .

(they should be) exterminated as if they were so many wild beasts'. The *Nonconformist* agreed that 'stern work will have to be done before order is restored and the supremacy of law re-established in India', but salved its conscience by adding: 'But let what *must* be done be done in a Christian spirit and not in the rage of maddened passions'.

There was great relief that the revolt had not coincided with the Crimean War or the operations in Persia, 'If it was to come,' remarked *The Times*, 'this revolt could not have occurred at a better time', and it declared that 'the only question is who shall govern them (the Indians) for they will never be able to govern themselves'. Lord Shaftesbury commented also on 'the favourable time at which the mutiny broke out' and concluded that 'the finger of God has been working. All these things proved that we are yet reserved as a nation to advance the civilisation of those millions of the human race and to be agents in the promulgation of the Gospel of His Blessed Son'.

The *Daily Telegraph* said: 'The suggestions of timidity and of morbid sentimentality never creep into the councils of an empire unless in the period of decay; such a period we affirm has not yet arrived.'

The novelist Thackeray, whose family fortune, lost by him at the gaming tables, had come from India, made the suppression of the revolt a prominent part of his programme as he tried unsuccessfully to persuade the electors of Oxford to return him to Parliament.

It is, therefore, clear that even among the bourgeoisie the reaction took various forms. What of the British working class?

Reynolds Newspaper, representing a non-socialist working-class standpoint, at once expressed sympathy with the rebels. On July 5, 1857, it wrote of 'the commencement of that tremendous retribution which, if there be justice in the world, the gigantic and unparalleled crimes of the British Government and East India Company are certain to evoke. . . .' It declared that 'while deploring the excesses in which the revolted regiments have indulged, our sympathies as they always have been are with the weak against the strong—with the oppressed struggling with their tyrants—with the tortured plundered, enslaved and insulted natives of India, in striving to free themselves of the iron yoke of their cruel, remorseless, rapacious and hypocritical masters. . . . *Our* sympathies are with the insurrectionists, with the mutinous scoundrels whom *The Times* and its colleagues wish to make an example of, by shooting, hanging and

gibboting'. When the 'atrocities' were blazoned abroad, *Reynolds* remarked: 'We at home only hear one side of the question . . . the provocation has been great.' It linked events in India with the extinction of liberty at home.

But three months later, in October, *Reynolds* was beginning to succumb to the infection of imperialism. It was concerned with retaining India by reforming British management. 'India will never be quieted and safe in our hands, unless we alter our policy of rapine, annexation and cruelty—and by letting the natives have a guarantee of mercy and justice in the future, disarm the frenzy of their despair and the resentment of the present. India may be a vast field for British enterprise and trade—if retained by England and the native population—and therefore it behoves the British people to see that no vile mismanagement and aristocratic guilt lose the last opportunity we have of retaining the golden garden of the east.'

Ernest Jones, the Chartist, had long been interested in India. He had written a series of neswpaper articles in 1853, and while in prison in 1851 had composed a long poem *The Revolt of Hindostan* or *The New World*, which was reissued when the Revolt occurred. In its preface Jones makes his celebrated amendment to the Imperial slogan: 'The British Empire on which the sun never sets.' 'On its colonies,' he wrote, 'the sun never sets, but the blood never dries'.

Jones was now almost alone in carrying on the militant tradition of the Chartists. Soon he would himself give up the struggle and make his peace with the bourgeoisie. His last fight—for the people of India—was a magnificent climax to his revolutionary career. On July 4, 1857, Jones opened his campaign. 'A policy of justice and conciliation might have long postponed the final rising of the men of Hindostan,' he declared, and he warned: 'You working men of England will be called on to bleed and pay for the maintenance of one of the most iniquitous usurpations that ever disgraced the annals of humanity. Englishmen! The Hindhus are now fighting for all most sacred to men. The cause of the Poles, the Hungarians, the Italians, the Irish, was not more just and holy . . . you men of England will be called on to spend your blood and treasure in crushing one of the noblest movements the world has ever known. . . . Fellow countrymen! you have something better to do than helping to crush the liberties of others—that is, to struggle for your own.'

