Another's Harvest

By

ALEC JOHNSON

THE BOOKMAN
CALCUTTA 13

First published—January, 1947.
Internet edition—March, 2006.

Original edition published by Chinmohan Sehanavis from the Bookman, 63, Dharmatala Street, Calcutta 13 and printed by Panchkori Mukherjee from Printkraft, Dharmatala Street, Calcutta 13.

Internet edition by Richard Bornat, 28 Albany Road, London N4 4RL.

From the dustjacket of the original edition

BENGAL'S GREEN and pleasant fields have passed through many a vicissitude. It was here amidst the mango groves of Plassey that Clive planted the British flag; and it was here that the banner of revolt against British rule was first raised and hundreds mounted the gallows. This is the soil out of which have sprouted legion of poets—from the humble village bards to the great Tagore—who have sung of brotherhood and freedom. Today that very soil is drenched with the blood of brothers killed by brothers.

And through these fields trekked a young Englishman in the winter of 1945. He met the town people, spoke to the officials, listened to the students, watched election battles, went round the huts and stayed with the peasants. And the harvest that was reaped is rich in its content as well as diversity. It combines the freshness of a tourist's impressions with [the] objectivity of a student's observations. The sketches that illustrate the text were drawn by the author himself during his travels.

The jacket of the book is from a photograph taken by Sunil Jonah illustrative of the typical Bengal landscape and the binding is of Jute—the golden fibre of Bengal to which reference has been made in these pages.

Price : Rs. 4/-

ALEC JOHNSON is the pen-name of a young Englishman in uniform, who, along with thousands of others during the war, has seen India from the Forces. In civil life he is an architect, and has taken a leading part in spreading Trade Unionism amongst technicians in the Building Industry. He was associated with Professor J. B. S. Haldane and others in a long struggle for efficient Air Raid Shelters in Britain during the last war.

He is an extensive traveller and has seen the villages of most of the countries in Europe. He twice went to the Soviet Union, in 1937 and again in 1939. On the day the war was declared, he was in Moscow leading the first party of British architects to study Building and Town Planning in the Soviet Union.

THE BOOKMAN
Calcutta 13

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

When famine swept Bengal in 1943 and the starving people from the villages streamed into Calcutta in search of rice and died in their thousands on its pavements, the real Bengal, rural Bengal, thrust itself for a time before the world. Famine is threatening far larger parts of India now—and so are demands for freedom and for liberation.

The masses of the common people of India are village people, peasants living from their labour on the land. Yet, at a time when there is so much in the air about freedom for India and when so many are seeking a solution to her problems, what is known of these common people of the villages? What of the problems and their struggles against oppression? What does freedom mean to them? Moreover, India being a peasant country in which, except for a few important centres, industrialisation has made so little headway. Virtually the whole of the activities of the towns and the existence of the middle classes depend on the production of the villages. The very wealth which first attracted the merchants and adventurers from the West—the legendary wealth of India—was produced from these same villages.

During several months stay in Calcutta I had been able to see something of the tremendous upsurge of feeling for national independence which followed the war. The city had been the scene of series of demonstrations, riots even, and of strikes by the working people in the industrial concerns organised in their Trade Unions. But, however important all this might be, it was also clear that from such a city as Calcutta, it was impossible to appreciate the real problems of Bengal—or of India. So it was that I took advantage of an opportunity that offered and, with the ready assistance of

many Indian friends and some slight knowledge of the Bengalee tongue, I went to the villages and rural towns to see for myself the real Bengal. I covered, in the main, three Districts in Eastern, Central and Western Bengal—and for a short time stayed in the foothills with the tribal people.

What I saw was terrible in terms of human suffering. Rural Bengal is in ruins. Even the very land itself is dying and only the oppressors and exploiters of the peasantry prosper still. Yet what I experienced was inspiring—for amongst the peasants, so long asleep and backward, is a growing consciousness which is having the greatest repercussions on the Indian national movement and on the whole question of freedom and liberation. In the villages and small towns it was also possible to understand more fully the points of view of adherents of Congress and the Muslim League, the policies of their organisations and the outlook of the local leaders. A real knowledge of what is happening inside Bengal today can give the key to the problem of India as a whole. For is not the first essential in understanding any country, to see its common people and the problems that face them, to hear from them of their own struggles and experiences? And Bengal is a very important part of India. Within it the problems of India are perhaps most accentuated, are present in their sharpest form.

As a Britisher mine was not an easy task, for the conditions in a peasant country are very different to those in Britain and are not easy to understand. Yet it is particularly important that British people do understand. A great responsibility for India's present plight rests with men of our own nation and the actions of the Labour Government can have a profound effect on a solution. Also I trust that Indian friends will find of some value the viewpoint of one who, though

not taking part in their own liberation movement, is yet as sincere as they in seeking freedom for their land.

INTRODUCTION TO INTERNET EDITION

'Alec Johnson' was my mother's brother, Dick Toms, who died recently aged 93. When he wrote this book, in Calcutta in 1946, he was in the British Army, aged 33. I'd always known he'd written a book about India, but I didn't see it till after his death. It's a rarity, because the British authorities in Calcutta did their best to suppress it, destroying all the copies they could and even arresting the printers and the publisher for a token period.

It's a remarkable testament. It documents a moment in the decline of British imperialism, the moment when it was completely obvious that Britain wasn't rich enough or powerful enough any more to run an Empire in the face of US opposition. It describes the state of Bengal, the richest part of India, the Jewel in the Crown, three years after a devastating famine from which it hadn't yet recovered. It gives the lie to anybody who might claim that British imperialism was a good thing for the Indians, showing that the British, even after two hundred years of occupation, couldn't run Bengal fairly in the interests of its population.

It's a book of its time. Dick was a Communist, and it shows. The Kisan Sabha in Bengal, the organisation which took him round Bengal, was strongly influenced by Indian Communists. Some of his remedies, like splitting India according to linguistic boundaries, might have been worse than the Partition that the British eventually imposed. Some of his enthusiasms, like taming the rivers, seem antique in an age when we have learnt (or we think we have learnt) that we ought not to try. But overall the burning idealism of his conviction that the future of India could be bright and its people free shines through. Anybody who thinks that Communists

were corrupt followers of a tarnished star should read this book, in particular to find sympathy, as Dick did, with the demands of the Muslims of Bengal as well as those of Congress.

It's well written, too, and it paints a picture of Bengal that might make you want to go there and see for yourself.

Anybody who has read a novel of the Second World War will realise that the British Army, like the US and the Soviet Armies, was out of the control of its government—hence the fact that Dick could write this book and remain unpunished despite the very recognisable photograph and biography on the dustjacket. Whilst he was in India Dick helped peasants dig drainage ditches by recruiting bored and under-used platoons of Royal Engineers, commanded by somebody he met in an Army mess in Calcutta. Before that he'd travelled across India in a special Army railway carriage fitted out as a sitting room. When he got to Calcutta he was welcomed by a fellow Communist Party member in Army Intelligence.[1] Perhaps that's why they didn't catch him...

Notes on the editing

I don't at the moment have a copy of the book and this edition has been prepared from a rather poor photocopy. Dick's pen-and-ink drawings have suffered especially. I think some of the problems are down to the original printer not inking some of the pages very well.

[1] Dick told me it was *Walter* de la Mare, but clearly that couldn't be the poet. His widow Mary confirms that it was *a* de la Mare, but can't remember the first name. If anybody knows who it might have been, please let me know.

In producing this edition I've tried to reproduce the format of the original, as far as LaTeXwill let me. I changed one or two things—'today' for 'to-day' and 'nowadays' for 'now-a-days'—and I've rationalised the use of punctuation in quoted and bracketed phrases. I standardised on the 'ise' spelling, where Dick had wavered between 'ise' and 'ize'. I've fixed all the typos in the original that I could spot, but unfortunately the scanning process has introduced lots more of its own.

I haven't yet found a Type 2 font that looks like the original.

Units under British occupation

A Bengal *maund* was 82 pounds 2 ounces, just over 36 kilos.
A Bengal *bigha* was 1600 square yards, about a third of an acre or a bit more than an eighth of a hectare.
The Indian *rupee* in 1948 was $13\frac{1}{3}$ to a British pound (one and six in old money, $7\frac{1}{2}$p in new) and 3.31 to a US dollar (about 30 cents).
An *anna* was one sixteenth of a rupee.

Copying this book

Mary Toms, Dick's widow, would like this book to live on. It occurred to me that the safest place for it at the moment is the Internet. Please copy and distribute it freely (provided you preserve the copyright notice).

—Richard Bornat (richard@bornat.me.uk) 31st March 2006.

CALCUTTA AND BENGAL

"The cities are well lit,
Dazzling is their garland of light,
But darkness pervades the country,
Darkness is our day and night."

—GOBINDADAS

By the simple method of counting heads, Calcutta is the second city of the Empire. Whether it is also the unhappiest would be more difficult to prove, but it could certainly lay a strong claim for that distinction.

Amongst its four million people one does not come across those who love their city, and have pride in it. Many of its people are not even Bengalees. The workers and coolies in the docks and mills, for, instance, in very many cases, are "up country" peasants from other Provinces, who have been driven by impoverishment and hunger to find work in the city and whose first thought is to leave and to return to their families in the villages. The conditions of the working people in Calcutta and the "bustees" they live in, are such as England has never experienced since the blackest days of the industrial Revolution while the less fortunate ones—and there are masses of them—live at little above starvation level and find their homes in tin shacks or on the pavements. The clerks

and middle classes mostly are Bengalees, more often than not Hindus, but even they have their ancestral homes somewhere in the country and are in Calcutta to supplement the meagre income of their family from some interest it has in land. Like the workers of Calcutta, they have the spectre of unemployment hanging over them now that the wartime boom is passed, and are fearful of losing their jobs and not being able to find another. Only the prosperous merchants and business men are really at home in Calcutta.

Although it is the Provincial capital, Calcutta does not belong to Bengal. It is a new, a largely artificial city. Two hundred years ago it only existed as a trading station on the banks of the muddy Hoooghly River and the East India Company was busy fortifying it for their coming struggle with the French. In 1756, Calcutta passed for the last time into Indian (though pro-French) hands when the newly constructed Fort William was captured by the forces of the Nawab of Bengal, but a year later, at Plassey, the Company was revenged and the British became supreme in Bengal. Robert Clive, who had gone to India as a clerk of the Company, returned to England "the wealthiest of His Majesty's subjects" and began the era of the wholesale export of Bengal's revenue and looted wealth to a foreign land.

Since then Calcutta has remained the greatest centre of British interests in India—until 1912 when Delhi took its place, it was also the capital of India. Army officers were the architects of its public buildings, even of St. Paul's Cathedral which stands in its central park. The old walled and moated barracks of Fort William still function and, across the park and near the racecourse, is a tremendous domed edifice to Queen Victoria, its white marble gleaming again in the sun after the removal of its wartime camouflage. Overlook-

ing the park are the clubs, stores and hotels for the "burra sahibs" and beyond and "out of bounds", the filthy streets and tenements of Calcutta's citizens and the docks, engineering works and mills where British capital still predominates.

To anyone who has been in Calcutta since the war, there can be little doubt of the feelings of the Indian people of today towards this British domination. "Quit India", the cry of Congress, has resounded during all the processions, strikes and demonstrations that have gripped the city. Many of these were called in protest against the court martial of men of the Indian National Army, the army formed on the Japanese side from prisoners of war to fight the British and whose members have become national heroes and whose leader, Subhas Bose, the all but successful liberator of India. Sometimes the city has been paralysed for days on end—particularly following those occasions when the police fired on and killed students demonstrating against the sentences on the I.N.A. men. Then, military lorries have been attacked and burnt and trains have been stopped, and there has been more firing and more deaths. During all this time the campaigns for the Provincial elections were on, with bitter antagonism between Congress and the Muslim League—although on the streets the flags of Congress, the League and the Communists had been seen, side by side, in common protest.

At the same time the working people, faced with the prospect of unemployment or slashes in their wages, have developed their Trade Unions which they have built up over the last twenty years and these Unions have become experienced and disciplined—an important portent for the future. The strike of the tramwaymen was an early one and a test case as it were, the most highly organised workers in the city against an important British company and the workers

won. Since then there have been more bitter struggles in Indian owned concerns as well, and the municipal employees have also been involved. Particularly significant was the time when Calcutta was without its rickshaws for two full weeks. These rickshaw pullers are backward and illiterate village men who are in Calcutta doing an inhuman job as beasts of burden—when such men have organised and act so solidly together, then indeed the Trade Union movement has become a profound force amongst the Indian working people today.

Virtually the whole of the industry of Bengal is concentrated in Calcutta—except for some coalfields in the Western corner of the Province—and Bengal is a great deal bigger than England and has some 60 million people. So seething Calcutta cannot give a picture of Bengal today. What goes on in Calcutta is far removed from the masses of Bengalees in the villages and rural towns. At the same time its existence largely depends on the villages—the jute mills, its greatest industry as well as the stronghold of British capital, draw their raw materials from the peasants' fields. Jute is the second greatest crop, after rice—most of it from the flooded fields of East Bengal. But what does Calcutta know of these peasants and how it is produced? The city has a huge trade with the villages in rice and food, but in Calcutta are only the stores of the dealers and merchants—a whole series of middlemen exists between Calcutta and the villages. It is also a great port handling many of the peasants' products—even from far beyond Bengal, for it is the outlet for the produce of the whole of the Ganges valley of Northern India. The railways, spreading throughout the Districts of the Province to bring the produce from the rural areas, are the only modern industrial penetration of vast areas of the

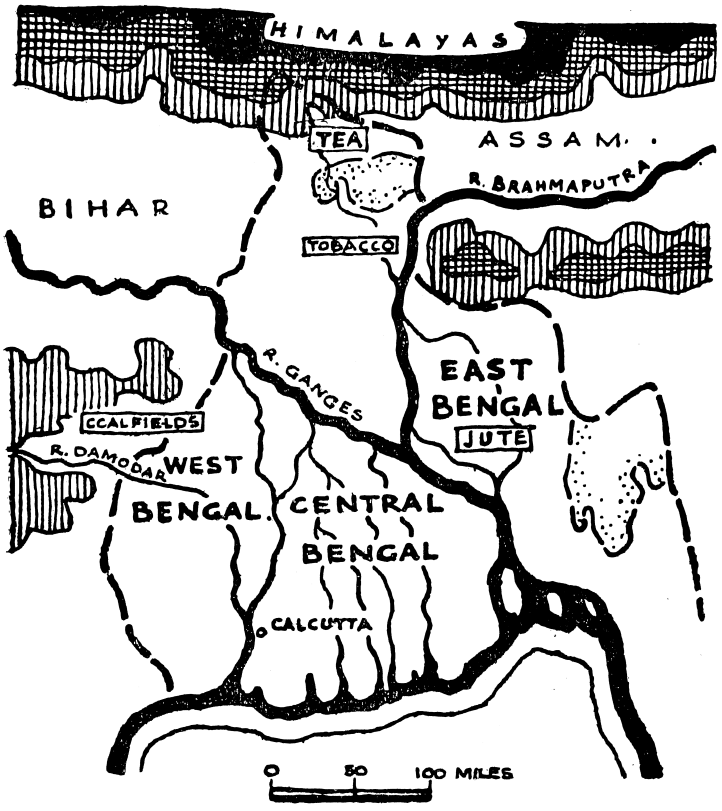
peasant countryside.

Calcutta is the administrative centre for the people in the 86,000 villages of Bengal. It is the seat of the elected Provincial Assembly and of the appointed Governor, and, under Section 93, Mr. Casey ruled for most of his last year as Governor, without a Ministry. It is this administration that issued so many announcements that "Bengal has turned the corner", that steps had been taken to ensure that the tragedy of the famine of 1943 could never be repeated. But do the peasants agree? Indeed what does famine mean to a peasant, what are the causes of his poverty and starvation, are these in fact being removed? The administration is full of schemes and plans for the improvement of Bengal while year after year areas of the Province are devastated by flood or drought. What is actually being done to improve the lot of the peasant? These questions of the administration are very important now that it is said that the British are ready to hand over India to the Indians. One can only understand what is involved in the demands to grant freedom to India, in the light of the way British administration functions now and the present realities of British rule.

Bengal is a land of mighty rivers, and of rich plainlands built up over the ages by these rivers bringing down silt from great mountain ranges. The Bengalee people of these deltaic regions are a single people in the sense that they have a language of their own—indeed they are as sharply demarcated as any of the many nationalities who inhabit India. One of their greatest struggles while under British rule was that against Partition in the years following 1905, when Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India, tried unsuccessfully to divide their land into two. However they are divided, almost equally, into two great religions, Hindu and Mahomedan—

and in India religion and politics are to a great degree intermingled. There is a rather greater proportion of Muslims and the adherents of the two religions are not evenly spread over the Province. People in the towns and the middle classes generally are Hindus, whilst a very great proportion of the Muslims are peasants. However, in West Bengal Hindus form the majority of the peasantry, and everywhere they are present in considerable numbers in the villages. Amongst these common people in the villages, what basis is there for Hindu-Muslim differences, if indeed real differences exist at all? What support do the peasants give to the claims of Congress that it represents all sections of the people, irrespective of status or religion? What of the Muslim League which is demanding Bengal as part of Pakistan, a Muslim homeland to be divided from Hindu India? As well the peasants now have their own organisation—the Kisan Sabha. It is stronger in Bengal than in any other Province in India and had held its all-India Conference in 1945 in one of the Bengal Districts. How far is it a real force in the villages, and what is its policy?

It was with such questions that I left Calcutta for the villages and country towns. The election campaigns were to be in progress, and this promised to afford the instructive and interesting experience of observing Indian democracy, such as it is at present, at work, and of seeing the reactions of the people to the policies of the different parties.


HIMALAYAS
TEA
ASSAM
R. BRAHMAPUTRA
BIHAR
TOBACCO
R. GANGES
EAST BENGAL
JUTE
COALFIELDS
R. DAMODAR
WEST BENGAL
CENTRAL BENGAL
CALCUTTA
0 50 100 MILES

PUBLIC SERVANTS OR PUBLIC MASTERS?

"Mother, my voice is choked with authority,
So I cannot sing my song."

—Written about 1906 for the
Swadeshi Movement in Bengal.

In the cool fresh air of the evening it is pleasant to wander round the streets. After the stench and bustle that is Calcutta, the town is slow and sleepy. There is no traffic on the dusty roads, only the rickshaws making their way through the little groups of sauntering people.

It is Jessore, the heart of the once rich delta of the Ganges, and the chief town of the District of the same name (a District in India being considerably larger than an English County). All around are signs of a more prosperous past. Many of the old brick and stuccoed houses are dilapidated now—all in their time were the proud homes of landlords and of merchants.

A little triangular green where the Muslims pray lies in the centre of the town and right opposite is the most prominent building, the Police Station—or rather, the Police barracks. It is extensive, and seems secluded, even dignified, built in the pleasant, simple style of England of pre-Victorian times. Like the Courts elsewhere, the building has not long

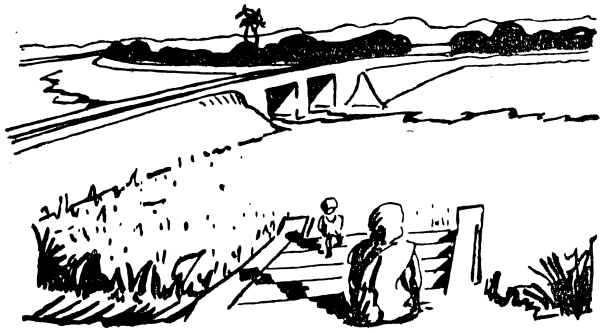
been redecorated, its walls a fresh yellow, the columns picked out in white. More sombre, but larger still, is the "Collectorate", the sprawling offices of the District Magistrate and Collector.

Law, Order and Revenue—-these seem to be the public buildings in one's first glimpse of an Indian town.

We wander on, passing a small procession in the streets, the young men in white Gandhi caps shouting in unison, "Quit India", "Jai Hind". It is bright moonlight now and we go to see the river—the "Bhairab", the "fiercely flowing river"—on which trade has flowed for centuries bringing wealth and produce from the villages. On the other bank the jail can just be seen and, quite recent additions, the Famine Relief Hospital adjoining the famine destitutes' camp.

We cross by the bridge and see the broad sweep of the river. But beneath us is no water—from bank to bank is a mass of hyacinth! The river has died! Crumbling brick steps leading down to the edge of the water that once flowed bear

silent testimony to the life the river used to have. Now, that lovely flower, the curse of the waterways of Bengal, has overgrown it—the fiercely flowing river!



Death and destitutes! Law and order! Is that all the picture?

The morning breaks. In Bengal the winter nights are cold—people in the streets are shivering still and draw their thin shawls around their shoulders. The rickshaw pullers stand waiting in the morning sun, alert for fares. A military lorry hoots its way through the town. Barefoot people collect in a little queue to get water from a creaking pump and little children run around with almost nothing on. A late shopkeeper takes down his shutters and a sweeper, with but a rag around his middle, is clearing out the open drains which run along the street.

We see more of the town. The elected bodies of the people—the Municipality and the District Board—have offices in modest buildings, invisible previously in the dark. There is a Public Library built from the money of an Indian donor, nearby a primary school in a converted building. The

college functions in an old mansion and two large tin sheds, its proper building still is requisitioned. There are numerous offices of officials, in old houses mostly, Civil Supplies Department, Agricultural Officer, Jute Controller, Weavers' Co-operative Society. A small comb factory closed some time ago for lack of raw materials and there is no other industry, only by the station is the railway yard and a power house supplying electricity to the town.

The headquarters of National Congress are in a large house with the tricolor flag of freedom hanging out of an upstairs window—inside they are still haggling with the Police over the return of furniture and documents taken away when Congress was banned. The green flag of the Muslim League, emblazoned with the crescent of Islam, is displayed on their less pretentious building. Opposite the Municipality building is the little office shared by the Kisan Sabha (the peasants' organisation) and the Fisherman's Association. Elsewhere is a room for the Student's Federation and, in a single storey old house, the District office of the Communist Party, its red flag on a long slender bamboo pole flapping lazily in the clear morning air.

Authority And Democracy

In Jessore then, as in every other District town, there are two kinds of administration. One, the District Magistrate-cum-Collector, the other, the elected District Board and Municipality. We might call the first "Authority" and the second, "Democracy". To what extent does each govern the people? And how do the British rule with so few Britishers? (For on more than one occasion I found myself in a District which had no British official of any sort.)

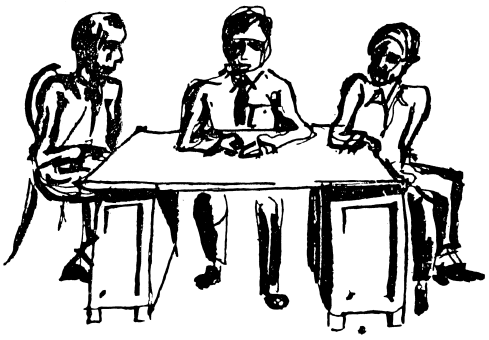
This dual system of administration applies from top to bottom throughout India (or rather throughout British India for the remaining two-fifths of the territory of the country are Princes' states under autocratic rule.) The Viceroy at the top is, in effect, the Collector-in-Chief, for he and the Collector have similar powers, one over all India, the other over a District. Side by side with the Viceroy is the elected Central Assembly and in each of the Provinces, such as Bengal, the Governor functions beside the elected Provincial Assembly. In a District, as we have seen, there is the Collector and the elected District Board. Below this again are Sub-Divisional Officers (S.D.Os.) and Subordinate Circle Officers side by side with Union Boards—these latter are the lowest elected bodies and cover, say, twenty villages.

How power is shared between these two systems was made very clear to me on the occasion of a long and revealing discussion I had on this subject with three Circle Officers.

The Collector and District Magistrate, as his name implies, both collects revenue and administers justice, they told me. More than that he controls the Police, and is legally responsible for all administration in his District—in addition to what he administers direct, his task is also to ensure that the elected bodies carry out their work in a 'satisfactory' manner and if they do not, he has legal power to supersede them. In the same way, the S.D.Os. and Circle Officers have powers over the Union Boards. In the Province also, the Governor can supersede the Provincial Assembly—as Mr. Casey did under the famous section 93 when he ruled direct for many months without a Ministry.

My Circle Officers were interested when I told them how fundamentally opposed this was to democracy in Britain. There the Civil Servant is given his powers through an elec-

ted Parliament which can always check his activities, and he administers very largely through elected bodies. Also a basic and jealously guarded principle is the separation of those who administer justice and those who have executive functions, and control of the Police is completely out of the hands of those who judge the accused.



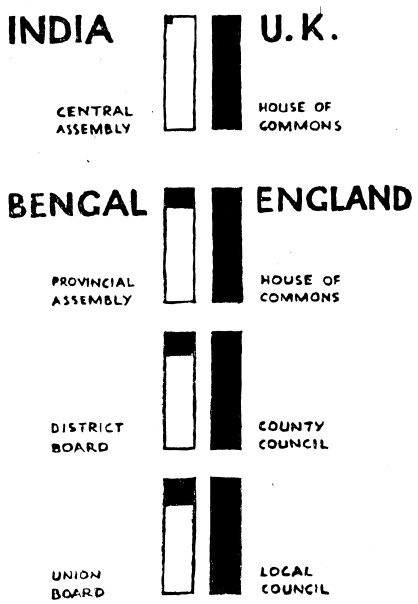
"A civil servant sits in an office then, and is little more than a clerk" said one, and he did not seem to relish their position as compared with his own. During our talk it had become more and more apparent to me that in front of me, were three men who called themselves Civil Servants but who in reality were Civil Masters. Later on in the towns and villages of Bengal I was to see how great a control the District Magistrate, the S.D.Os. and the Circle Officers wielded over the lives of the people.

The elected bodies, the District and Union Boards and Municipalities, are limited in their powers to such things as looking after secondary roads, education and public health. The money they can spend on these things they collect themselves through cesses and rates. But they collect from an

impoverished countryside which has already contributed to the revenue of the collector—even then they have to help pay for the police! For instance, on one occasion a Union Board President showed me his books. The annual income from rates was Rs. 2,500 a year. Of this Rs. 1,900 was spent on wages, mainly on village chowkidars—sort of watchmen-cum-policemen who legally have to be provided in every village. This left Rs. 600 a year to be spent on roads, assistance to primary schools and such like in about 18 villages—or about 3 annas per inhabitant per annum! As an example of the relative importance of different services for the people, it is interesting to note that, for Bengal as a whole and taking a pre-war Budget as a sample, while 12 percent was spent on police, $5\frac{1}{2}$ percent was spent on health and only 2 percent on primary education!

Little wonder that in Jessore the Collectorate was 50 big and the offices of the elected bodies so small! Moreover, recently there has been a growing tendency for the bureaucracy to take more and more out of the hands of the local bodies, particularly since the Governor has ruled under Section 93. From Mr. Casey downwards the officials justify their actions by pointing out that these bodies are inefficient and corrupt and that the only way to get things better is to put in capable civil servants to run affairs, to centralise control to a greater degree, to "provincialise" things. We shall see later the results of this policy, whether in fact things have become more efficient, or whether corruption and inefficiency have not become hidden and so cannot be exposed by the people.

An examination of the methods of election of the various bodies is very revealing. The higher the body, the more restricted the franchise. A Union Board at the bottom is elected by every villager or peasant who has a holding large enough



Democracy in Britain and India. The proportions of adult people eligible to vote for corresponding bodies in the two countries are shown in black.

to pay a rate, the "chowkidari rate". But the Provincial Assembly is elected by under 15 percent of the people (with separate electorates for the different religious communities) while the Central Assembly for British India is voted in by less than 1 percent of the population! When these facts are coupled with the very limited powers of the bodies when they are elected, the picture of "safeguards against democracy" seems to be complete.

On more than one occasion when I was discussing the ex-

tension of the franchise with an official, he remarked, "you must give us time to prepare the election rolls". This is fantastic when one knows a little of how they do the job at present. If left to themselves they would never prepare a roll for universal franchise in a hundred years. Many people eligible to vote are never put on the rolls at all. "Dead" names are written in and when rolls are being prepared, the public is hardly informed and individual protests get no results. For instance in one area I knew of a District town where there should have been about a hundred voters there were only six on the rolls! In a family I stayed with there should have been seven, but there were none.

I have no mind for law, but a talk I had with a pleader in a small town threw much light on the legal basis of British rule and of the powers of authority. He was an ardent nationalist and had worked in his young days in the Congress movement. We were in his house, which served also as his office, and beside him his one old clerk sat cross legged, writing out lengthy documents by hand. All around were ageing and weighty volumes of law, and, when he pointed it out, it was clear enough that the whole of this basic law is "British made". He read some clauses in the Criminal Code so ably drafted by Macaulay. One says in effect, "if two or more persons carry out an illegal act, it can he treated as conspiracy", that is, any type of crime can be judged as conspiracy against British rule. It is a punishable offence to inflame differences between classes, as of course a peasant does when he organises and protests against oppression by his landlord. Again to bring disaffection, hatred or contempt against Her Majesty means transportation for life. As "disaffection" is defined as "not affection" most of the Indian people could be transported and certainly the whole of the nationalist move-

ment! Also in India, trial by jury is very exceptional and "special" tribunals can always be set up, as is done particularly of course for political cases. Such powers still remain and would seem to be enough for any ruler, yet, as he pointed out, new measures have been continually brought in, most of which give increased power to authority. During the War alone over 200 Ordinances have been promulgated and "rule by Ordinance" in different parts of India has been a very common feature for many years.

Does all this give that picture, so often painted by apologists for British rule, of an India advancing towards democracy, of Indians being given ever increasing powers to govern themselves? The reality is that administrators and civil servants, the police and dispensers of justice are given their powers, not by any democratic body of the Indian people, but by authority of the British, ultimately by the India Office and Parliament in London—and during and since the war they have even increased the scope of their activities. As for the elected bodies within India, they deal only with certain social measures for the people, but have not the means to provide them; they are elected only by the upper sections and they work within the framework of a law itself designed for the retention of the foreign ruler. It makes no difference that this rule of authority is carried out by Indians—in any case these are carefully selected for their integrity and are highly paid. When the hidden but all powerful hold of British capital over India is also borne in mind, India can be seen for what it really is, the world's greatest colony and subject nation.

A LANDED ARISTOCRACY

"They do not form the general public; they are extraordinary people. They do not build their houses on the common soil; they live in high perched nests. But whatever their glory they cannot be the people's spokesmen. They do a great deal of service to the British, but the British if they tried could not make them the people's 'natural leaders'. For even the British rulers cannot convert the impossible into the possible."

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE, 1899.

We leave the town and make our way along the mud tracks that are the highways of Bengal. The morning sun tips with gold the paddy ripening in the fields—small fields of irregular shape, each one a patch of ground, the equivalent say of a hundred feet square. Between them run low earth walls, serving to hold back the water in the rains and used as pathways to the fields beyond.

We make way for a creaking bullock cart loaded up with bundled jute, its wheels running deep in the ruts in the earthen track. The driver, nodding to sleep, wakes with a start to twist the tails of his lean beasts and prod them into faster motion. Men pass us bound for market, each with the rice or vegetables he hopes to sell in a wicker basket on his head.

After half a mile of fields the jungle closes in again. Further on, swamps and water hyacinth and still more jungle with but a few patches cultivated here and there. Then we come upon it, the country seat of the aristocracy of Bengal.

In the jungle there stands an English country house, vast in extent, built in the classic [style] of a hundred years ago. But it is a ruin! The weeds and jungle have taken possession, a few bits of plaster and moulded cornices still hang on the brickwork, but the roofs have fallen in! We wander through the courtyards and look in the empty rooms. Three or four families, descendents of the builders, now occupy a portion of the wings. The many columned "Pujah Hall" where the Hindu peasants come and celebrate their religious festivals, still stands: in front of it, on the lawn, is the bamboo frame work erected for this year's "Durga Pujah". Around the huge homestead stretches a wide and shallow moat, now a swamp, with a few patches of straggling paddy trying to make its way up into the sun.

As we leave, an ageing man walks slowly by. We talk to

him, he is a tenant of this zemindar and he takes us to his village. He is barefoot and lean and carries a bottle of medicine with which he hopes to cure his little girl of fever. For this he has paid some quack eight annas, half of what he earns a day, and what he has is surely coloured water. He is a fisherman by caste. The zemindar is landlord of the rivers and the ponds as well as the land and he pays him rent to fish. Year by year the water is disappearing and giving way to swamp but he still has to pay. Of course he could leave, but where else to go? Fishermen are starving everywhere in Bengal and they cannot get yarn to make their nets or tar to soak the yarn. Few now have boats, and how many could afford [the] Rs. 200 a new one costs? The harvest is beginning and men are working in the fields—not many of them in their own fields however. We talk to one or two. They have no land at all, but are working for a bigger peasant and he pays them a daily wage. Others are gathering the harvest on land which once was theirs, but which now is the moneylender's or the zemindar's, who will take two-thirds of the crop the peasant reaps.

In the villages it seems strangely quiet. Some of the homesteads are dilapidated or in ruins and the ponds from which the people draw their water are overgrown and slimy green. A little group of men gather round us. Most of them look thin and ill, some wear nothing but a length of cloth about their middle, a few have tattered shirts. We ask them about their land. Some peasants in the village have enough to keep their families, they tell us, some even employ others to work for them as well. Of those talking to us, most had sold theirs in the famine to buy food and pay off debts. They have never seen their landlord, the zemindar, for he has a house somewhere in Calcutta—but they all know his agents

and the moneylender. Two other men were also standing by, men carrying lathis (bamboo sticks used by the police) and when they leave, we ask the peasants who they were. They are the men whom the zemindar employs to collect his rent and debts, and they had come to take an old man to the office about what he owed. This man told us he had given them eight annas and bribed them to put it off a little for, he said, once they get you there it is difficult to get away—unless you have the money or the rice to pay, or unless you agree to take out another loan.

Permanent Settlement

This was the first I saw of the land system as it operates in Bengal—a poverty-stricken peasantry, peasants who do not own but rent their land, many of whom are dispossessed, virtually all of whom are in debt, with absentee landlords, their estates going to ruin, yet with such power that they even have their own armed men and usurp the power of the police.

It is often explained that such conditions exist because "India is a backward peasant country". How little is it realised that the present system of land tenure only goes back 150 years, that the landlords were actually created by an Act of Parliament in London in 1793!

For centuries before, even since the days of the ancient Britons, India had been a feudal country. Nobody owned the land in the modern sense. The peasant had the unassailable right to occupy and till his land and he made over a portion of his produce to his overlord who kept irrigation works in order, protected him and waged wars. There was little written law covering the rights of different people, just as was the case in early feudal England. The system had de-

veloped, was accepted and seemed everlasting. Out of this land system grew the village communities, each more or less self-contained and with their own weavers, blacksmiths and craftsmen. The villagers of course were poor, with their ancient methods of cultivation—many had a struggle for existence—but every peasant had his land. From these village communities was produced all the fabulous wealth of India, and they were so stable they outlasted all the waves of conquerors until the British merchants came. The East India Company, like its rival companies of other European countries, was after the wealth of India, the products of her villages and the revenue they paid to the Emperors and, by 1765, after ousting their competitors and after many military campaigns, the Company had managed to seize this revenue in Bengal.

However, a problem still remained for them how best to regularise and make permanent the annual extraction of this wealth. Their solution was certainly ingenious. Under the Moghul system there had been a class of people called "zemindars" whose function had been to collect the revenue for the overlords. They had had certain hereditary rights and, during the early chaotic years of Company rule, had gained considerably in importance. It was these men who, in a single stroke, were given the ownership of the land and were created landlords. How did this "Permanent Settlement", as it was called, solve the problem of the Company? The zemindars were given the land on the condition that they paid over regularly to the Company a certain fixed sum previously determined and in this way the Company was guaranteed its annual revenue without having the bother of collecting it. As well, the British needed allies in Bengal, for their rule was far from easy at that time—and they found them in this new

and powerful section of the people.

The results were catastrophic for Bengal. From London, of course, came eloquent assurances of Lord Cornwallis and others that "an English estate system" was being introduced with all its benefits and that the rights of the peasants were being protected. In reality the zemindars had been given the land, with a free hand to charge what rents they would, and the peasants had become tenants without rights and without redress. During the first twenty years or so, the zemindars did not have an easy time—they were bound to hand over the revenue by certain dates each year and the Company would accept no excuses of bad harvests or the inability of peasants to pay. There was wholesale selling of estates by auction during this period and the Company disposed of those virgin jungle areas just coming under cultivation, in which it also had full rights. Very often the worst type of Indian speculator gained possession of the land and these new zemindars began increasing the rents more and more—still only paying the same revenue to the British. In a generation or so they had amassed wealth enough to build those country seats and mansions we see in Bengal today. As the rents went up and up and the peasants became more and more impoverished, a bad harvest or a failure of the rains would mean ruin. Then they had to borrow money or rice to live, or seed to sow for the next crop, and the zemindars and their underlings eagerly entered the field as money-lenders, charging extortionate rates of interest. The peasant became more and more indebted, until mortgaged to the hilt, he had to sell. This process continued, and is still going on so that today up to a half of Bengal's peasants have lost their land.

The only object of the zemindars was to get their rents; they had no other interest in the land. Often they would go

away to the towns and live on their wealth, and never see their land, but would sublet parts of their estates to others. These sub-zemindars, or "taluqdars", would do the same, until today, above the peasant, there are several layers of landlords and sub-landlords all living from his rent. These might number three or four, sometimes five or six, there are even cases up to thirty-six! Moreover, according to the Hindu custom of inheritance, under which the property of a father is divided amongst his sons, many of these estates decreased in size as time went on, until today some of the smaller landlords have been reduced to severe straits and their homes are in ruins. Still, there are zemindars who hold vast estates, bigger than any landowners in England.

The Permanent Settlement has been condemned almost

from its inception, and numerous Commissions have been set up to enquire into its workings, but still it continues. It has had profound effects on every aspect of Bengal today. The land itself is dying. The zemindars have no interest in it, no more do many of those in the series to whom it had been sublet. Irrigation has been neglected and waterways have not been kept open, so huge areas of land revert to marsh and jungle. Impoverished peasants who do not even own their land are in no position to carry out such work as this.

It is from the Permanent Settlement that the Bengal society of today has developed. Virtually the whole of the present day middle classes, in the towns as well as the country, have arisen from the zemindars and still hold interests in land. In effect they are a vast class of parasites living off the backs of the peasantry. Most of the less wealthy ones do nothing more than keep a clerk, probably in an office in their house in town, where they collect their rent from whoever is below them in the scale of landholders. Perhaps, as well, they or members of their family are working as clerks or doctors, teachers or officials in Calcutta or the rural towns. At the same time, the old village society has been ruined and has been replaced by a system of zemindars, moneylenders and profiteers who have acquired the worst traits of oppression and usury, who have lost all previously accepted moral values. Moreover, the differences between the Hindus and Muslims have been sharpened—for nearly all the zemindars are Hindus and the vast majority of Muslims are peasants. (This is the result, to a great extent, of the policy of the East India Company which very naturally favoured the Hindus to offset the Muslims who were the previous rulers of Bengal and from whom they had conquered power.)

Bengal was the first part of India where Parliament settled

the land question for the Company. A similar arrangement was made for Bihar, Orissa and parts of Madras but a few years later, new systems were imposed in other parts. "Temporary Settlement", where the amount of revenue is periodically reviewed and if necessary increased, applies in the United and Central Provinces, parts of the Punjab etc. A third system is "Ryotwari", where the peasants rent land direct from the Governor. All have the same features—landlordism (this also applies to the "Ryotwari" areas where the bigger peasants gradually amassed more and more land), indebtedness and money lenders, and an ever increasing proportion of landless peasants.

There is one further feature of landlordism in India today—the Princes' (or Rajahs') states. There are three within Bengal itself. (Also there is a small area still under French sovereignty!) Throughout India there are 563 of these states, some as big as Spain, some of only a few hundred acres. These Princes and Rajahs are often described as the traditional rulers of their people but in fact they are zemindars, often fabulously wealthy, who rule as autocrats—with British "Political Agents" to ensure this rule suits the British administration. In the cases where they come from old ruling families, their ancestors had proved themselves "loyal" to the East India Company and had been suitably rewarded. Some states were bought for money—Kashmir, the largest state, was actually purchased by its rulers for the equivalent of half a million pounds. Large areas of some states are even leased, at a rental, to adjoining provinces. The boundaries of the states rarely bear any relation to communities or nationalities of people. They are even more backward than the rest of India, and their abolition is the first step in the liberation of India as a whole.

THE VILLAGES

"The evening lamps are lit no more.
Every little cottage in our village has its grave,
In the courtyards of the houses only jackals howl,
And no one knows who once lived there.
You, who can save and tend those who still live,
Come forward, save us, now!"

—From a song of the Peasants' Movement,
written after the famine.

When I arrived in an area I always sought out the leaders of the various organisations to help me see the village people. I soon learnt that Civil Servants and officials know very little of them. Individual Congressmen and Muslim Leaguers did what they could, but it was through the Kisan Sabha, the peasants' own organisation and the various Famine Relief Centres, that I got to know them best.

Villages in Bengal are not easy of approach. Many are far from a road of any sort and one has to find one's way among the maze of winding earth walls that bound the little fields. In the East of the Province only boats are any use during the rains, but after harvest peasants take their bullock carts across the fields and can cross the river beds.

For us, cycles were invaluable, although we did many a mile on foot. The roads that do exist give a shocking picture of neglect. There was a District Board road in East Bengal, for instance, which ran for some ten miles from a railway station and served, say, 200 villages. It was an earth embankment, raised above the water level in the rains, and was interrupted in no fewer than five places where bridges over small water courses had collapsed or disappeared. Bullock carts and the daily bus made huge detours over the fields below, for which tolls were eagerly collected. Some attempts had been made to rebuild the bridges but one had been built too high and so could not be used. Another had been rebuilt, but the embankment at each end had never been joined to the bridge! So there it stood, an island of rusting and useless steel, a monument to neglect. This sort of thing has gone on for many years, not only during the war—there were old peasants who could not remember the authorities ever having

placed a single sod of earth to repair important roads.

Often the villages appear as oases of trees amongst the rolling expanse of paddy fields. One peasant's holding includes a number of these tiny fields scattered round the village, perhaps a mile distant from each other. To get the bare minimum for existence for his family he would have to have about 5 bighas (2 acres), or more than that where the soil is not so good, as well as a pair of bullocks and a wooden plough.