On August 1, Jones wrote that 'The revolt turns out to be, as we

assured our readers from the commencement, not a military mutiny but a national insurrection,' and he wrote hopefully that it appeared to show signs of careful preparation. 'Is this merely "a war with a monarch" such as we have had many of? Far from it, this is a war with people and one embracing greater numbers than any we have ever yet had warlike arbitration with in India.' He covered himself against these sanguine views by warning that 'the insurgents may quarrel among each other; they may display unexpected imbecility of conduct. . . . Of one thing we are certain—that whether this insurrection be suppressed or not, it is the precursor to our loss of India. . . . Our advice is . . . recognise independence of the Indian races. . . . One hundred years (ago) . . . a foreign tribe, the pedlars of the earth, the merchant-robbers of Leadenhall Street stole on a false pretence into the heart of this mighty galaxy of empires and robbed it of its jewel—independence. . . . Within that reign of 100 years a millennium of guilt has been compressed'. He admitted that atrocities might have been committed by the rebels, but emphasised the provocation and recalled British military slaughters during the Peninsular War. 'Did *The Times* inveigh then? No, not with a single word!'

On September 5 *People's Paper* repeated that the Revolt was 'one of the most just, noble and necessary ever attempted in the history of the world. . . . The wonder is, not that one hundred and seventy million of people should now rise in part—the wonder is that they should ever have submitted at all. They would not, had they not been betrayed by their own princes, who sold each other to the alien. . . . Thus Kings, princes and aristocracies have ever proven the enemies and curses of every land that harboured them in every age'. Jones emphasised that the English working people should have 'sympathy . . . for their Hindhu brethren. Their cause is yours—their success indirectly is yours as well'.

On October 19, Jones dealt with the 'atrocities', expressing his belief that they were 'fearfully exaggerated'. But 'even if they were proved . . . they must remember they had heard only one side', and they should recollect the British record in the American War of Independence when we 'employed Indians and paid those Indians a fixed sum for every scalp of man, woman or child they brought into the British camp . . . well knowing by what horrid torture the miserable victims had been put to death. That was not an act of the dark ages but perpetrated even within the memory of living man', and he pointed out that the 'British in India . . . have invented

a mode of death that humanity shudders at the thought. They, the merciful Christians . . . have hit on the refined expedient of tying living men to the mouths of cannons, and then firing them off, blowing them to atoms, scattering a rain of blood—a shower of quivering fragments of human flesh and intestines on the bystanders. *Such an act Nero never surpassed. It is a destruction of the human* body which Churchmen tell us is made in the image of the Deity!'

On November 14 he made a fresh 'acknowledgement of the heroic bravery of the Hindhu force'. On November 21 he pointed out that 'Blood breeds blood and cruelty begets cruelty.' On December 5 he tried to persuade his readers that they need not yet despair of the Hindhu cause, but his hopes of a successful blow against British Imperialism were now beginning to fade. His references to the Revolt became less frequent. On April 3, 1858, he wrote of 'the final struggle between Indian Patriotism and British aggression', but his reference on April 10 to his 'hope for the success of our Hindhu brethren' was based on future and not immediate prospects. 'At some now far distant period,' he wrote, 'the development of Indian greatness will be found most consistent with India's freedom from British rule, and its thorough, uncontrolled and unshackled independence'.

Jones not only wrote articles. He addressed meetings. On August 12, 1857, he spoke at 'one of the largest meetings ever held in St. George's Hall, London'. In December, he spoke at the St. Martin's Hall. 'Let it not be supposed for one moment,' he said 'that he sanctioned the mode by which our Indian rule had been acquired, or the conduct by which it had been retained. He considered it from beginning to end one of the blackest crimes in the annals of a civilised country.' In January, 1858, he spoke at a meeting at the London Tavern, at which the old Chartist, John Frost, was refused a hearing when he said that 'if they took the power out of the hands of the East India Company and gave it to the Government they would put it in the hands of much worse men'.

The cause was not lost, only temporarily defeated. The British working class was to pass through a period of collaboration with its masters, picking up the crumbs which fell from their well-laden tables as they exploited half the world: the Indian people were to pass through nearly a century of foreign rule before obtaining independence. It is worth recalling in this centenary year of the Revolt that the voice of the British working class was not silent in the hour of agony and defeat.