In the villages each homestead has four, five or more little huts grouped around a smooth mud courtyard, with perhaps a storehouse for the rice and an open shed, where the women husk the paddy by a crude arrangement of a wooden beam pounding the grain in a hole in the ground. The families are large, "joint families", including the sons of the parents with their wives and children. Often, and particularly in Muslim homes, the courtyards are screened from outside view and the women stay inside in purdah.

The thin mud-plastered bamboo walls go quickly into disrepair, and many a home now has but its thatched roof left perched on a few bamboo poles protruding from the raised mud floor, the remaining earthly possessions of the tenant exposed to view. In the West of the province walls are of mud baked hard in the sun; in the East, surprisingly enough, corrugated iron is largely used. Now, many of the sheets have been sold for food and replaced by jute stalks and bamboo.

These homesteads may be close together in a village, as they are in the West, or, in the more flooded areas in the East, in straggling villages, each homestead on a little knoll, out of reach of the water. Perhaps nearby is a grove of mango trees, here and there a coconut, and little groups of palms, the juice of which is boiled and a sweet sugar made. All amongst

the homesteads are the straggling bamboo trees which are cut down to build new huts, to make matting or to weave baskets. And in many a village now there is undergrowth where mosquitoes thrive in the stagnant pools beneath.

In the excavated "tanks" or ponds, the people fish and bathe sometimes with the cattle. The tanks, when neglected and uncleaned—more so when they are the only source of drinking water—are hotbeds of disease. In village after village, old broken handpumps stand unused and pure water is denied to the people because a few spare parts cannot be obtained. Burdwan was the only district where I saw most villages with properly functioning wells.

Outside the village might be a mansion of the zemindar; amongst the homesteads, too, would be the homes of the richer peasants or the middle class. Perhaps there is a

primary school—if it has not closed down—and in a bigger village, a post office and a Charitable Dispensary run by the District Board, where medicines can be obtained.

Hindus and Muslims

No doubt it was an event for the village when I came. Why should a 'Sahib' come like this to them? Yet when they realised that he, although a Britisher, was also a friend, there was no stinting of their welcome. Often I had to refuse the "hooka", their communal pipe, as my stomach would not take it, and I had, perhaps, the cool milk from a coconut or a glass of tea made English fashion—for this habit has spread even to the middle peasants in the villages in the last few years. They usually found me a stool for, when one is not accustomed, it is not easy to squat for long periods on the floor—much less to eat in this position!

The boys and girls, particularly, were agape. They had heard of the British, but here was one in their village and drinking tea in Rahirn's hut. The little ones, many with nothing on themselves, would stand and stare, perhaps at my shoes or my fine white shirt. The girls would shyly look at me from the corners of their eyes and trip off to tell the others, their sleek black hair shining in the sun.

It was easy to tell the status of the men. The poor peasant or the landless labourer, whether a Hindu or a Muslim, looked very much alike. All would have the same thin stooping bodies, very often with nothing on them except a piece of cloth around their middle. In a poorer village very many would be like this and some of them too, would be too ill and weak to be out working in the fields. But usually there would be a middle class Hindu or two, with their clean white

dhoties and sandals on their feet. There might be the local school master, who would hardly be so prosperous, and perhaps the old postmaster, still carrying a tattered umbrella. The Muslims would wear their loose white trousers and a cheap cloth fez and occasionally there would be a prosperous one with his distinctive long, buttoned coat.

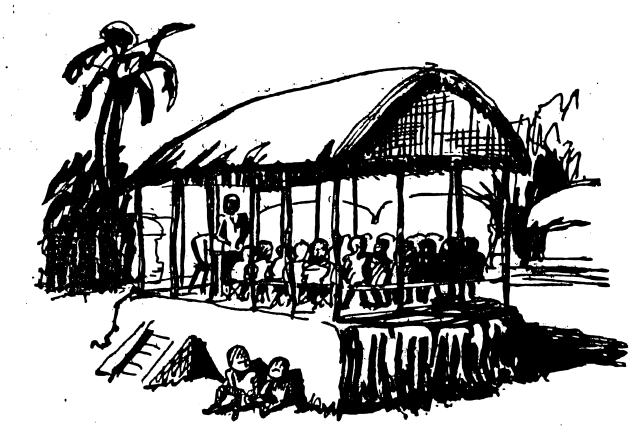
I did not often see the women folk. I perhaps would have a glimpse of them busy husking paddy, or there might be one in the distance going down to the tank to bathe, her coarse grey sari wrapped around her even under water; another getting water or sticking slabs of cow dung on a wall with her open hand to dry it in the sun–this is used as fuel where there is not sufficient wood. A woman in the fields would turn away if we passed by and lift the hem of her sari to hide her face. One of the effects of the famine, I was told, is that women can be seen about and working where they never could before.

I thought of the women when I had a meal. They prepared the food somewhere in the house behind, yet they never saw their guest. They would feed me well and as I did my best to manipulate the curries and the rice with my fingers, I would tell the man that this was not the daily meal of a poor Bengal peasant! How could a man feed his family on a few annas a day? What did they eat to keep alive? Rice and little more. Some fish if they could get it and a few vegetables now and then. Even the middle class usually had little more—perhaps they would get some milk and make sweetmeats of curdled milk and sugar.

I also saw the remnants of those men who made Bengal famous in the past. The weavers, their looms silent now for want of yarn; the metal workers and the blacksmiths, who only get enough material to work for an hour or two a day. I

saw one blacksmith whose forge was silent and he was weaving a mat with reeds for which he would get 14 annas in the market.

A school teacher might take me to see the village school. I remember one, an open sided hut say twenty feet by ten with a raised mud floor. About twenty boys and girls were



sitting on three benches and each bench was a class! The teacher went from class to class, asking questions according to their standard. Previously there had been a [literacy] class for adults in the evening but now they had no oil for lamps and so it had been abandoned. Over 90 percent of the people here could not read or write. This school had recently been opened by the efforts of the Kisan Sabha and was entirely self-supporting, run by donations from the villages and with no assistance from the District Board. Each child paid 2 to 4 annas a month and the teacher received a wage of Rs. 14 a month! For that he had received his training! How could he live? He was fortunate, he said, in that he had no family to

support.

Originally there had been three primary schools in the surrounding villages but this was now the only one. Teachers like everyone else had been affected by the famine and could not get rice to live. Many left for temporary war jobs and got five or six times the money as a clerk. The pupils themselves had died, and now many cannot come as they have not the cloth with which to clothe themselves.

In the villages there is rarely a temple or a mosque, yet continually there are signs of the two religions and their effect on the peoples' lives. Every evening, at sundown, the Muslims will carry out their prayers and salutations, facing West to Mecca. Little Hindu shrines are everywhere, under a tree or on some stones. Sometimes one sees a grotesque shape lying in the fields—all that is left of some stuffed Hindu image that had been immersed, as they always are, in the sacred water of the rivers and left here by the flood.

I remember arriving in a Hindu village after a walk of some miles across the fields as the sun was going down. It was a 'Pujah' day, and on the verandah of a house a crude image of a goddess had been set up decorated with flowers and there was an oil lamp or two about. Every now and then a man would go up and worship the goddess. The shrivelled Brahmin with his sacred cotton thread over his shoulder was in attendance and men would beat their drums and tinkle little bells. My presence did not affect the festival—everything was simple and free and easy. Half the village sat around and we talked of the embankment they had built to keep away the floods; they asked me about the peasantry in England and I told them, as best I could, that things were very different there—they had a trade union, like workers in a factory, instead of a Kisan Sabha.

Hinduism can, perhaps, be summed up for a Westerner, as rather a system of customs and superstitions than a religion in the European sense. It is the most flexible of religions but two important principles always stand—reincarnation, the belief that after his death the soul of every man is reborn in another being, lower or higher, depending on his actions in this life. Arising out of this, the second, the acceptance of caste—man has been born in his present station because of his past actions and so his status cannot be questioned. True, many of the manifestations of this are breaking down, but it is still unbroken as regards marriage. A girl will never marry out of her proper caste. The main castes of priest, warrior and peasant, with untouchables beyond the pale, result clearly from an ancient feudalism, and history shows many examples of the struggles of the Brahmins (priests) to retain supremacy.

Hinduism then is not a religion that goes out to convert others to the faith. One is born a Hindu. Thus it is that, deep in the hearts of many a Hindu, is the feeling that Mahomedanism is an alien religion on the soil of Mother India. A Muslim has such a different faith. He is a fervent believer in Allah, the one God, and in Mahomed, his prophet who spoke the word of God. The Koran thus stands immutable, inspired and unalterable and it lays down the ways of life of a believer. I found that I could never talk to Muslims as I could to Hindus. With the latter I could discuss their gods, even laugh about them. For there are so many, each with a different story and very human failings and excesses. Different also is the position of women. In a Hindu family a daughter is a liability, for a dowry must accompany her in marriage. With the Muslims the husband has to make over something when they marry, and she has greater rights to

inherit property. Yet her social standing is lower—amongst Muslims purdah is religiously enforced.

So these vastly different religions go on side by side and the differences mean altogether more than in any example of European history. Each creates certain differences in the way of living, in customs, and in outlook.

It seemed clear to me that Hindus tend to treat the Muslims as beneath them. Although in a village Hindus' and Muslims' houses would often be side by side, sometimes in the Muslim minority areas the Muslims would be grouped together in one part together with the untouchables themselves. And it is as difficult for a Muslim to eat in the house of a caste Hindu as it is for an untouchable—the place would be still unclean until washed and treated with cow dung. The same must have happened after I had eaten in an orthodox Hindu home. There, unlike a Muslim house, there would be separate dishes, for any food that is touched is unclean. I would ask them not to put too much in front of me as I knew that what I could not eat would be only thrown away!

Even in an area with a majority of Muslims, the educated and middle classes are still Hindus. So also, with few exceptions, are the merchants and the zemindars—no doubt, as is so often claimed, the result of British policy. It is on this soil that the demand of the Muslims for Pakistan has prospered. Yet they are all Bengalees. The Hindus, the untouchables, the Muslims have a common language and to a great degree a common culture. By uniting and arousing the peasants in their common interest, the peasants' organisation is breaking down their difference and surmounting the barriers of caste.

In a Stricken Area

There were few signs at first that we are in an area seriously affected by the famine. The countryside seemed normal enough. The paddy was ripening in the fields, jute stalks were piled up, bleached by the sun, and the yellow splash of a field of mustard showed every now and then.

Few men were working as we made our way between the fields—only a half-starved cow tethered to a stick in the ground interrupted us and refused to move. Then, overlooking a decaying river, with rotting skeletons of boats still showing through the reeds, we saw raised patches of ground that once were homes. Their owners had sold out to the kulaks (that is, those big peasants who gained more land during the famine), and now they were God knows where. The ground their home once stood on is cultivated—but not by them. Beyond were the gaunt remains of another homestead, the raised mud floors of the little huts not yet washed away by the rains.

Amongst the trees, huts were still standing and still inhabited. We walked into the courtyard of one of these homesteads. There was a deathly silence. In every one of a group of half a dozen huts were people too ill to come out. Some women crept to their doorways to speak to us. They were in rags and asked for medicine. Yet food was the medicine they really needed—nothing could prevail against disease in those frail bodies. It was unearthly to see such human beings. And through all the villages was this eerie silence. Not a baby cried, not a dog lived.

In another deserted group of huts everyone had gone for medicine to the relief centre. We looked in the huts and saw the possessions of these people. A little pile of rags—their

winter clothing—two or three earthern pots, a few old bottles hanging from the roof and the tattered remains of a fishing net.

We came to a village where twenty or thirty young men and boys gathered round to meet us. They had been working in the fields and said they were the only male members still able to do so. Their fathers had either died or gone. They showed us the remains of the village. Here had been a homestead—all signs of it had gone. There they had buried the family—and when they pointed out the spot I realised that under all those bamboo trees were graves, now hollows in the ground. They were everywhere and we saw them for several miles as we made our way around. Fifty volunteers from the Kisan Sabha had come to this village to bury the dead, and they brought with them milk and rice to save those still alive. "Two families were buried there." "Forty people are in a single grave there." They had buried 500 people in the villages around. In the single village where we were, they reckoned that of 700 people alive before the famine, 500 had died since then and more were dying yet.

Every now and then we would see some homeless destitutes. In the courtyard of a house a mother and her two little children with no possessions in the world, were sitting on a piece of bamboo matting, another piece propped up to shield them from the sun. One child was but a living skeleton, her stomach big with spleen, the other puffed out and covered with sores, his little eyes half closed. It did not need a doctor to see that they were past all hope. They would just stay and die. How many of these cold nights could they survive?

Others had more life in them. A woman, sitting on the ground, had been given a dozen little fish and was slowly pulling off their heads while they were still alive. Her young

son had a few sticks and was trying to light a fire in a hole in the ground. A peasant standing by said this woman had a daughter who had strength enough to go out husking paddy and that she would be back soon with some rice.

One could not talk to them—they were beyond all help or hope. They were too weak to notice our presence, and there was not even a movement by the women to draw their rags over their shrivelled breasts. And the children just sat still, without a murmur, and stared blankly out of their dilated eyes.

It was worse than a battlefield, this man-made death and misery prolonged and unending, with people living still amongst these graveyards, amid these lingering skeletons. And kulaks and zemindars and moneylenders had prospered and grown wealthy out of this. Meanwhile the government and the officials soothe themselves and others that the famine is over, disease is conquered and they can close down relief centres and withdraw medical assistance as there is no famine. And in London, the Secretary of State blandly answers questions in Parliament on the basis of this information.

On our way back we pass a man demented, crying and wringing his hands. He passes on, oblivious to us in his grief. He had lost his son today, "My son, my son, the last one left to me!"

Two hundred years of British Rule! Citizens of the Empire! Do you not understand the benefits this has brought to India?

LAND AND LIFE

"Who among you will take up the duty of feeding the hungry?" Lord Buddha asked his followers when famine raged at Shravasti.

Ratnaker, the banker, hung his head and said, "Much more is needed than all my wealth to feed the hungry".

Jaysen, the Chief of the King's Army, said "I would gladly give my life's blood, but there is not enough food in my house."

Dharmapal, who owned broad acres of land, said with a sigh: "The drought demon has sucked my fields dry. I know not how to pay the King's dues."

Then rose Supriya, the mendicant's daughter. She bowed to all meekly and said: "I will feed the hungry."

"How?" they cried in surprise. "How can you fulfil that vow?" "I am the poorest of you all,"said Supriya, "that is my strength. I have my coffer and my store at each of your houses."

—"The Mendicant's Daughter",
a fable by RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

It does not need statistics to prove that the peasants of Bengal do not get enough to eat—one has but to see them.

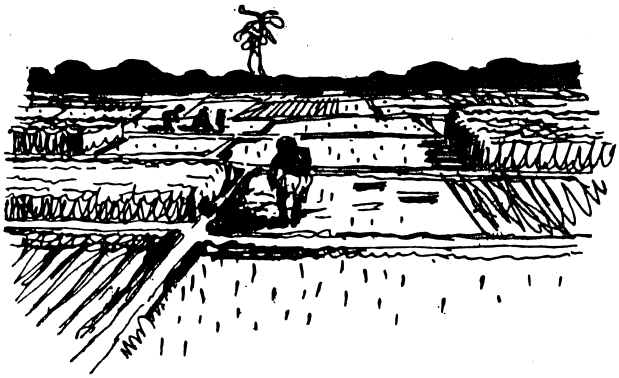
That is why, on the average, a Bengalee lives less than half as long as a Britisher, why also in Bengal, so may infants die before they even walk, and why all the poorer people have fever or disease to some degree.

There are too many of them, the land cannot support them all, is a favourite rejoinder. How many who say this have seen the huge areas of land, once cultivated, reverting again to swamp, or the rivers and canals which brought water to the land, dead and dying? Do they know that from each acre still cultivated the yield of food is going down, that on the average one acre in Bengal produces but a half the amount of rice as compared with China or only a third as compared with Japan?

What have they thought when they see the farming methods of an impoverished peasantry, scratching the surface with a wooden plough, even burning manure for fuel because nothing else is available? Have they considered the crying need for industry, the millions who would be absorbed in developing the resources of Bengal?

Many times, as I crossed the little fields of the richest plainlands of the world, I pictured how so many of those tiny plots could be swept into one, how ideal were those rolling acres for large scale mechanised farming. The little villages could become communities of cooperative owners, water would once again flow to the land, untamed rivers would be harnessed and industry and mineral wealth developed. Bengal could be wealthy and smiling ...

But this is dreaming. For today the peasant does not even own the land he tills himself. The men who do, think only of ways and means of collecting rent and how they can retain their hold over their tenants. Yet, to the peasant, his land is his life—land means rice which keeps alive his family. So,

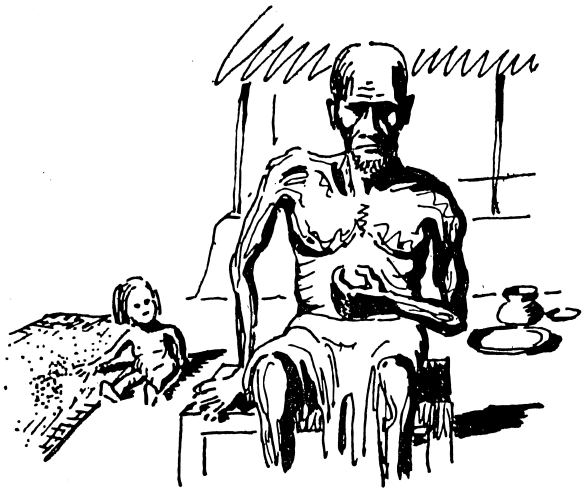


over all these little fields there is a never ending struggle for land and rice, for rent and life.

Why do the peasants submit? Because it is not in the nature of peasantry to revolt. A peasant who is the head of his family thinks primarily of that family, he has pride in its well being, he will struggle and sacrifice, he will sell up their possessions to save their land. But it is essentially an individual struggle. For the homesteads in a village are not united, each has its separate interest, some, relatively prosperous, are perhaps doing well out of another's misfortunes. A peasant is born oppressed and inherits debts and he accepts this as his lot. For he is illiterate and has not the means to know that anything else could prevail and his religion and his customs only perpetuate it—often, when the rains do not come or the floods ruin his crops, the cause of his misfortunes seems to him to be powerful Nature. Ranged against him all the time are educated and clever men with the law behind them who threaten him and, have the means, even the

armed force to dispossess him.

At times however, the peasants' struggle for rice and land becomes so sharp that all restraints are broken. Terrible dramas between man and man when all moral values go for naught, have been enacted in the remote and backward areas. I heard of one of these from an old Muslim peasant who had taken part. We were in his village where it had happened



several years ago.

"The crops had failed and we were starving. We gathered together to see what we should do, but our leaders were arrested. So the rest of us collected in the fields and we all went along to the house of the zemindar demanding rice.

"We squatted down outside and three or four called on him and asked for rice. 'I cannot feed you,' he said. 'Your store is full of rice, rice from our fields,' they told him. 'Keep

enough for your family and at least we shall not starve. For if we die, you also must die.'"

With that he agreed. But while they waited he went upstairs and, through a window, shot nine of the peasants down below with a rifle that he had.

"We fled and assembled again. 'Why did he murder us? We went to beg, not steal.' Then we knew we should die in any case, so we came again to his house. But he had no more bullets left and some of us went in and dragged him out and killed him, with eight others also from his house, to atone for the nine of us lying in his fields.

"Next day the military appeared. Peasants from far around assembled to meet them. All we had were sheets of corrugated iron against their bullets, but we were too many for them and they left."

Of course the rising was quelled and I heard later how it had been reported as "another communal riot". For the peasants were Muslims and the zemindar a Hindu!

It was in this very village however, that they told me "It could never happen now—we now have our Kisan Sabha". Elsewhere, wherever their organisation was strong, there was this same feeling that now they could stand up to the zemindar. The fact that such brutalities are much rarer now than in the past is undoubtedly due in large measure to this greater awareness amongst the peasants and the influence of the liberation movements. How has this been achieved? By the peasants themselves understanding that their interests are one and that the only way to fight successfully against the zemindar is to unite against him. I was passing through some villages on one occasion with a well known member of the Kisan Sabha. The villages had no organisation but one or two had heard of what the Kisan Sabha had done and the

peasants crowded round my companion pleading with him to take up their grievances against the zemindar. I always remember his answer "Yes, the Kisan Sabha will fight for you", he said "but in your village you will be the Kisan Sabha. For remember, he is one and you are many".

So simple and yet so revolutionary, for it entails breaking down their inborn prejudices and giving them a new confidence in themselves. This can only be done step by step and on issues which concern them strongly—not always to do with [the] zemindar. In any case he is probably away in the town and never sees his land which has been sub-let many times over and it is one of his underlings who is directly oppressing the peasants, and often as not he is the moneylender also. In a well organised area all the different types of peasants are united and conscious of their strength. Elsewhere the middle peasants might be the backbone of the organisation having come together on some such issue as exhorbitant charges for water from Government irrigation canals. In the stricken areas, the poor peasants and the landless labourers might be united against the "kulaks"—those bigger peasants who grew rich out of the famine and gained land and are now oppressing others.

Not all zemindars or taluqdars (sub-zemindars) would be oppressive to their tenants, although all, big and small, live out of the labour of the peasants, and are parasites of the land. Some of the smaller ones are nearly as impoverished themselves and there is hardly a more pitiful sight than one of these households. Wandering rather aimlessly about their dilapidated homes are two or three old men, perhaps with the sacred thread of the Brahmins over their withered shoulders. There are no young men left—they have all gone to the towns and those who remain try pathetically to keep up appearance

with shoes on their feet and are often steadfastly opposed to the peasant movement. I was told of one of these who when asked his income, said his family now received only Rs. 28 a month from their land! Yet he was a zemindar and he also had the outlook of a zemindar. On the other hand some hold vast areas of land. One has practically a whole District—many times more land than any landlord has in England.

While in the towns I often heard of legislation that protected the peasant and how this had improved his lot. But, in a backward area, what does the law mean to a peasant who cannot read or write, who has no money to employ a lawyer? There is an example in the extracting of "abwabs" by the zeminders—charges made by them on many pretexts and added to the rents. For instance, if a zemindar bought a new carriage he would recover the cost from his tenants, a wedding in his family would be charged to them, the peasant would have to pay a fee to sink a well in the land he himself tilled. This charges have been illegal since the very inception of the Permanent Settlement and there have been many laws since against them. Yet they continued on a colossal scale and official Commissions of investigation have pointed out that, through common usage, many of them have become incorporated in the regular rents. Nowadays, although zemindar still do levy 'abwabs', the practice is much less prevalent—their tenants have become more conscious of their rights. Legislation is of real value only when the peasantry is enlightened.

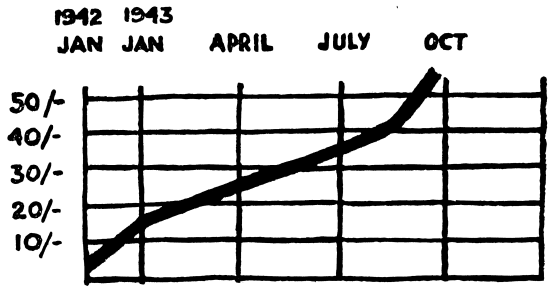
The Price of Rice is Death

In 1943 the Japanese were nearing the borders of Bengal itself. There was some shortage of rice that year and imports

had been stopped because of the war. The general dislocation was increased by the bungling of the authorities. For instance, under their "denial policy" all boats were taken away from the peasants in certain areas for fear they would fall into enemy hands—in spite of the fact that they were the main means of transport in the villages and a necessity for fishing. It was under such conditions that the oppressors of the peasantry and the profiteers came into their own to reap a rich harvest from the deaths of their fellow beings. The 1943 famine was, in fact, a climax in the long process of the impoverishment of the peasantry under the Permanent Settlement.

The shortage of rice amounted to about six weeks supply out of the full year—not more than had faced Bengal on previous occasions—yet three million people died of starvation and in the three great waves of epidemics that followed the famine. With equitable distribution people would have gone short but need these millions have died? They died because the price of rice went up and up, four, six, ten times, and the poorer people could not afford to buy. Those who died were the landless and poor peasants, the fishermen and such like—the very people who produced the food. Rice was always available for those with money enough to pay the inflated prices.

Even so, a peasant growing paddy in his fields need not starve—whatever the price of rice in the market—if he were able to keep back enough to feed his family throughout the year. But many of the peasants hold no land at all and they must buy rice to live. The sharecroppers who till the land of the zemindar or the moneylender, hand over half to two thirds of the crop to him and they are too impoverished to retain much of the remainder as food for themselves. As



The market price of rice per maund in 1942-43.

for the peasants who do hold land, they pay much of their rent and debts in rice and after harvest have to sell most of what is left in the market or to the merchant for money with which to pay their other debts and to buy other necessities of life. So the rice stock passes into the hands of the merchant, partly through the zemindar and the moneylender and it is from these same people that the peasants and the town people must buy rice to live. It was they who held back and hoarded the stocks of rice and watched the price go up and up—only loosening it on the black market to those who would pay the price. Even the official Famine Enquiry Commission pointed out that for every human being who died in the famine, a profit of Rs. 1,500 was made by those who held the stocks of rice.

Not all the people I spoke to, especially middleclass people in the towns, would agree with this explanation of the colossal death roll in the famine. A local Muslim League leader told me the cause was the dislocation of transport under war conditions and that rice could not be moved to the stricken

districts. Elsewhere a Congress leader said it was due to the Government and the bureaucracy who themselves were hoaders and refused to release their large stocks of rice (a Muslim League ministry was in office at the time). I was also told that it happened because of the policy of the Government in procuring rice from the peasants and selling it later at much higher prices and that the people who gained out of the famine were the officials and the bureaucrats themselves. All these comments were true enough but such people would not agree that private hoarders of all types were responsible to a very large degree for the deaths of their fellow Bengalees. For instance, when the Government procured rice it used private dealers and merchants as agents and so opened the doors to the stocking of the black market. When the Government was so inept as to attempt to control the price of rice without first securing the stocks, the inevitable happened and rice disappeared from the open market—held back by these same private hoarders.

Of course, people who gave these other explanations were not peasants themselves and they knew very little of their problems—one in fact was himself a merchant. They typified many of the middle sections of Bengal today who cannot see what stares them in the face—for these methods of exploitation and corrruption are accepted as normal in money making and in business and they themselves are most likely involved to some degree. However, when one is amongst the peasants in the villages, it is clear enough that the hoarders, the profiteering merchants and the black marketeers, no less than the zemindar, his underlings and the moneylenders, are the scourge of Bengal today. They were largely the cause of the deaths in the famine, they grew stronger as a result of it and their continued existence is one reason why Bengal has

not recovered.

As for the peasants—faced with the rising cost of rice, large numbers had to sell their property and their rights in some or all of their land to that they could buy rice to live. Those already landless became destitutes without a possession in the world. Streams of them left the stricken areas and

those who have not yet died can be seen in many parts of Bengal today. Some who lost their land managed to remain in their villages and have become day labourers—they find

work on another's fields and earn anything from a few annas to a rupee a day. Others have become sharecroppers and cultivate their land for the moneylender, or whoever else it was to whom they sold the rights in their land. Some who left their home districts and survived, returned later. Two brothers, I remember, had just arrived in their village which they had left in 1943. They had trekked back from Assam and, except for the rags they stood up in, had nothing of their own. Before the famine their family had had several little fields and a homestead of its own.

The only ones who have gained in land are the same oppressors of the peasants—the taluqdars, zemindars, moneylenders and in some parts the "kulaks" or rich peasants. Over a half of the peasants are now landless, or have so little they have to work for others in order to survive. This large-scale transfer of land is another reason why Bengal has not recovered.

One of the steps the Government has taken and widely publicised, is to set up large centralised stores of rice which are to be released when the necessity arises and so will guard against famine. In the villages in which people are starving now, this seems meaningless and one can but wonder how much would ever reach the peasants and how much find its way to the black market. I thought of these huge stores on the two or three occasions when I saw the little communal rice stores in the villages arranged by the peasants themselves through the Kisan Sabha. These were on a voluntary basis and nearly all the peasants contributed. Distribution, as the need arose, was left in the hands of the local committee. What confidence this demonstrated in their own organisation, what a change from the individual, backward peasants that once they were!

Very few peasants I ever spoke to had had anything from Government relief loans. One peasant in an East Bengal village who had received Rs. 25 in 1943, was being forced to pay back Rs. 50 now! This seemed inconceivable to me, especially when he told me that although he had only three bighas of land left, he was having to pay others to till it as he and his family were too weak and ill to work! It was only later, when I saw more of moneylenders and corrupt officials, that I understood how such things really could take place. There were also loans for cattle—these had died no less than human beings. Peasant after peasant complained that he could not till his land because his bullocks were weak or he had lost them—never during the whole time I was in Bengal did I see one whose ribs and bones were not clearly showing through his skin. In one sub-division, as an example, the Government loan worked out at 5 annas per family, and, as a bullock costs upwards of Rs. 150, it is not surprising that few peasants had even heard of these loans.

This season the crops have been badly affected by the weather—in West Bengal by drought and in the lower Brahmaputra valley by severe floods. In neither area has anything worth mentioning been done by the authorities to relieve the distress. In village after village in Burdwan District the peasants said they were only getting 25 percent of the normal crops because of lack of rain. A Kisan Sabha leader said the officials estimated the crop at 50 to 75 percent. He had been unable to get them down to see for themselves and had been told he was “scare-mongering”. I pictured to myself what would happen in a few months when the resources of the poorer peasants were exhausted. Some relief kitchens would be opened and very belatedly, perhaps after people had started to die off, some of the much publicised stocks of

rice would be put on the market and some of it might find its way to the peasants. Another but a very tiny famine, too small to get into the papers, just a small part of the bigger one that will be sweeping India!

Peasant Producers of Jute

As well as paddy the peasants grow other crops which they can sell for ready cash in the market. The most important of these "money crops" is jute. Tobacco and sugar cane are also grown in some parts of the province.

In all corners of the earth jute is used for hessian, sacking and such like. Virtually all of it comes from the peasants' flooded fields of East Bengal—there is nowhere else it will grow, nowhere else has the huge rainfall, the rich soil and the standing water which are necessary to produce the lengthy fibres. It is stripped, processed and washed for hours by peasants or labourers standing waist deep in water and then is dried in the sun and brought in bundles to the market.

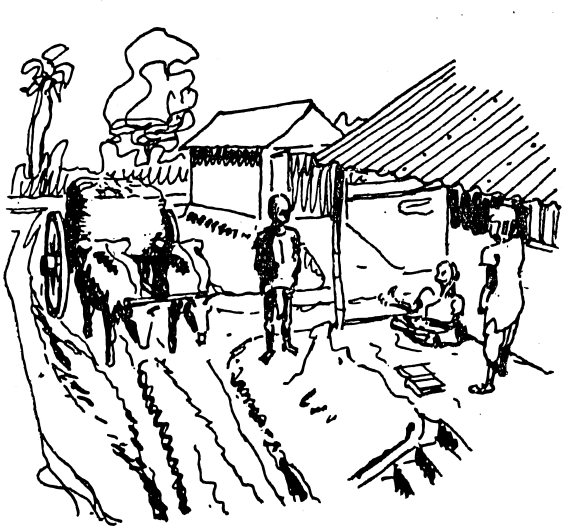
I had heard there was a controlled price for jute but, in the villages and small towns, I saw peasants selling it to dealers for 7 to 8 rupees a maund—and bitterly complaining that it now costs them Rs. 10 to produce. It was later that I learnt that it was only the maximum price, of Rs. 12, which was controlled! Why then do the peasants grow it in such quantities? They do so because of the ready cash it brings to them. A peasant with a few acres will often grow just as much paddy as will keep his family and will cultivate jute on the rest of his land. When one asks a peasant how he decides the amount of jute he will grow each year, it is clear that it is just a speculation on his part. He has to judge what the price will be and how far it will pay him—or how much he

might lose. Much seems to depend on rumours of the coming market prices, And there is not much doubt that the dealers encourage those of the right kind—for the more jute that is grown the easier it is to keep down the prices.

The market price of jute can mean the well-being or the impoverishment of millions of people. The Kisan Sabha is campaigning for a guaranteed minimum price to protect the peasant and high enough to ensure him a fair return. (There is a guaranteed price to the peasants for sugar cane delivered to the mill—although once again advantage is taken of the need of the peasants for ready cash and the rate hardly covers the cost of growing and carting to the mill.) It is common knowledge, even amongst the Government Jute Officers to whom I spoke, that the reason the Government does not lay down a fair price is that the market is completely in the hands of the Calcutta mill owners who manipulate the prices as they will. These mills are mostly owned by British firms—we shall see later more implications of the jute industry in Bengal.

While in the villages I learnt something of the point of view of the peasant grower of jute and the odds seem very heavily loaded against him. He has to sell his jute quickly, as he must get the money—for it is traditional that at market time all those to whom he owes money, the zemindar, the moneylender, the Union Board, will press for payment. Also he has no proper store in which to keep the jute and it will deteriorate and discolour unless he disposes of it at once. On the other hand, the big dealers build up a reserve stock from earlier harvests and so keep down the price.

Above the dealer in the market is a whole hierarchy of middle men—it has been said that jute passes through more hands than any other crop—and each one of these has his profit, taken off the price paid to the grower. It was amazing



also to hear of the further deductions and allowances taken off the price. Charges are made for weighing, extra jute is always taken as a "dryage allowance", deductions are made for festivals and such like. So, as with rice, above the peasant and living off his labours are layers of parasites. But there are important differences, for in the case of jute there is a highly organised industry at the top. The jute mill owners, the steamship and railway companies which carry the raw jute, the dealers, the brokers, the balers, the exporters, are all highly organised, are largely interconnected financially and have a powerful influence on the destinies of Bengal. They all live off the produce of the peasant and while he is the one who holds the real monopoly, he is exploited and swindled at every turn because he is backward and unorganised. That is why the growing peasant movement in the jute area is of

such importance to the major industry of the province, the jute mills, and the stronghold of British capital in Bengal.

WHO CONTROLS THE CONTROL SHOP?

"Learn to know this man.
Learn to hate and understand.
He stole and sold our food for gold,
He'd sell for gold his motherland.

Hunger comes, a killing pain.
He smiles, stores up the peasant's grain.
When thousands die in lightless gloom,
Gold brightens up his secret room.
When comrades rise in arms to fight,
He kills, to check our growing might.

Can we who live forget our dead,
And let the traitor live instead?"

—"THE HOARDER", by a poet of the peasant movement.

I remember while in Calcutta reading the official statements in the Press, allaying rumours of a cloth famine, "Under the Rationing scheme cloth is being supplied at ten yards per head during the year" (and there were numerous protests saying how inadequate that was). Yet, in no case in East Bengal did I find a poor peasant or a labourer who had had more than one piece of 5 yards in 6 months for the *whole*

of his family, that is but one eighth, or at most a quarter, of the rate at which we are told he is getting it. Elsewhere the best example was two pieces per family in 4 months or a maximum of half the official rate. If cloth is actually being released by the Government at 10 yards a year it but shows the colossal proportions the black market has reached.

Cloth is a necessity no less than food—in the cold winter nights weak and half-starved people can perish. In every area one of the foremost grievances of the peasants was that they could not get cloth from the Control Shop. "The women cannot leave the house because they have no cloth", I heard on many occasions. There were peasants who said they had had to take their children away from school because there was not enough cloth in the family to clothe them. A woman, almost destitute, broke down and burst into tears once when

I asked about cloth. The murmurs and complaints from the others around left no doubt of the reality of the cloth famine

in Bengal.

It is cloth for sails and dhotis which is supposed to be rationed and controlled. So is sugar, kerosene and salt. Yet I have been through village after village in the evenings which were blacked except for a glimmer of light here and there, because they could not get their ration of kerosene. I have seen some of the salt from the Control Shop which was so filthy that it had been condemned by the Sanitary Inspector as likely to cause dysentery, and yet for weeks no other was obtained.

On one occasion some peasants who had come in to market showed me their ration cards. Yes, the amounts they had received for several months were clearly marked—about a quarter of what they should have been. Here was proof enough for any officials and I told them so. One of them answered, "The Kisan Sabha collected 500 of these last month and took them to the S.D.O. He could not then deny the position. All he could say was, 'I know it gets to the black market. But what can I do? You know as well as I do, that they are all corrupt.'". This from the official responsible for all administration in his area and who is ever receiving greater powers.

Co-operative Societies

Controlled goods are supplied either through Co-operative Societies and Control Shops or through selected merchants and retailers. Unofficial Food Committees should also be functioning to control distribution, and watch activities.

Co-operative Societies have existed in some areas for many years under an Act of the Government of Bengal, as have Co-operative Banks for supplying cheap credit to the

peasants. It is a surprise in backward Bengal, to see the solid buildings of some of their premises. The whole idea seems very enlightened—it might have been well intentioned—but peculiar things go on behind those walls. I had the example of a new Society, only recently set up. It was started by the S.D.O. himself and although much of what he did was against the regulations of the Act, it was undoubtedly perfectly legal, for, as we have seen, the powers of such officials are now practically unlimited.

The wholesale society for the sub-division was established with shares at Rs. 5,000 apiece. The only people who could buy such shares were the very merchants and black-marketeers the Co-operative was supposed to counter. On the Committees of the Retail Societies, one to each union, the S.D.O. at first appointed a representative from each of the political parties, but since then they have been removed one by one on various pretexts and now all the members are Government officials! According to the Act, shares in the Retail Societies should be Rs. 2 each and payable at 4 annas a month. He made the shares Rs. 5 each, payable in one sum, thus making it impossible for poorer people to take part.

When, in addition, the private dealers selected to sell the goods to the villagers were not appointed by the Retail Societies under which they functioned, but by the Wholesale Society, the whole thing was seen to be a farce. The profiteers were in control at the top, they had appointed retail dealers to suit themselves (if in fact they did not actually own them) and everything carried on very much as before.

What did the peasants have to say about such Co-operatives? "They refused to issue ration cards unless we bought a share." Thus food and cloth were actually being denied to the poor sections of the people. This rule was

only rescinded by the S.D.O. after long struggles. Another case: "They refused a ration card until we had paid our Union rates". Members of the Union Board were running the Co-operative here. I confirmed from other sources that both these examples were correct.

It is clear enough where all the controlled goods go to, for the black market goes on naked and unashamed. With money one can buy anything, as I saw for myself. Corruption is rampant from the very bottom. I repeatedly heard statements that even when goods had arrived in a Control Shop they remained 'under the counter' until a sum sufficient to suit the shopkeeper had been added to the proper rate.

What of the people who expose these things? One, still a member of the Food Committee, had been arrested on a charge of dacoity after he had proved, by entering the man's house, that a Committee member of the Co-operative Society had over 200 bales of cloth there. Another court case was in progress against members of the Kisan Sabha, who, in seizing hoarded bales of cloth from a merchant's store, had become involved in blows. In neither case had the real culprits been charged for hoarding—indeed it is difficult to find a case in the whole Province, where a hoarder or a profiteering merchant has been charged before the courts.

Although this was the prevalent state of affairs there were still exceptions. Some Food Committees are functioning well and distributing as fairly as their supplies will show. One notable case was of a Cooperative Society which had been in operation for two years and which laid all its books before us, a very rare occurrence. Here there was a strong Kisan Sabha organisation and the S.D.O. had not been obstructive. The result was a Society covering a Union and serving about twenty food committees and which obviously had the con-

fidence of the peasants. In the villages I got no accusations from them against that Co-operative and although supplies were still terribly short, what did come was fairly distributed.

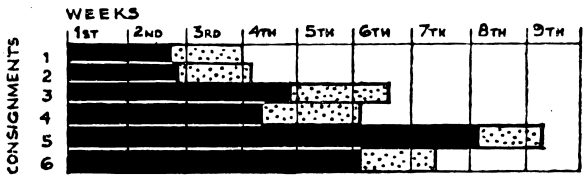
Food Committees

Food Committees were introduced originally to give a measure of popular control but now, in numerous cases they have been superseded. This was done by officials on the pretext of "greater efficiency" and as it is part of a similar process in other spheres it is worth considering one example in some detail.

I was in the house of the Secretary of a District Food Committee; he was a pleader in a small way and one of those honest individuals who still carry on in the midst of all the corruption. (I confirmed this from the villages—that is the only way to check an 'honest' man.) He was of no party, had once been in the Hindus Mahasabha and left it in disgust. This was the story from his files.

For several months, all controlled goods had been distributed through non-official Sub-divisional and Union Food Committees. During this time they had made many protests to the District Magistrate about the slow and inadequate supply of goods to them, but trouble came when they submitted a detailed statement. This the Secretary showed me and I examined it at some length.

It was most revealing, and showed that the time taken for goods merely to be handed over by the Government Supply Department in bulk was about twice as long as the time taken for the Food Committee to distribute it to all the Unions. It was, in effect, an indictment of the bureaucracy and revealed the relative efficiency of the popular bodies. This could have



SIX CONSIGNMENTS OF CLOTH.
Black shows the time taken for officials to hand over cloth in bulk after it had arrived in the District Store.
Dotted shows the time taken for [the] Sub-Divisional Food Committee to allot cloth on basis of ration card holders, to divide the bales and to distribute cloth to about 100 Union[s].

hardly pleased the District Magistrate. At all events, at the next meeting of the Union Board representatives he proposed that cloth should be taken out of the hands of the Food Committees and supplied direct to the villages. All those present were unanimous in rejecting the proposal and they even decided to boycott the scheme if it were put into operation.

Afterwards the District Magistrate saw the Secretary and the conversation went something like this: "You were on the platform, you could at least have tried to persuade them to accept the scheme", he said. "But they were unanimous, you saw their temper", the Secretary replied. "Therefore I take it you are in favour of the boycott" was the rejoinder of the District Magistrate—this, of course, is an offence. They parted and following that he has been distributing through dealers and has taken it out of the hands of the Committee.

I then saw how distribution is working now, several months later. Cloth, for instance. The bulk supply of this

always has a great quantity of material useless for clothing, (although it is all included in the quota)—printed cloths, netting, expensive serges, etc. Previously the Committees had taken great care to divide this as fairly as possible. Now, naturally, the officials get the pickings at every stage and the unwanted materials arrive in the villages. He had figures submitted by him to the District Magistrate, which show that officials receive 4[0] percent of the total or about 16 times their share. Also a policy is being adopted (on Government instructions) to satisfy the towns first. Thus, the towns receive 16 times as much sugar as the villages.

He concluded with some bitter remarks on seed potatoes, which the peasants should be able to buy at controlled rates. A dealer had been appointed direct by some official in Calcutta to supply so many hundred tons for the District. These were bought in Central India, but as he said, for a relatively small sum, some individual from the railway staff can be bribed to 'accidentally' direct the wagons to a siding. The potatoes being perishable goods the contractors can do nothing else but sell them off, of course, at black market rates! Whatever actually did take place, the peasants of his whole District, were denied their seed potatoes at controlled prices, although they had actually been purchased by the dealer. In this sort of way the black market gets its supplies.

LET THEM DIE!

"Come with me and I will show you,
Almost hidden in the shadow
Of an Indian night
Pavements strewn with human bodies
That with all the other shit
The authorities forget
Even to worry about.
Here's one
Still lives, though all his flesh is gone."

—CLIVE BRANSON, a British soldier in India,
killed in Burma, 1944.

We walked out of the little town to see the famine destitutes in their camp—those who were still left from the thousands who, in 1943, had streamed into this part of Central Bengal in search of food. As we walked along the road the night was falling and the cold already penetrating. We came upon the camp in the clear moonlight. Set in a clearing were five or six large bamboo and thatch huts—the huts already falling to pieces. The inmates crowded round us, many young women and little toddlers, and a few able-bodied men—altogether there were nearly 300 people in these huts.

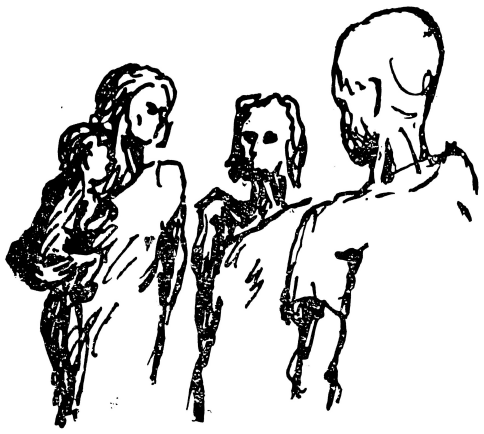
The camp had been built with Government funds in 1944, that is several months after the destitutes had invaded the area. It had served to get them off the streets of the town and since then they had been virtually left to fend for themselves. One of the women told us the authorities even came recently to demolish the huts! But she and others had gone down to the Kisan Sabha office and one of the local leaders (he was with me then) had come straight up and they had all marched to the District Magistrate and he had had to rescind the order.

We looked inside the huts. There were no lamps—they got no ration of kerosene—but, by the flickering light of one or two candles, we could just make out the human beings lying on the floor. They were in all stages of destitution, the little children, with no cloth to cover themselves, huddling to the warmth of their mothers. We asked them from where they came. Mostly from Dacca District. One woman said she had had 6 bighas of land but the family had had to sell all they possessed and she had lost her husband on the trek from there. There were no complete families left. Some did not know whether their father or brother or mother had died or still lingered on in some other part—they were past hoping they would ever see them again.

"How do you live now", we asked a middle aged woman who seemed to be the spokesman of the camp. "Some get jobs as day labourers", she said and she proudly patted the head of her son, her only one left. He had worked on the aerodromes but, with the war over, that work is finished now. What about the rest? For there was only a handful of such able-bodied youths. Then she pointed out to us what I had only heard of before. These women and girls were selling their bodies as the only means to get food—she herself had

been able to avoid doing so because she had had her son. I looked into the faces of the girls in the moonlight. Yes, many of their little ones were too young to have come with them in the famine—and there was not light enough to see the colour of their skin.

To such depths has been forced the peasant stock of Bengal, forgotten by authority and shunned by society. For later I was to find "respectable" people in the town nearby,

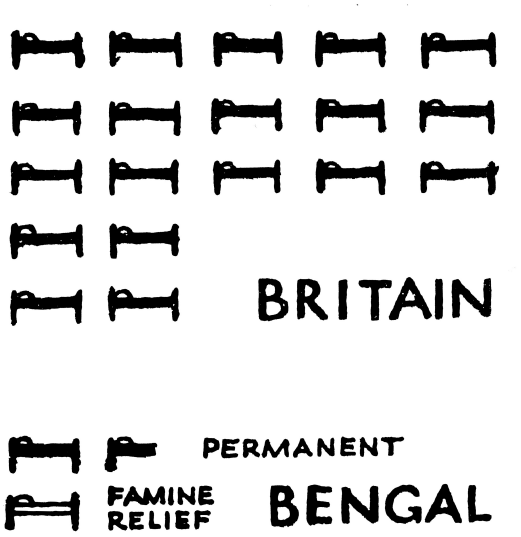


including leading members of Congress and the Muslim League, who hardly knew of the existence of these people except as a den of prostitutes and beggars. If it had not been for the man who was with me then, and others of the Kisan Sabha, many of them would not be living today—according to what they told us themselves. These people were their only friends, they had brought them food, they had fought for them against the authorities.

I felt very moved as I walked back with such a friend along the road. The little naked children followed, to see us go. Though they were trained in begging by their mothers, they never asked us for a gift. They also knew their friends. . .

As well as such destitute camps, the Government provided Famine Relief hospitals in 1944. In one District I was in, there were six with about 200 beds. The permanent hospital beds are also about the same number, say one bed for

about 3,000 people, or about twenty times as few as England. Is the Government developing these hospitals into permanent



Proportionate numbers of hospital beds

ones and taking the opportunity to improve the health facilities for Bengal? On the contrary, at the time I was there, their policy was to close them down as the need for them no longer existed. It was only later, but a few weeks before they were due to close, that they decided to retain most of them for a further three years.

The management of these hospitals affords an example of the anti-democratic methods of authority. I talked over this with the doctor in one of the hospitals. The hospital was typical of many of them—hardly a magnificent example

by normal standards. It consisted of a series of bamboo huts with mud floors, but at least the patients had beds and blankets and mosquito nets. Originally it had been managed by the District Board with the S.D.O. Now, as a result of the policy of "efficiency" and Section 93, it is "provincialised" and run by civil servants under the department of the Civil Surgeon of the Government of Bengal. What is the difference? Previously, no doubt, it was not run as efficiently as it might have been and there was graft and corruption in its management. Now, however, there is every opportunity for bureaucratic muddle and corruption on an altogether bigger scale—hidden from the people and with little chance of exposure. For, however bad a District Board might be, it is a body of the people and its work can be exposed and checked to some degree. Certainly, supplies have now increased and there are more blankets, medicines even. But is this an argument for bureaucracy? Could not these have been made available before? Feeding also has shown some improvement. On the other hand the allowance for food per patient has been increased from 8 annas to 12 annas per day—altogether out of proportion to the improvement.

Why were these hospitals to be closed? (Only 15 percent of the beds were to be retained after three months.) I saw part of the answer when I visited others of them. The atmosphere was that of the old institutions of Victorian England—I had even heard one called a "slaughterhouse" by a past inmate. As well there was no proper system of finding patients—thousands might be dying in the villages but none would be crowding round their doors.

People's Relief Centres

During 1943 gruel kitchens and mobile units had been organised by many unofficial bodies and, during the waves of epidemics which followed the famine, these had developed into established Medical Relief centres. I was talking to the doctor in one of these, a centre provided by the Bengal Civil Protection Committee. It was in two rooms in an old house near a village and the owner of the house had played a leading part in running the centre since its inception. Two cupboards and some tables comprised the dispensary and outside was a hand pump for drinking water. The doctor proudly showed me the microscope inscribed "To the people of Bengal from the workers of the U.S.A." presented jointly by the C.I.O. and the A.F.L. It had proved invaluable—mainly for diagnosing kalazer fever—and was used also by three [or] four other relief centres in the neighbourhood. There were two regular assistants in this centre, volunteers who had been trained by the doctor, and who dispensed and issued medicines to the patient.

The patients were waiting outside the building—over a hundred of them. The men were in front and the women behind. Their condition beggars description. The women, frail and withered with their thin grey saries hanging loosely on their bodies, were sitting in little groups on the ground. (Even in such conditions the Hindu women kept apart and to themselves.) The bare bodies of the men were thin and bony and their cheeks had hollowed with hunger. The little children with protruding stomachs, were standing still and looking up at one with wide open eyes. Most of these people had malaria, nearly as many kalazer fever, and dysentery and stomach troubles were very common. They were all virtually

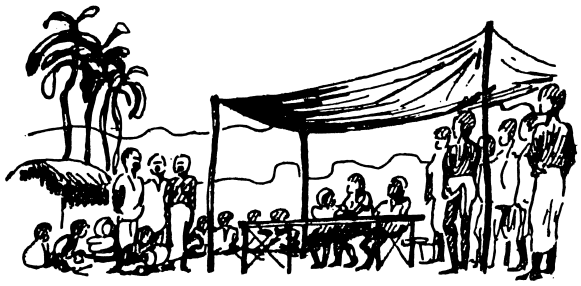
starving.

The doctor dealt with an average of 200 cases a day at this centre. He would see these patients at the centre in the morning and the rest of the day would visit those in the villages who were too ill to come. When I went on his rounds with one of these doctors, I would see how well he knew the people and what help and hope he gave them. As we cycled

through the fields he would tell me, “There are three people dying in that home there”, “Eighty people have died in this village since the rains”. Yet such is the character of justice and authority, that I found of such doctors that I met, nearly all had been hounded and had spent their terms in jail for fighting for the people’s freedom.

These centres give much more than mere medical relief. I found them to be the centres, in the fullest sense, of the

lives and struggles of the peasants of the area. At one of them they had been told a British visitor was coming, and the local members of the Kisan Sabha prepared a welcome. I had a special meal with the best fine rice and with vegetables and fish. As well they had made several special sweet-



meats in their homes the day before. They came from villages far around and it was there I met the village poet whose songs I had even heard in other Districts in Bengal. Two or three of them sang some of these songs for me. They tell of the beauty of their homeland, of the death and devastation of today, of the way in which the hoarders are waxing rich on the sufferings of the people. They tell of Congress and the League, of the fight against bureaucracy and authority, of how the Kisan Sabha is helping the downtrodden. These songs are sung far and wide, only two days before I had heard a blind beggar singing one in a little town.

We talked about their villages and about imperialist rule, of the Kisan Sabha and of Pakistan. I told them about England, how the common people are their friends. . .

There were four of these centres in this subdivision. As well there was one Government Famine Relief hospital and a few permanent District Board Charitable Dispensaries—

three of these latter had closed, however, as they were short of medicines and it was difficult to get doctors as they were paid only Rs. 40 a month! All the unofficial centres were controlled by the Bengal Medical Relief Co-ordination Committee which had been set up in 1944. Two of these centres were run direct by the Committee, one belonged to the People's Relief Committee, a body with wide support sponsored by the Communist Party, another to Congress and one, which had been run by the Muslim League, had been transferred elsewhere. They are supported by collections from all types of people. The Government had only helped to the extent of supplying rice to the relief kitchens for two months in 1943 and, after the medical centres had been set up, by the supply of quinine. At the time I was there because "epidemics are over" they intended to withdraw all assistance one month later. The relief centres are countering this with a campaign demanding that this decision be rescinded, and appealing for public support and donations to establish them on a permanent basis. They are determined that bureaucracy shall not be allowed to let the people die.

Who Knows The People Best?

When I was in the office of the Sanitary Inspector in the neighbourhood, I saw something of the way in which the Government obtains its statistics of disease and death rates. This poor official, himself trying to live on Rs. 20 a month, is responsible for public health. He told me that it was the Kisan Sabha which had organised the volunteers for carrying out inoculations with cholera and other vaccines, when he had been able to get them. One of his jobs is to collect statistics and his room was full of graphs and figures.

How does he get them? From the village chowkidars in over a hundred villages. These illiterate, ill-paid semi-policemen, who often do not know or care about the people in their villages and whose object is little more than to give some figures, any figures, which can be entered on a form so that they can draw their pittance—it is on the basis of what these men say that the Government makes its statements. A recent one assured the world that, as malaria figures were down, the emergency is over. In any case this only covered a three monthly period and conveniently forgot to state that other diseases were so mounting that they threatened to surpass malaria.

Let us see what the doctors have to say, those doctors from the relief centres who are trained men and know their villages and are the friends of the people. It is revealing to know that the doctor who showed me the following report, was nearly arrested last year for making a similar statement! He had sent it by post to an Officer in the Government of Bengal but it somehow found its way to another department. It was there stated to be a gross exaggeration and the doctor was charged with "creating alarm" and such like. The peasants in his area heard of this however, and over a thousand of them went to the police station demanding to be arrested too! In the face of this the charge was not pursued and he even managed to get an official down to show him that things really were as he had written.

The report I saw was prepared in Autumn 1945 by various doctors from the centres and covered a subdivision with several hundred thousand population. "The condition of health in the sub-division has deteriorated since last year", it stated. "The patients who were attacked at the beginning of the epidemic had some resistance, whereas at present, people

are more devitalised and are suffering from chronic diseases with complications requiring a better type of medical aid and medicines ... Due to this year's floods, water borne diseases are on the increase ... Immediate repair of hand pumps for drinking water is essential.

"Our survey shows that, of the total population, 95 percent suffer from some disease, mild or grave. 40 percent have serious ailments and of these 50 percent are in a grave condition and require constant and prolonged medical aid.

"It is proposed that ... the existing staff at the centres should be doubled ... medical expenditure should be increased to 500 to 600 rupees ... the staff should have more equipment, cycles, torches, rain coats, etc."

Whom are we to believe? These doctors or the village chowkidars? The organisations of the people or the bureaucracy?

WATER IN THE WRONG PLACE

"Black cloud, come down, come down,
Flower-bearing cloud, come down,
Cloud like cotton, cloud like dust,
O let your sweat pour down.

Bind cloud blind cloud, come,
Let your twelve, brother cloudlets come,
O cloud, drop a little water
That we may eat good rice.

Straight cloud strong cloud, come,
Lazy cloud, little cloud, come,
I will sell the jewel in my nose and buy
An umbrella for your head!

Soft rain, gently fall,
In the house the plough neglected lies,
In the burning sun the peasant dies,
O rain with laughing face, come down."

—Bengalee song of the Village Maidens,
by JASIM UDDIN.

Water is the life blood of Bengal. Its very soil has been built up through the ages by mighty rivers bringing down silt from the mountain ranges. The cultivation of its crops

depends on the intense rainfall of the summer monsoon and fluctuations in the monsoon can mean ruin to the cultivators—for there is practically no rain at other times of the year. So the control of waterways to drain away the floods and systems of irrigation to bring water to the land after the rainy season, have been recognised as important for centuries. Many signs can still be seen of the canals and embankments which were still maintained under the Moghul Emperors.

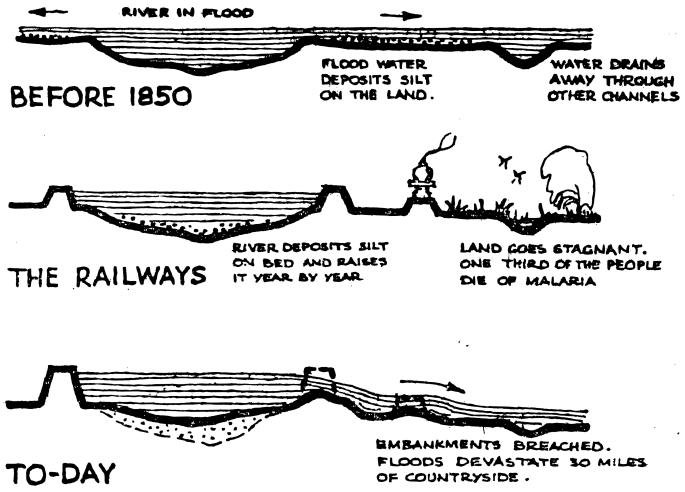
Today, man, who should control nature, has lost his grip. Over a hundred years of neglect and of terrible engineering errors in the construction of railway and roads, are turning huge areas into marsh and jungle, rivers are silting up and dying, elsewhere the sea water is creeping northwards and poisoning the land, other land is crying out for water. In a province where, in one District or another, the crops are ruined year after year by lack of rain or floods or some other calamity of nature, only one acre in 100 is served by Government irrigation canals. In one District, Midnapore, the acreage irrigated in this way actually declined by 80 percent during the 15 years before the war according to official figures. Elsewhere the small areas laboriously irrigated from rivers, ponds, and wells, often by human labour, do not touch the fringe of the problem.

The peasants are in a continual and almost lone struggle with the forces of nature. In the swamps and the stagnant land only the mosquito thrives and multiplies on its human victims.

The Seven Satanic Chains

Before 1850 the District of Burdwan in West Bengal was such a pleasant and healthy place that the wealthy people

of Calcutta had their country houses there and would stay to recuperate their health. Dr. Buchanan of the East India Company, commissioned to survey North and South India, was so impressed with the agricultural prosperity of the District in 1815 that he placed it first in all India. Yet suddenly, in the ten years after 1862, one third of the whole population died of malaria—many of a particularly virulent type called "Burdwan Fever"—and today it remains a most malarious District.



The story of the Damodar

Why this sudden calamity? Because just before this time railway embankments had been built along the Damodar River with no consideration as to how they would affect the natural flooding of the river. Railways in Bengal are always built on continuous embankments to keep them above water

level during the rains. Along the Damodar, instead of allowing the flood water to find its way across the country and to drain away through other water courses and canals, they confined the river to a narrow course. The results were two-fold. Deprived of its annual flow of water, the countryside went stagnant, prosperous fields changed back to jungle. Secondly, disastrous floods took place every now and then when the angry river tore through the embankments. In the rains the rivers here reach a tremendous size and bring down huge quantities of silt—previously this had been deposited on the land, improving the fertility of the soil, but with the river confined by the embankments, year by year this silt raised its bed. So the embankment had to be progressively raised and raised, and was periodically breached. The present seven embankments—railway, canal and road—are indeed Burdwan's "seven satanic chains", as they were so aptly named by Sir Herbert Wilcox.

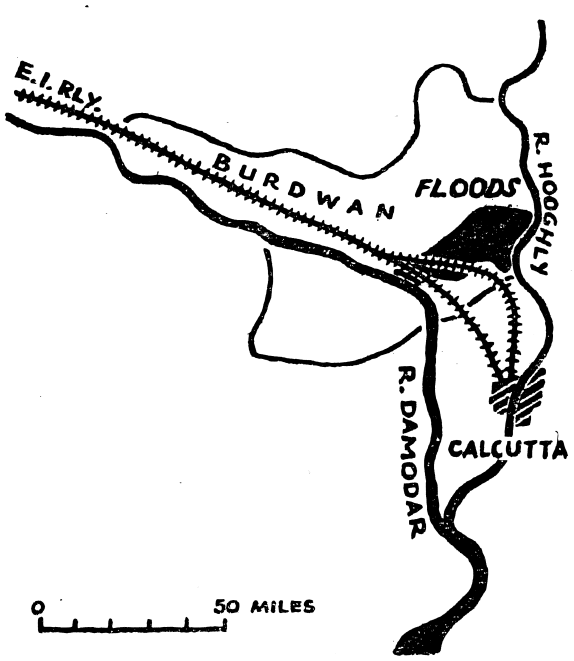
In the soothing language of the Victorian officials soon after the first calamity, "a certain sense of insecurity prevailed amongst the peasants" and a scheme to control the floods by dams and reservoirs in the upper reaches was prepared by Army officers. Since then scheme after scheme has been produced, but nothing has yet materialised. All of these schemes had as their primary object the protection of "important interests", that is the main railway lines and Grand Trunk Road—the welfare of the people of the District as a whole was hardly considered. The latest proposals prepared after the disastrous floods of 1943 go beyond this however, and demonstrate the tremendous possibilities of the agricultural and industrial development of this part of Bengal. The new dams would not only control the flow of water and prevent floods but could have hydro-electric stations producing

as much electrical energy as is at present used in the whole of the Calcutta area; the hills in the upper reaches would be replanted and the land cared for and would prevent the top soil being eroded and swept down the rivers in the rains each year; the rivers would be opened again for water transport from Calcutta even as far as the coalfield of West Bengal and Bihar; the peasants' fields could be watered by large-scale schemes of irrigation. The Damodar Valley in fact could become another T.V.A. and Burdwan could lose its "satanic chains".

At present there is haggling going on between the Governments of Bengal, the adjoining province of Bihar and the Government of India as to financing the construction works. Also certain other "important interests" are involved and are having their say, the coalowners in Bihar, for instance, who claim their pits will be affected by the dams. Does the same fate as befell its predecessors await this latest scheme?

Floods in the Damodar mean much more than breached roads and railways. In 1943 the river virtually changed its course and tore across thirty miles or so of peasants' fields, finding its way into the Hooghly river and even threatening the Port of Calcutta. Officially, most of the country is supposed to have recovered—but stop a peasant and ask him. In one village two-thirds of the land was still unusable because old waterways, silted up by sand from the flood, have not been reopened. So the peasants become impoverished and food is denied to the people.

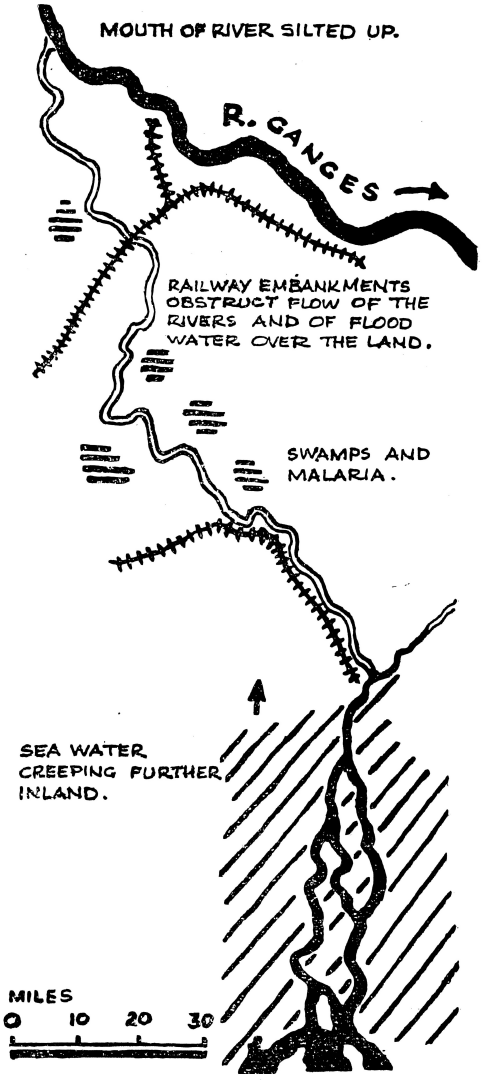
Certain areas of Burdwan are at present served by a system of Government irrigation canals. It was here the peasants' organisations grew strong before the war after lengthy struggles against the high charges for water. These were finally reduced to under a half (during the war they were in-



The lower course of the River Damodar

creased again and have just been raised once more to their original level.) This year the crops in these fields are thriving, elsewhere there is drought and a failure of the harvest. Every now and again, one sees little valleys in the parched ground which were watercourses before the Darnodar embankments were built. They are cultivated now, and zemindars—who own rivers also—are getting additional rent from them, so they are against them being opened up again.

I also saw a "little Damodar", the Ajoy River, and the scene of the greatest victory of the organisation of the com-



A dead river of Central Bengal

mon people. The embankment along this river had been allowed to get into disrepair and large portions had been swept away. For many miles one walks through derelict villages and straggling grass and reeds in sandy wastes that once were paddy fields. An Embankment Committee was formed from all sections of the people and, after a long campaign and after meetings, demonstrations and deputations, the Government had at last agreed to pay for the repair of the embankment and appointed a contractor—but not till June, the very month the rains would start and the floods come! Every official thought it was too late that year, but the Committee knew otherwise. Immediately there was a campaign for labour and the Kisan Sabha toured the villages with the slogan "every peasant off his fields for a week to fill the breach". They did it before the floods, two thousand men and women were working at one time in spite of difficulties put in the way by the contractor. But they knew this was only a temporary solution and now they are campaigning for irrigation canals to bring water to the land and to control the flood waters of the river.

The sea is winning

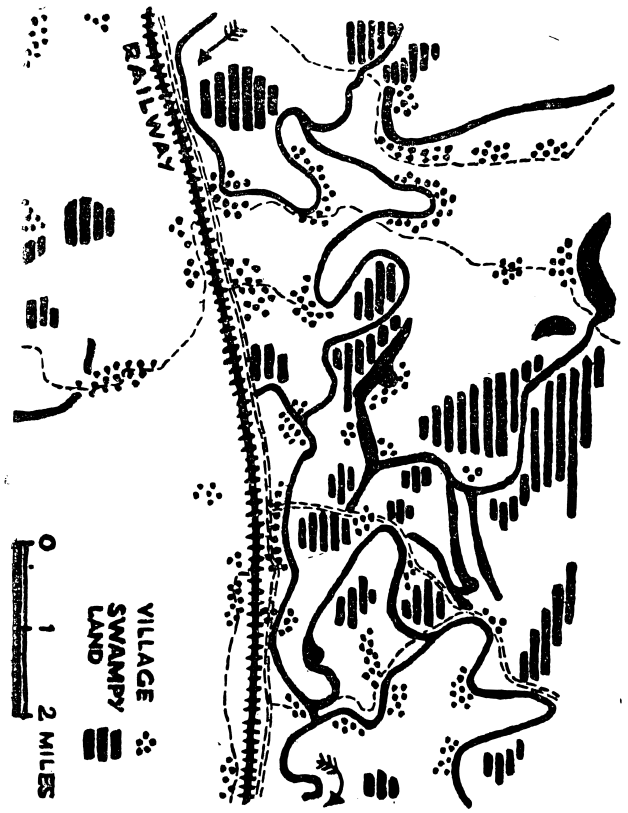
Jessore is the delta region of the Ganges. Numerous rivers branch off from the main stream and run southwards through the District. Today these rivers are dead or dying, just masses of hyacinth during the dry season and areas of standing water which cannot drain away during the rains. So the land goes stagnant and turns into malarial swamps, water transport has to cease, and fishermens' communities die out as there is nothing in which men can fish. Further south, in the region where the rivers meet the sea, the saline water moves

northward year by year, poisoning the land, because there is not a sufficient flow of river water to sweep it out.

These rivers have been dying within living memory—they had been open before for centuries. The main cause is neglect of the land as a result of the Permanent Settlement. The rivers always tend to silt up and so great sandbanks form during the floods where the rivers leave the Ganges. Who is there to keep these rivers open? An absentee zemindar never will—he has sublet his land and never sees it. The ones to whom it is sublet have not the capital resources, far less have the impoverished peasantry. So the rivers are just left to die. Also, across the level plains are miles of raised embankments for the roads and railways. During the floods water slowly moves across the land and these embankments become obstructions because the openings and bridges are not big enough or are insufficient. Time after time one sees a road or a railway crossing a river, the solid embankments carried out into the river bed itself and the bridge but a third or a quarter of the total width.

Nobody expected the Government to carry out major schemes during wartime; correctly enough they said they would support every practicable scheme which would "Grow More Food" by bringing land back to cultivation. But in practice they have been incompetent and obstructive. In some areas I visited, the peasants themselves had carried out more schemes than the Government departments, always after having first tried and failed to get official assistance. More than that I saw at least one official improvement of considerable size, which failed to achieve anything and was virtually a waste of money.

"Bodra Canal" was one scheme I saw that the peasants had carried out themselves and it had been proudly named



A dying countryside—a few square miles of Central Bengal.
Nearly all the water (shown in black) is stagnant and overgrown with water hyacinth. The arrows show the only river which is still flowing.
The fishermen in the villages lose their livelihood and become the first victims of famine. The huge areas of swamp are useless for cultivation, as well as being breeding grounds for mosquitoes.
The effect of the ralway embankment can clearly be seen. In this stretch of several miles there are no proper bridges or openings through which the water can pass.

after the local leader of the Kisan Sabha who had done so much to carry it through. At this spot the river has a great loop five miles round and completes a full circle except for a neck of land half a mile in width. It is across this neck that the great ditch has been dug, and it carries away the water from the sodden land upstream opening up this portion of the river again. Full 1,000 bighas of land previously useless are now cultivated and much more than that has been improved.

After a campaign in the villages for volunteers to dig the canal, the peasants, bringing their own tools and baskets, turned up in their hundreds. The only financial help was Rs. 1,000 from the unofficial People's Relief Committee and this had enabled some of the destitutes to be paid a quarter or a half the normal wages and a camp was set up for them nearby. At the formal opening as well as the peasants who had dug the canal were well-known people of the locality. One can imagine the enthusiasm. When the rains came "the water roared through" as a peasant told me. I had also seen the peasant leader, Bodra. He was ill and exhausted with fever and malnutrition—in the past he had been hunted by the authorities and had had his term in jail. No wonder the peasants of the locality had recently contributed Rs. 300 to send him away to a hospital to get him well.

In the south of the District it was another story. A peasant took us in his boat to show its the embankment they had built last year to keep the sea water from their fields. Once this man had been prosperous. He still had his land, 28 bighas, and still had to pay the rent—but he got no crops. So he was finding daily work in a little port up the river. Everyone here was in the same plight and so in the famine very many had died and others were dying yet and many more were destitutes. The Kisan Sabha was strong in the area and last

year the peasants had rallied to build the embankment to save their fields. But as one peasant said, "We were too weak in body" and they only managed to complete $3\frac{1}{2}$ out of the 4 miles, so when the floods came, the water had swept it away. I enquired afterwards why the zemindars were not interested in preventing their land becoming useless. There were small zemindars here and the larger one higher up the river was waiting for them to become impoverished so he could buy them out! As a result he was obstructing the peasants with every means in his power.

Untamed Rivers

In Eastern Bengal there are also dead and dying rivers, but below the hills there are rivers of a different sort. There is a tremendous rainfall in this area and then the rivers become raging torrents and frequently break their banks, tearing across the country, leaving devastation in their wake. Even along a stretch of a few miles, one can see five or six places where this has happened in the last ten years. One I remember was a great gap in the river bank 200 yards in width. For miles behind, sand covered the earth and only tufts of spindly grass would grow. Virtually nothing is done or is attempted by way of controlling these rivers, it is just as if they were flowing through uninhabited jungle instead of cultivated peasants' fields. I asked the peasants what happened after a flood, what assistance did they get from the authorities? None that they knew of. To be worthy of a Flood Relief Fund, it seems a flood has to be a great flood, big enough to get in the papers.

Farther away from the hills the rivers are somewhat calmer but they still eat through the banks and try to change their

courses. One place where this was happening there was a gap only 40 yards in width and over the last twenty years the river had been slowly carving a new channel. More and more of the water had been making its way across country forming huge areas of swamp and joining the main stream 10 miles lower down. As I walked around, the local people collected and I heard how they had built an earth embankment across the gap last year, but the water had overtopped it and finally swept it away. Here was a scheme on which the Government, by giving some financial assistance and helping these peasants, could bring back to cultivation and improve great areas of land. Yet, later, when I saw the official responsible, he had not even visited the area!

Controllers of Rivers

There is, of course, nobody controlling the rivers, they have got out of hand. But there are people whose interests prevent the problem being tackled. As I stood on a little railway bridge only some 15 yards in width and the peasants showed me how this bridge held back the water and affected the land for 10 miles upstream; when they pointed out the flood levels and suggested where new openings could be made in the embankment, I thought of the shareholders in London drawing their returns—for this was a British Railway Company. (Along these railways, too, the Company, since the famine, has allowed peasants to cultivate the waste strip of land along the foot of the embankment—but they get their rent, three eighths of the produce has to be handed over to the company.) In administration the needs of the railways always come first—that is when the point of view of the peasants is considered at all in high policy. Railways are important to

the authorities not only for trade and the returns they bring, they also have a vital military significance. Is it surprising that the peasants view with hostility these benefits of civilisation?

As for the zemindars who own Bengal, we have seen the interest they take in their land. There only remains the Government and its Irrigation Department. Clearly the engineers have not an easy task, controlling rivers is a difficult problem at any time, more so when they have reached their present state. Also these individuals are but cogs in a vast bureaucratic machine, but how far are they striving in spite of these handicaps?

I saw some of the officials responsible for this work. All of them told of the schemes and proposals that are in preparation. A dam and hydro-electric station here, a barrage there, the diversion of some river or another, afforestation in the upper reaches. True, there is a lot of surveying still to be done they said, and they were not sure of the exact sites. This was all very interesting, especially when one heard of the mineral resources in the hills and one could begin to picture Bengal as it might be if its resources were tapped. However, I was just as interested in what was being done now, especially as I had seen something of the rivers for myself. When I asked about this, usually I then heard of the technical difficulties, perhaps the whole of the rivers in the area depended on the diverting of the main Brahmaputra River back to its original course which it had left some centuries ago after an earthquake and that this was so difficult that it had not yet been decided how it could be done. What of the policy of "Grow More Food" and small scheme[s] which could be tackled to relieve the situation now? I told them of the examples I had seen. Some schemes like this were

"under consideration", some I had seen had not been heard of. Once one official grew a little exasperated and burst out that he was so busy and worked till 7 o'clock every evening "considering schemes". He seemed blind to the red tape that bound him up and did not see that his work should be measured, not by the number of schemes on paper but by those he carried out.

Once I had more detailed arguments from an engineer as to why these small schemes were not carried out. Rivers which were trying to change their course should be allowed to do so, he said, nature was still building up the soil of Bengal. The Government was against any embanking, "just look at what happened on the Damodar". What of the people that inhabited the area, I asked him, for how many generations was this to be allowed to go on? Perhaps the Dutch were wrong in resisting the forces of nature by keeping out the sea? Should not rivers be controlled as they mostly are in all civilised countries? True, Bengal's rivers present special problems—an embankment in itself is no solution and if it is not properly considered it can worsen the situation. Yet here was an engineer who had retreated before nature and was taking refuge in arguments justifying this as a correct and technical point of view.

TRIBAL PEOPLE

".Some listen to the village talk. Others cannot hear
That, again and again. they call and say,
'Help us out of our woes. Give us the right
To live like men'."

—From a song of the Peasant Movement
heard in the hills.

They can be seen from a far distance, rising out of the plains, the blue wooded Garo Hills which lie along the borders of Bengal and Assam. We cross the last barrier at their foot, the Someswari, a narrow river at this time of year, but in the rains a raging torrent, fed from the hills which have almost the highest rainfall in the world. The water of the river is calm and sparkling clear, with half a mile of sandbanks each side, blindingly brilliant in the sun, leading down to the water's edge. We cross in a boat hollowed out of a single tree trunk, made by the people of the hills, and are in the area of the "tribal people" as the Bengalees call the inhabitants here.

In all too short a stay I was able to see a little of the lives of a "backward people", learn something of the methods of British administration of such border tribal areas and see the work of Missionaries amongst the people—more than that, to see how it was that such a backward area had recently

become a stronghold of the peasants' organisation. The belt of foothills here some 80 miles long, frequently called the "red belt", is one of the strongest bases of the Kisan Sabha in East Bengal.

There are two main peoples here, the "Garos", hill people proper, living in an "excluded area" directly administered by the Governor, and the "Hajangs", in the foothills, whose area is "partially excluded" and where all enactments of the Provincial Government are normally enforced by him. I did not go to the Garo area—in any case permission has to be obtained to enter—but many of the people have filtered to the foothills and the plains below. Both these peoples are of Mongol stock, and very different racially from the Bengalees. The Garos are still tribal with a matriarchal system of society and a primitive religion which includes the worship of snakes and stones. The Hajangs have permanently settled as peasants in the foothills and have lost almost all traces of their tribal origin. They are Hindus now, but all of

them are scheduled castes—untouchables.

Immediately at the foot of the hills in the plains there are Bengalee peasants and they are mostly Muslims, while the middle classes of the little towns and villages here are caste Hindus. On market days in these towns one sees the hill people who have walked for miles across the field carrying their produce in baskets on their heads or slung over their shoulders. A few are women. The Hajangs have straight-cut

frocks in brilliant patterns woven by themselves; the Garo women, surprisingly, wear skirts to all intents European ones—and usually, in the hills, they wear nothing else besides. Of these people who live down in the plains, most are employed as menials and as servants.

The Permanent Settlement applies over all these areas, as it does to the whole of Assam—except that several years ago the zemindars in the higher parts of the hills were bought out by the Government, presumably because of the valuable deposits of coal and other minerals that are known to exist there. The holdings of the Hajang peasants are bigger than

in the plains, 20 bighas or so is quite common. Their villages are similar, except that the huts are very low and are built up off the ground on short bamboo poles. There are virtually no roads to the villages and one has to walk across miles of paths between the fields or travel up the streams on boats.

Why are these areas "excluded" and administered separately? Officials will say it is because the people are backward, their administration is a special problem and they could not conceive of them governing themselves. So the hill people are left in their backwardness, more or less isolated from the world around—except for Missionaries who have their greatest strength in such areas. One wonders if such a negative policy is not partly due to a desire to be sure these areas remain "safe"—educated and enlightened people begin to question authority.

There are a number of Missions in this area, both Catholic and Protestant, and they have done much work in carrying the Gospel to the heathen. More than that they run schools, dispensaries and agricultural training centres which are open to Christian and non-Christian alike. For years they were the only force of enlightenment within the area; they produced an alphabet for the Garo people and the Bible has been written down in their language. One or two of the Missionaries I met had given the best part of their lives to these people and one could only have the greatest admiration for their faith. I asked one who had been there for nearly twenty years and was soon to return home, whether he felt satisfied with what he had achieved. "It is not what I have achieved," he said, "I felt it to be my duty to do what I have done". However, one must ask whether their way is the right way, does it help to bring the people forward to real freedom and to become masters of their own destiny, to develop their own

culture? From the Christian Hajang people whom I met, it seemed to have given them a false faith in the benevolence and goodness of the white man—it made them resistant to the demands for freedom from his rule. How could they come to know what has been carried out in India and in other colonies by men of Christian countries? As the only organised force in the area the Missions became, as it were, an unofficial part of the administration, with a considerable influence on the lives of the people.

Hajang People's Own Movement

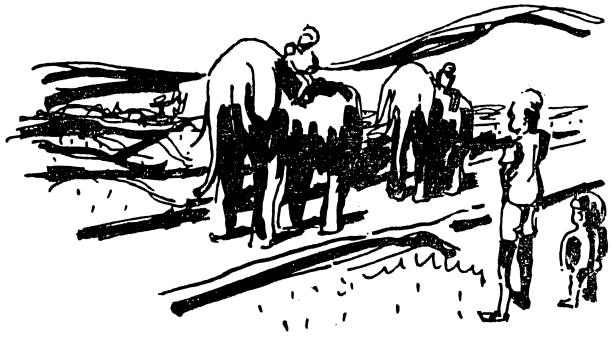
When one asks a Hajang member of the peasant organisation what it has done for him, the answer nearly always will be that they can now stand up to the zemindar; sometimes he might tell how they used to be treated as slaves and serfs, they would have to sit on the floor with folded hands when in his house—now his agent talks to them politely and offers them a chair! This is but the expression of an oppressed people in a new found confidence of their own strength as human beings.

They were oppressed in a double way; not only by the zemindars, but also by the rest of society because they were a backward people, different racially and because they were untouchables. (It is interesting to note in this connection that there is a considerable movement amongst them which attempts to show, on the basis of so called historical facts, that they are really of the "warrior" caste and claims that they should be accepted by caste Hindus as such.) Almost the only caste Hindus in their area are certain Brahmins who belong to a special sub-caste that allows them to carry out religious functions for untouchables. I was told how frequent it

was in the past that an upper caste Hindu would behave in an orthodox manner; he would throw away his food as unclean if they walked into the room—in this sense they were worse than dogs, for he would not do the same with a dog. (Yet such is the strength of religious custom and tradition that a Hajang would not accept food from a Muslim.) One of the leading Kisan Sabha workers, himself a Brahmin, told me something of his experiences when first he went to their villages. On the one hand they were pleased the first time he ate with them—such a man had always spurned them before—but they were also shocked since it was against all their religious prejudices and customs and they resented it. He had to be very careful to know them first and win their confidence before he could expect them to accept him into their houses. Now, he said in the organised areas all this is past, Kisan Sabha workers are accepted everywhere and I saw much myself which confirmed this. In the movement Hajangs and Muslims are working together and whereas, in the past, women would never have left their house if a stranger were about, now there are as many as 50 present in a meeting of 200.

The zemindars here are mostly big ones, and since it was such a remote area, their oppression was especially severe and inhuman; it is only now that details are coming to light of earlier struggles against them. Sixty years ago, there was a rebellion which held out for a year, a rebellion against the practice of the zemindars of calling out their tenants in large numbers to assist in hunts for tigers and wild elephants, of course, without remuneration. It seemed that on one occasion a headman from a village was crushed and killed by an elephant in on of these hunts, and this was the spark that set the hills ablaze. Swords and spears were hurriedly made in all the villages; there were pitched battles with the hired

forces of the zemindars, and villages were burned and looted. Finally the rebellion was ruthlessly suppressed. When I was there I saw some of the huge tame elephants of a zemindar, used for his hunting expeditions, and they are against the



people in another way now. Their masters are refusing to allow the peasants to complete the digging of a small canal which would drain a large area and make it available for crops because this would affect the arrangements for growing fodder for these elephants. At present the Kisan Sabha has a court case pending to prove their rights to drain this swampy land.

The peasants' movement first developed in strength in 1938 on a campaign against the illegal actions of the zemindars in demanding payment for rent in kind instead of cash, and against the "tonk" system under which the zemindar would only let his land on a yearly basis and the peasant would have no rights to hold it. After severe struggles in which the peasants' leaders were arrested by the police, the zemindars were forced to accept the principle of prop-

erty rights for their tenants. Then, the zemindars declared the hill areas as "reserved" to prevent the peasants collecting fuel and grazing cattle there as they had done for years. The Kisan Sabha organised practical demonstrations against this when four or five hundred peasants would go to the hill slopes en masse and collect their fuel. A court case dragged on for a year and finally nineteen of these peasants were sent to jail for short periods.

Nowhere else did I feel such confidence amongst the peasants in their organisation as there was amongst these people; perhaps the very fact that they were so remote and backward has made them feel all the more keenly the urge for a new life and the need to struggle against oppression. I was proudly told that there are 16,000 paying members in the Hajang belt and that their quota by the next conference is 25,000. I saw members of the organisation who made it their job to go round the villages singing the songs of the movement and reviving the dying culture. Members have come down from Calcutta to help them collect information so as to piece together and write a history of the people. More than that, in some places they have organised and built up their co-operative stores for selling controlled goods; the Weavers' Co-operative has been able to secure yarn to get handlooms going again. They were proud of the fact that not one person died of hunger during the famine in their area; they had collected food from each household for the people they were feeding in gruel kitchens and had helped to open five medical relief centres at the time of the epidemics. There was even one case, after epidemics had broken out amongst the cattle, when peasants from a number of villages farmed 400 acres together on a co-operative basis.

All this in an area the administrators make "partially ex-

cluded” because its people are so backward!

THE PEASANTS' MOVEMENT

"How many brigands have raided our country, how many times?
Ravaging village on village, piling up cruelties, crimes!
How many Bulbuls have ravished our grains,
Mothers have crooned of tyrannical reigns,
In spite of it all the proud spirit remains Of the people forever!
The peasant, the potter, the fisher, the blacksmith, the boatman, the weaver!"

—"The People for Ever", by BISHNU DEY.

Since 1936, when it was founded at a conference of Indian National Congress, the All-India Kisan Sabha has grown to the extent that, today, it is a power in the land which cannot be ignored either by the Government or by other sections of the national movement. At last the peasantry have their own organisation and can make their voice heard. By 1945, 850,000 of them were paying members of the Kisan Sabha and membership now is probably nearing the million mark.

The all-India organisation holds annual delegates' conferences and these in themselves are events which demonstrate the support there is for the movement and capabilities of the organisation. The 1945 session was held in Bengal—

near Netrokona, a small town in the east of the Province. Delegates from practically every Province of India were there. It was estimated that 100,000 people were present at the open session, including many hundreds who had walked from 30 up to 90 miles distance. I heard something of the work involved in preparing for this great gathering from those who had taken part. Time was short—it had been intended to hold the session in Madras Province but the Government there had refused permission. 3,500 volunteers, nearly all peasants, worked to produce what was virtually a small township of bamboo huts. There were 100 acres of ground, two of these were enclosed and a covered bamboo structure was built for the 500 delegates. Kitchens were provided—altogether 45,000 cooked meals were served and the medical and sanitary arrangements must have been most efficient. There was an exhibition on view about the problems of the peasant and varieties of seed, implements and handicrafts were shown. A statue of the Indian Peasant, specially modelled after a Hajang member, stood in front of the main gate of the enclosure.

At these sessions the leadership for the coming year is elected and national policy is discussed and formulated. In 1945 the main resolutions were on food and famine and the "Grow More Food" campaign. The achievements of the Kisan Sabha throughout India were reviewed and village-wide unity was shown to be the only way to overcome the interests standing in the way. Governments of different Provinces were called on to enforce a procurement policy of all food, at a guaranteed price, from the peasants and to carry this out with the participation of the peasants' organisation and other democratic bodies so as to keep food out of private hands. A definite and adequate supply of cloth and

other necessities was demanded for the villages, to be distributed through Food Committees and other organisations of the people. The political resolutions called for the immediate release of the Congress leaders (then still in jail), for unity between Congress and the League and deplored the moves amongst a section of Congress to form a rival peasants' organisation.

Bengal, as a Province, has the largest membership—about 250,000. Its special problems were discussed at its own provincial conference. In the main these were concerned with urgent measures for relief and rehabilitation. A survey of the present position showed over a million people as completely destitute while "semi-destitutes"—those who have been able

to carry on somehow—number nearly four million. Communities of artisans and fishermen had been nearly wiped out and over the whole Province, 9 per cent of the cattle had died and 12 per cent were sold. The State was called on to accept their responsibility for the destitutes by allowing minimum subsistence and medical aid; orphanages and work to be provided for the able-bodied ones: as many people as possible to be moved back to their homes and occupation; legislation to be improved and simplified to enable peasants to regain the land they had lost; measures to be taken for the supply of cattle and implements, free to destitutes and with easy loans to others; boats for fishermen to be constructed on a large scale and an adequate supply of yarn, looms, metal, etc., arranged for artisans and craftsmen; a minimum price to be guaranteed to the peasant for jute, sugar cane and other "money crops", high enough to ensure his well being. For all this to be successful the Government must allow the fullest participation of the people and their organisations.

It is on the basis of such demands, demands which if implemented would save shattered Bengal, that hundreds of thousands of backward and illiterate peasants have been organised. What type of movement is theirs? What of its membership and its leadership? What is its significance in the wider field of Indian liberation?

Organised Peasant

Naturally the strength of the movement varies in different parts of Bengal. There are vast areas in which the peasants are as backward as ever—although in most Districts the organisation is, at least, established. On the other hand it has its strong areas—in one subdivision I visited, there were strong

bases in over a third of the Unions. But, while its present strength should not be over-estimated, what is certain is that it is growing and will continue to do so. A member of the organisation pays an annual subscription of one anna and takes a pledge to help to build up the movement. However its influence goes far beyond its paying membership—as can be seen in any well organised area. Here, out of many villages, there might be a few hundred members, yet one can stop any peasant in his village or in the fields and he will talk of "our Kisan Sabha". The organisation will enter into his daily life in many ways, as it does for every one of them. It probably gave his family relief when they were hungry, it has given him new confidence to stand up against the zemindar or the moneylender, it might have achieved an increase in the cloth or yarn coming into the village, perhaps there is a school it helped to open. He probably gave a hand in the digging of some canal that saved the fields and there might be a communal store of rice, arranged through the organisation and to which he contributes—and he knows the rice there is safe out of the hands of the black marketeer and can be drawn in case of need. As well, members of the organisation and their supporters have set up and manage co-operative societies, even assist in the running of high schools. Their work in Food Committees and in organising the distribution of cloth and such like, has shown a degree of efficiency that has exposed the incompetent officials. They are efficient because they are democratic, because they have the confidence of and know the needs of the people.

It is often said that the leadership of the movement is in the hands of middle class people, and that therefore it cannot be said to be truly a peasants' organisation. Of course it is a fact that a backward peasant cut off from the world and

not able to read or write, cannot undertake at once the organising work or the carrying through of campaigns that are necessary in any movement. Yet what the peasant lacks can be provided by an educated individual as long as he gets inspiration for his leadership from the peasants themselves and has a real understanding of their problems. If he has dropped all notions and prejudices of the middle class from which he comes, he will be playing a vital role in what is truly a peasants' movement. The Kisan Sahha today has such leaders and the surest test is to see the way in which they encourage peasants themselves to take on positions of leadership. The more the organisation is developing the more this is taking place. For it is peasants who see most clearly and sharply the problems that face them and as they gain in education and experience they are able to take on the organising work in the day to day leadership of the movement.

An example of the contribution of middle class people might be taken in the development of peasant culture. The traditional forms of drama, song and verse in the village had lost their vitality, become debased or even disappeared as a result of the general deterioration in village society. A few years ago the the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association was formed largely by middle class people. They studied the lost arts and revived them with the new and modern content of the problems facing the peasant today. They played in the village and at peasants' meetings and found a tremendous response amongst the people for this form of expression which was so near to them. By now, however, their inspiration has had such an effect that it is a people's art which is beginning to revive. Peasants are singing the songs at their daily work, songs are being composed in the villages. Moreover, previously unknown forms of culture have been brought to

light and village bards who carried on these traditions have even been to conference in Calcutta, with their strange instruments and local verse and song. They are given new inspiration, they understand more of what are the real problems and issues of the peasant, and they incorporate this in their art and so ensure that once again the culture of the common people will flourish.

All too many people in the towns have a lack of faith in the peasants. They can understand a more or less spontaneous revolt by a ground down peasantry, but they cannot credit that peasants as individuals can comprehend complicated issues, take a leading part in an organisation, regularly work in it and manage its affairs. Many times I heard peasants dismissed as just "illiterate and backward", the silent masses who have to be shown the way by political leaders. But very often, I found far greater understanding of essentials from an illiterate peasant than from an educated townsman. To take a very simple instance. I, a Britisher, one of the race of overlords every peasant knows as the rulers of his

country, would appear in a village. Yet always, when it was explained that I was one of the common British people, that there are two sorts of people in Britain and that I was against the oppressors and the imperialists, a peasant would immediately and completely accept me as a friend and it would give him more faith in his own struggles to know that there were such friends across the seas. Yet some town people, even local leaders in the national movement, could never understand that I, a Britisher, was sincere. When I was critical of aspects of their movement, sometimes it was because I was "imperialist minded", sometimes that I must have been a Communist—not that that there is such a thing as a sincere, though British, friend of India really interested in the problems of their movement.

From the struggles of his daily life, a peasant knows who are his oppressors, brown and white. He knows the zemindars and the hoarders are the enemies of the people, that they, as well as the British rulers, must go before there will be freedom. It is for this reason that the elections which are so violently disturbing the towns, mean so much less in the villages—even amongst those peasants entitled to vote. A typical comment I heard was that the only time they see these leaders is at election time when they come down making all their promises and yet they have never helped them in their daily problems. It is even worse when the candidate is a zemindar or a merchant himself, as is frequently the case. One exception, in a well organised area, was where a leading member of the Kisan Sabha was contesting the seat as a Communist candidate. He was well known to the peasants and they knew him for their friend. Nevertheless in the villages there is very wide general support of Congress or the League. Many a peasant will answer that Congress is for

freedom and Muslims will say that Pakistan is for freedom for them. It is under these conditions that the extension of the franchise to the whole adult population becomes so important in India today. Then the common people themselves will be able to expose and remove their own reactionary countrymen from leading positions in the national movement—at present the candidates are elected mainly by middle class votes.

Already it is clear who are the friends and the foes of the organised peasant. Against the peasant movement are all those sections who oppress the people and who have arisen as a result of the Permanent Settlement—the oppressive zemindars and taluqdars, the moneylenders, the hoarders, the black marketeers. A merchant who profiteers will be afraid he will be exposed or his gains will be affected; a dealer will be opposed to them because of their demands for better prices for the produce of the peasants; a doctor who makes his money by swindling the people will be antagonistic because he knows they condemn him for not giving his skill to the poor. Opposed to the movement also are the officials, the authorities and the British administration, because their inefficiency and corruption are exposed and traditionally they repress any movement of the common people.

With the movement are all people who are for the common people and against oppression. It is a movement in which there is no Hindu-Muslim problem—all religions and castes are included because they are all united in their common interests. It is the movement for all peasants, prosperous and dispossessed, for all rural artisans, for all who are destitute and starving. As time goes on and they see what can be achieved by working together and their prejudices are broken down, more and more will find their place in the or-

ganisation. With them also are those people of the middle class who have surmounted their prejudices and are for real freedom for the people.

The programme of the movement is essentially concerned with the immediate issues facing the peasantry. Indeed the leaders to whom I spoke, strongly countered the tendency, very prevalent amongst town people and officials, to talk about and discuss long term solutions and forget the immediate problems of survival which stare the peasant in the face. As they pointed out, all power over the lives of the people, at present, is in the hands of anti-social sections—hoarders, money-lenders, black marketeers and such like—and, until the peasants and the people as a whole are aroused against them and are resolved to put an end to their methods, nothing real can be achieved. Nevertheless nothing less than the abolition of the Permanent Settlement will solve the problems of Bengal. The land must be given back to the peasants—they must be changed from tenants to real peasants again and the zemindars must be left with no more land than they can cultivate under their own direction. And later on, as the industry of India is developed, Bengal can go forward to large scale co-operative farming and the peasants can be lifted for ever from their backwardness and poverty and become human beings working together in prosperity for a common end.

There can be no doubt of the importance of the growing peasant movement in India today—for the first time these very backward peasants who form the mass of the people of the country, are organising and working together in their own interests. And is not their movement the parallel to the Trade Union movement which, as we have seen, has strongly developed in the industrial centres? For both are the organisations of the oppressed common people of India and it is

for this reason that they become so significant in the Indian scene today. But before we can understand the part they play at present, it will be necessary to consider the Indian National movement as a whole and see what is happening in the rural towns.

SMALL TOWN POLITICS

"In India the misfortune of being governed by a foreign race is daily brought home to us not only in the callous neglect of such minimum necessities of life as adequate provision for food, clothing and educational facilities for the people, but in an even unhappier form in the way the people have been divided among themselves."

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE, 1941.

Election time in a District town is an experience a Britisher is not likely to forget. If there were half the commotion in a sleepy County town in England society would seem rocked to its very foundations and the proverbial old ladies and retired gentlemen would be behind their doors bemoaning that "the revolution has come!".

In Bengal, however, staying indoors does not keep it out. Somebody would be there talking about the latest news or a rumour he had heard. Perhaps it is a report that Subhas Bose is not really dead or that in a nearby town the police are out after Muslim Leaguers had beaten up some Nationalist Muslims. It might be that a leading personality has blamed the Communists for the rowdyism in another meeting—such accusations and counter accusations fill the daily papers.

Even through the doors the muffled noise of shouting at a meeting or a demonstration might be heard. "Pakistan!" or "Congress zindabad!". Most days there is some procession in the streets. Congress students perhaps, are shouting in unison the slogans of the I.N.A., "March to Delhi", "Jai Hind", then "Quit India", "Quit Asia"—and if I were passing these last two might be directed, half grimly half good humouredly, to me. Another day it would be the Muslim

Leaguers demonstrating just as keenly for Pakistan and the defence of Islam, or the red flag of the Communists would be on the streets.

In England, even at election times, it is sometimes difficult to fill a public hail and party workers complain the people are so apathetic! Yet the comparative excesses of Indian politics are easy enough to understand. India is a subject nation under alien rule. The consciousness of foreign domination colours the whole lives and outlook of the people, its

effects are felt on every hand. The British people have not had this experience, they have not suffered this humiliation, in this sense they are free. This tremendous latent feeling in India against British rule is particularly captured by Congress with its cry of "Quit India". I was in a Bengal town when reports came through of police firing on the students in Calcutta. One could feel the tenseness in the atmosphere, see the little knots of people in the streets and sense the news being passed around in every home. Next day this burst out into protests and demonstrations, even some small amount of rioting, against the British Raj. There was a 'hartal' all day long when not a shopkeeper took down his shutters or a rickshaw appeared on the streets.

At the same time amongst Indians themselves there are complex cross currents and differences of interest. During the two hundred years of foreign rule the old society and old relationships have broken down, people have been set against each other, those holding land against the peasants, the moneylender and the profiteering merchant against the common people, Hindu against Muslim. All these sections have their influence within the different parties of the national movement. Bengal, like India itself, must go through many tribulations before she once more finds her soul.

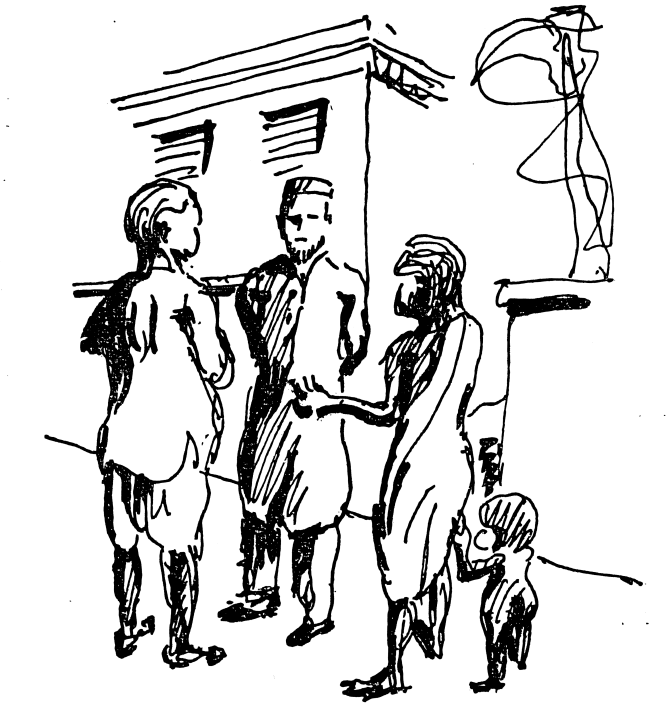
How different in the villages is all this politics! There the elections seem unreal while the town is in a fever. The peasant feels his immediate oppressors to be the zemindar and the hoarder—Bengalee oppressors. The town student feels that by the British quitting India or by achieving Pakistan all will be solved. How real is this difference between the town and country?

In the towns politics are essentially middle class politics. There are no peasants, and no industrial workers except

a few in the railway yard perhaps and small shopkeepers and craftsmen do not take the lead in political movements. So it was inevitable that the educated middle class people should have played the leading role in town politics—more than that, that they should have led the national movement as a whole. When nationalism and ideals of freedom were developing in India the peasants were remote and backward, they were completely unorganised. On the other hand the educated man knew what was going on elsewhere in the world, he had learnt there were alternatives to poverty and subjection.

A middle class man probably has a struggle to exist. Even after a college education he might find himself without a future. If he is prosperous and in business he will feel thwarted at every turn by the dead hand of British financial control over India. Yet, however much he feels for freedom, he still remains one of that class living off the peasantry, a parasite of the land, and, unless he consciously cuts these connections, he will never get the ear of the peasants—the mass of the people. Further, his very conditions of life tend to make him accept as inevitable a less fortunate class of people. He might not rigidly accept ideas of caste and inferiority, yet he probably does not realise that if "the poor are always with us" was said of England, it is a hundred times more true for India. With a continual surplus of labour, menials do his heavy and unpleasant work, if his household is of any standing it will have a bevy of servants of different sorts and to save him walking in the heat, a rickshawwallah will always pull him for a pittance.

So when I discussed things with middle class people in the towns, whether or not they were leaders or whichever party they supported, I would like to know their relationship



and attitude to the peasantry and the common people. Most had some interest in land, but a doctor or a lawyer, for instance, might be sincere and giving his services to meet the crying needs of the people, or, he might be a quack, deceiving the poor and doting on the rich. A shop keeper might be a black marketeer or an honest man. A prosperous dealer hardly could be honest with bribery and corruption accepted to the degree they are, as a means to business. As for the officials, the miserable low paid clerks are amongst the poorest

of the people, but, for this very reason, often fall prey to petty corruption, and their desire to hold their jobs is so great that they are often afraid to do anything that might be to the displeasure of their superiors. As for the higher officials, they are relatively very well paid and certainly have their stake on the side of authority.

True Patriots

There are many people from the middle classes—and I was continually meeting them—who had overcome all these handicaps and thrown themselves completely into the liberation movement. Such individuals make personal sacrifice and fight against the forces of authority in a way which is difficult to conceive in England today. They are the men and women who are preparing the future for the Indian people. A typical instance was a man who, in 1921, had joined the Non-Cooperation Movement of that time, giving up what probably would have been a brilliant official career. He might have been a District Magistrate, now, instead he is penniless. He had sold his property years ago to finance some nationalist paper and had been three times in jail. Well may the Indian People be proud of the record of Congress in the past and of the struggles that have been carried out in its name. Most of those who take an active part have seen the inside of a prison, sometimes even as schoolboys they were arrested. Authority has not learnt yet that its methods hold no terrors for an Indian fighter—for he has a cause for which he is prepared to die.

Such men also were the "Bengal terrorists" and I heard many graphic stories from those who, in their younger days, had been in one or other of these organisations. They do not

agree now with their old terrorist methods, rather they look on what took place as a phase in the development to maturity of the liberation movement. Today there is virtually no terrorist movement in Bengal and many of the individuals are now taking a leading part in the organisation of the peasantry. The point of view they held was that, by devoting their lives to heroic exploits against the British rulers, by collecting and manufacturing arms and assassinating selected hated officials, they would so arouse the people that the British would be forced to leave. They were successful in a number of instances—although on occasion the home-made bomb would kill the man who threw it. In Bengal the memories of their deeds still live. From every quarter they are looked on as selfless and heroic patriots devoted to the cause of Indian freedom and some of their names have become household words. Although they were, of necessity, a closed circle working underground, I had many instances of the support the peasantry gave them—when they were hunted they would be fed and concealed in the villages from the police.

The authorities were ruthless in their suppression and sometimes, as in the famous Chittagong Armoury Raid in 1930, this needed a minor military operation. There was a whole series of trials of those caught and charged with assassination, of illicitly securing and making arms or of taking part in the organisation. Many were hanged, others received long sentences. Women were included—one girl of eighteen was sentenced to life imprisonment and released eight years later only after strenuous protests. A boy sentenced when he was fourteen was recently released as a man of thirty-four. Many were transported to the notorious Andaman Islands and it was here they staged their famous hunger strike

in 1937 when they were joined in this by political prisoners in jails all over India. India was aroused, Gandhi himself took up their cause and in 1938 he was assured by the authorities that the prisoners would be released that same year.

Eight years have passed and many of them are still not released.[1] Some whose terms expired have been re-arrested at the jail gates and indefinitely detained under Ordinance. It is beyond doubt that they have renounced their terrorist ideas—the Government itself was convinced of it in 1938 when they were to be released. Incredible as it may seem, in 1942 the Government made use of their prestige by actually reprinting in official propaganda leaflets their appeals to the people of Bengal to unite and resist the Japanese invader, while at the same time they kept the writers behind bars. One wonders if the fact that while still in jail many of them have joined the Communist Party, has not some bearing on the attitude of the authorities. I realised what real patriots all of them are when I saw those who are out amongst the people. Some had only played a minor part in the organisation, yet each had done his job with a knowledge of the consequences to him if he were caught, and with a conviction that he was playing his part to free his motherland. One man, for instance, was entrusted with nothing more than periodically carrying a parcel and placing it on a certain seat in a bus—in an undergound organisation one does not ask the destination, someone else will receive it and pass it on. It is such men as these whose hearts are with the common people, who can assist them in their fight for freedom. No British friend of India can rest

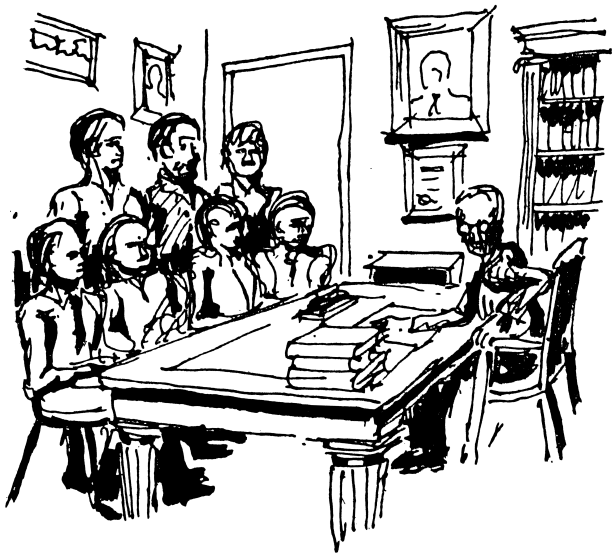
[1]The pre-Reform prisoners including the Chittagong Armoury Raid heroes have been released since though many others of [the] August 1942 movement, [the] R.I.N. Mutiny and the I.N.A. are still In jail.

until these prisoners are freed. True, the methods they used would not be countenanced in Britain, yet it was the character of British rule that made true patriots develop such ideas.

Fire Of Youth

What of the educated youth of Bengal today? In the schools and colleges is an ossifying system of education, but amongst the students, there are most militant movements reflecting the problems that beset the middle classes as a whole today.

High schools take children up to age sixteen and finish with the Matriculation examination. They are in every town and in some large or Union villages serving children from the rural areas. I particularly remember two of them I visited because they were so very different. One was an old established boys' school in a fair sized town, and I sat in the headmaster's room and talked with him for half an hour. It was rather a painful half hour, the whole thing such a pale reflection of old fashioned English notions and all rather pathetic. I saw the accounts of the old boys who had become famous, the record collections the school had made for this or that charity, even a framed congratulation from the Governor of Bengal. All the teachers—there were about ten—sat in front of us, and during the whole time they never said a word, they never asked what such a secondary school in England would be like, what I thought of their school. I was relieved when I got out and sat down in an empty classroom with a few boys who proceeded to try out their English on me. They were interested and intelligent and it was very refreshing. This school was assisted financially by the Government and as in all such schools, the chairman of the managing board was the S.D.O. (so he is in on education as well as everything else!).



The pupils pay from to 3 rupees a month and when I learnt more of condition [some words missing here, perhaps referring to teachers] sympathy. They earn from 15 to 60 rupees a month! For this they have graduated! Normally they make up this money by private coaching in all their spare time. No wonder teachers left the schools during the war and got temporary jobs as clerks.

The other school was in a small town and was self supporting. It had been built and was largely maintained by local donors, and was recognised for the Matriculation examination. It was altogether exceptional. There was a keen committee of twelve, three of whom were teachers and another the local secretary of the Kisan Sabha. The building was

very poor, typical of High School, the classrooms holding about 40 pupils each and with old benches and mud floors. I asked why they did not apply for Government assistance. The headmaster said if they did, Education Inspectors would be entitled to come and they would prevent them managing the schools as they did now and many of the teachers would certainly be removed as they held progressive views. Although it was financed privately, Government approved text books still had to used. I had seen these elsewhere. I had opened the English primer at "The Charge of the Light Brigade", it was full of such examples. The picture of benevolent British rule in India, and the empire given in the history book was certainly not the source of the boys' ideas on the subject.

On one or two occasions I had discussions with teachers on the curriculum and the standard of education. They were concerned that there was so much "cramming", that the pupil's sole idea was to pass the examinations to qualify him to get a job. This also applies in England, as I told them, but certainly not to the same degree. It was surprising to hear that it is only comparatively recently that most text books have been in Bengalee. When a student received his instruction in English, and had to learn and think in a foreign tongue, it was no wonder his education suffered. I asked whether the pupils ever disagreed with or discussed some of the things in their text books which are so much at variance with the viewpoint of Indians generally. Very little it seemed, again their chief concern was what answer would the examiner [want] and beyond that they were not very concerned—at least while in school.

College education gave a similar picture—except that I did not hear of any which had broken away to any great de-

gree from the deadening tradition. They are all under the clammy hand of Calcutta University and once again education had not developed in an Indian or Bengalee way, but was just a lifeless imitation of foreign ideas. I learnt later that 80 percent of the Senate, the governing body of Calcutta University are appointed by the governor. Thus right from the top down to each of the local High Schools (where the S.D.O. is the chairman of the Board) authority holds the key position. No wonder a Professor bitterly remarked to me, "Even intellectually we are a subject nation".

There were more colleges than I had expected—at least one in each district I visited. The majority of the students were Hindus. Even in an area where 85 percent of the population were Muslims, Muslim students at the college were less than 40 per cent and out of the twelve professors only two were Muslims. It was significant also that during the famine, at the very time primary schools in the villages were disappearing, at least one new college was opened—that was in a stricken district.

Outside education hours the students are much more lively. As well as college students, high school boys from about twelve years old or so are in their students' organisations and they were very surprised when I told them this was a thing unheard of in England. For many years students have been to the forefront of the national movement. One young man I spoke to had been expelled from his college with twelve others a few years ago, because they had taken a leading part in two strikes. One of these strikes had been about a certain national song and continued for three months until the college allowed them to sing it at their functions. One youth, secretary of the Federation in his high school, said that about half the boys were members—and he was

rather contemptuous of these others who did not join because they were afraid it would affect their chance of getting a job. He himself had had to report to the police station twice and had been told to desist and threatened that if he refused he would be barred from any official service!

What are the students striving for today? There is no single answer, they are not united. They are all for freedom. Beyond that, is it true to say that most of them feel things rather than try to clarify their minds on the way forward for the mass of the common people of India, that they are largely carried away by emotion? Most are clear what they are *against*, against British rule, against the Communists, against Congress if they are Muslims, against Pakistan if they are Hindus. Although they are conscious enough of the poverty and oppression of the peasants they do not think it very important to discuss them, or how far the solution of these problems is involved in the objective of all Indians' freedom. If they are for Pakistan somehow this will solve all oppression. If they are for Congress these problems will all be solved after the British quit India. If we consider these two points of view we might be able to see which one is right—if indeed either point of view is right.

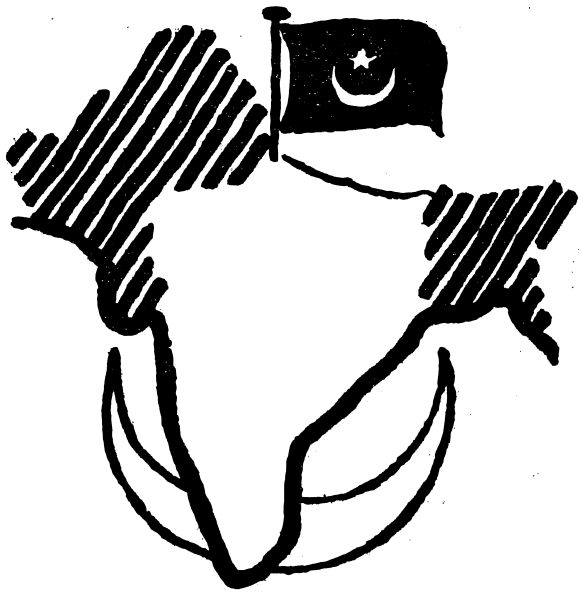
PAKISTAN AND THE LEAGUE

"I say to the impatient youth, he not concerned with details of the scheme . . . Who knows what shape Pakistan will finally take and in what form it will emerge from the turmoil of the years?"

—A leader of the Muslim League.

An enthusiastic young supporter of the Muslim League will have a paper badge stuck in his cap with a map of India on it showing the parts he claims as "Pakistan"—the Punjab, Sind and the North West Frontier in the West, and 700 miles away, "Eastern Pakistan", comprising the whole of Bengal and Assam. Mr. Jinnah and the League claim that this Pakistan should be a separate sovereign state and that India should be divided into two, leaving the rest as Hindustan. Since it put forward this demand in 1940, the League has undoubtedly had a phenomenal growth. It now claims to represent the mass of the Muslims—indeed that it is the only body that is entitled to speak on their behalf. This is as vigorously denied by its Congress opponents. How far is the League justified in its claims?

On one occasion I was in a town in a strongly Muslim area when two Muslim election meetings were in progress at the same time—one of the Muslim League, the other suppor-



ted by Congress. There was no doubt that the League meeting had the mass support. Several thousand men were squatting on the ground—a huge square of them. Their leaders, together with the candidate for the Provincial election, were on a raised pandal and the one who was speaking was invoking texts from the Koran and demanding that every believer support Pakistan for the defence of Islam. We walked through the town to the other meeting, called to support the candidate of the Krishak Proja, the "Peasants' Party", a party of "nationalist Muslims" who support Congress and are against the League.

People were thronging the streets—all the Muslims seemed to be out for the occasion. Some were up from

the villages, middle peasants mainly. Everywhere were the loose white trousers and the fezes of the orthodox Muslims and now and again the long buttoned coat worn by the more prosperous ones. A bearded Muslim leader, with whom I had earlier had a long talk, passed in a rickshaw and gave me a gracious salute, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm as he saw the crowds around. On a bicycle, and going our way to the "nationalist" meeting, was the local Congress president, a Hindu doctor. We crossed a little bridge. This other meeting was protected by police, armed police. A few hundred people were there. I heard the speaker demanding that the British "Quit India", but it seemed ironical to be ask-

ing for this under the protection of their police. Several of the local Congressmen I had previously met were present and a considerable proportion of the audience were clearly Hindus and not Muslims. Young Muslim League students with megaphones were walking up and down outside the meeting, shouting "traitors to Islam". I could not stay long. The atmosphere was too highly charged and, being such a strange visitor, I became a centre of attraction myself and I had no desire to precipitate an "incident".

We got back to the League meeting. It was still on. This time the speaker was attacking Congress because, at the same time that it was demanding freedom for India, it was refusing it to the Muslims. There was a fervent and enthusiastic atmosphere. All around the main body of the meeting, people were wandering about and coming and going, it was as if the whole town were there. Sitting on a grass bank l had a long talk with two or three Muslim students on what they meant by Pakistan.

This was the feeling in a town, but what of the peasants in the villages? Whenever I spoke to a Muslim peasant and had the opportunity, I asked him the the simple question. Had he heard of the Muslim League? What did he think of Pakistan? It was surprising how many had heard and were for Pakistan—at least in the majority Muslim areas in East Bengal. Never on a single occasion did I find one in favour of the Nationalist Muslims or for Congress. Why then did they support the League? If one asked them they could hardly answer—all they knew was that Mr. Jinnah and Pakistan meant freedom for Muslims and therefore should have their support. Some were confused. I remember, for instance, being in the villages the day after these same town meetings. Two or three of the peasants (bigger peasants and themselves

eligible to vote) had been to the two meetings and, on their return, had called together others from the village. They had all decided they should vote for neither party. Both had been calling on believers and quoting from the Koran. "Allah is one, they are dividing Allah", they said, and they seemed to have a general disgust for all those people who, as they said, were never concerned to see them except at election time.

Whenever I asked a League leader or a student in the towns why Pakistan had such wide support, the immediate reply was that Islam is in danger from the Hindus and the only way to protect themselves was to have a separate state—this was their birthright and they would have it. Some times they would discuss the significance of Islam, how it is not just a formal religion but a whole way of life, that the conduct of every believer is laid down in the Koran, the word of God. A leading Provincial member once even explained how all this made all Muslims into one nation and he pointed out that there are really four great nations in the world—West European including America, Soviet Russia, Fascism now disappearing and Islam.

I heard many opinions on the causes of Hindu-Muslim differences. It was pointed out how contrary were these religions, how they had different ways of life and the people a different outlook. Often these Muslims would be very bitter that the Hindus were repressing Islam. I particularly remember the occasion I sat in the local office of the League in a West Bengal town, one where Muslims were but a minority. The young student members had few ideas on what was involved in Pakistan, but they were fanatical against the Hindus because of what they had done against their religion. They claimed that for years they had been prevented by the Hindus from building a mosque, for instance, on the plea that its ex-

istence would be a cause of disturbances and communal riots. Many Muslims seem to feel there can be no flowering of their own culture while the Hindus are in their present position.

However, I usually pressed the point and asked whether there are not other reasons for these differences. Is it not true that economically the Muslims are oppressed? They would agree and would tell me different instances. Muslims in business told of the more powerful position of their Hindu competitors and students often said they knew Hindus would get the best of the jobs. Sometimes we discussed how far this was due to the policy of the British and the East India Company. Bengal had been conquered from the Muslims and quite naturally it was the subject Hindus and not the previous ruling Muslims who were given posts in administration and such like and became educated first. From this the Hindus developed into the middle class sections and today, are the first in business and in land. (Practically the overwhelming bulk of zemindars in Bengal are Hindus.) Moreover, Muslims told me many minor instances of how the Hindus slighted them. We have already seen that an orthodox Hindu ranks a Muslim with an untouchable and feels, in his heart, that Mahomedanism is an alien religion in Hindu Mother India, and these feelings are undoubtedly carried through in many minor ways. It is clear that often Hindus do not realise the bitter feeling there is amongst the Muslims—something they might say in all innocence will be taken by a Muslim as a slight directed against him.

This then is the background to the growth of the Muslim League. There is no doubt that, with its demand for Pakistan, it has brought about a mass awakening and, what is important, of a section of the people who, compared with the Hindus,

were backward as regards their general prosperity, status in society, their hold in business and in land. So it has all types within its ranks or giving it support—peasants with an urge to end oppression up to astute business men who feel thwarted by the present position of the prosperous Hindus. Its leadership is dominantly composed of landed interest in the countryside and the rich of the town. One one occasion I was in a town when a League meeting was broken up by a section of Muslim Leaguers themselves. These members were against their present leader whom they accused of being "pro-Communist" and working with the enemies of religion. However I saw something of the motive behind this incident and had talked with the individual in question. He was a staunch believer and a deep thinker but he was not afraid to give his support to the peasants' movement even if there were Communists amongst it. Some at least of those who broke up the meeting were poor rickshaw pullers who acknowledged later they had been paid to do so. It was but a small example of how some reactionary sections are trying to remove present leaders and get leading positions themselves in the organisation.

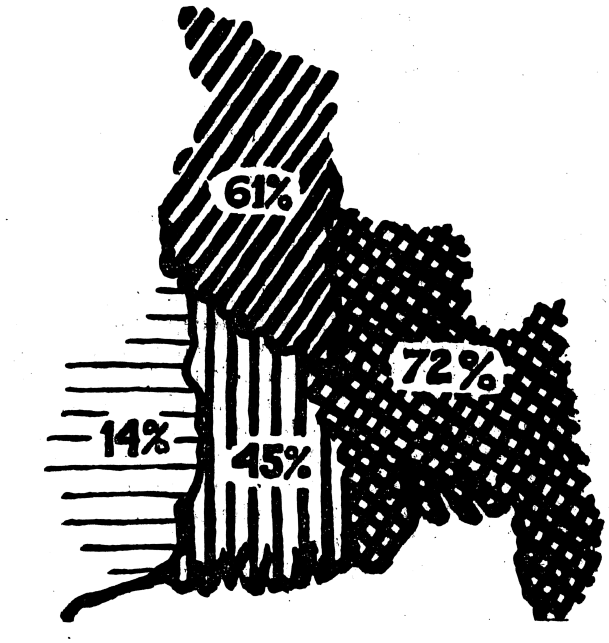
Can Pakistan Save Bengal?

When I had a discussion with a Leaguer in a town, I would explain that, in Britain, Pakistan is little understood. Much is known of the struggles of Congress and there is great sympathy with its cause. Not so with the Muslim League. It has grown very quickly and religion is mixed up with its politics—a thing which is foreign to British movements and it seems to many British people that the League is dividing

India and so is holding back its freedom. Must not all Indians unite to achieve their liberation?

Members of the League would always point out that, for them, brown overlordship is as acceptable as white: they are keen as any [Indian] for freedom from British rule but they want to be certain that this is not replaced by Hindu domination. They fear that if Congress, with its present policy, were to achieve its object, it would mean Hindu oppression. Many of the students and younger elements agreed that they would have to work with Congress to achieve independence, but they could not do so until Congress had agreed with the right of Muslims to Pakistan. Some of the leaders, more used to party politics and negotiation, said the British Government should recognise the justice of their demand—this would become clearer as a result of the elections—and should take steps against the Hindus. Some even envisaged the possibility of some sort of Pakistan with the British still in India. Thus they were relying on the British authorities to solve India's internal problems. Did they really think the India Office would, or could "solve" these problems in the interests of the Indian people?

I continued, that even when one understood the background of their demands (for all communities have the right to their own freedom), there still remained the question as to exactly what they meant by Pakistan—in particular how it would solve the problems of Bengal. The Muslims claimed they were oppressed by the Hindus. Would not Pakistan only reverse the position?—I asked. How would they deal with the large Hindu minority in Bengal—especially in the west of the province where, in fact, the majority of the people were Hindus. Always they replied that, in Pakistan, there would be no oppression, the rights of all minorities would be



Map of Bengal showing the percentage of Muslims [in the populations of] the North, West, Central and Eastern parts of the Province.

safeguarded. Once again some of the leaders gave a constitutional answer. While in Pakistan there would be a Hindu minority, they said, in Hindustan similarly there would be a Muslim minority and this meant that the rights of each would be assured in the agreements that took place between the two parties. Others explained that with Islam there could be no oppression and, in any case usury was forbidden by

their religion. I asked, would there then be no rich and poor in Pakistan, and does not being rich usually entail living off the labour of others? Yes, but the amount of profit and interest would be limited, no Muslim can see another human being oppressed. Once or twice I did suggest that this did not seem to tally with the fact that I had seen very little of organised efforts of the League to help the oppressed peasants in their daily struggle for survival, while tt the same time many League leaders were living in comparative luxury in the towns. Their reply was—that these measures were only palliative—what they wanted was to change the system.

However these questions interested some of the students very greatly. One or two, in particular, were very concerned when I told them that I could not be satisfied with the answers their leaders had given me. They were sorry I had gone to the leaders at all and I thought it a good sign of independent thinking that they did not seem to have much faith in them themselves. We talked of the oppression of the peasants now, and of the zernindars and hoarders, both Hindu and Muslim. But if Pakistan were to be a Muslim state, either the landlords would have to be replaced by Muslims for the state to gain real power, or they would have to be done away with entirely and the land given to the pea[sants. There] is no doubt the latter is what the peasants [would desire—]should not this be the demand of every Mus[lim? Further], we discussed West Bengal, a Hindu area. [How could] they in justice demand this as part of [Pakistan?] They replied that they did not want to see Bengal divided, they felt it was their Muslim homeland. I suggested there might be another reason—that the Bengalee people, Hindus or Muslims, think of themselves as Bengalees, they have a common language and they live and work together in the same land. Might they not be a nation

in themselves?

When I spoke to such young people and thought of the struggle of the common Muslim peasantry against oppression, I felt that their Pakistan was a distorted manifestation of a genuine urge for freedom. It is obvious that it would not solve Bengal's problems—let alone the problems of all the other parts of India claimed as part of the Muslim state. The leadership is far out of touch with the demands of the common people which it has aroused—to them Pakistan means the opportunity to carve large chunks out of India and to whip up the religious frenzy of the people. More and more they seem to be relying on a settlement with the British Government—a settlement that would have to be imposed on large sections of the people without their consent. The more this happens the further they get away from the masses of the Muslims and the more reactionary their organisation becomes.

What Pakistan does show is that the backward communities in India are on the march and that any solution will have to include freedom for them also. The fact that India does include many communities and nationalities, that indeed it is a multinational country, cannot now be ignored and the whole question of freedom for these nationalities and backward sections, is on the order of the day.

CONGRESS

"Our Congress does not have to shoulder responsibility for kingdoms or empires: it is itself being borne by our educated middle classes coming together and seeking to give expression to the country's will ... If, in this mighty assembly, there is a lack of that tolerance which can enable people of all classes and views to find room in the organisation, that would only reveal the inadequacy of our strength."

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE.
Presidential Address, Bengal Congress, 1908.

"Quit India", the slogan of Congress, resounds in every town in Bengal today. Since the release of the Congress leaders and the breakdown of the Simla Conference in July 1945 there has been an upsurge of feeling against British rule that is hardly parallelled even in Indian politics. The court martial of the soldiers who joined the Indian National Army—formed from prisoners of war on the Japanese side to drive the British out of India—became the occasion for widespread demonstrations, and their leader Subhas Bose became a national hero. His name Is on the lips of every Congress youth today and the slogans of the I.N.A., "Jai Hind" and

"Delhi Chalo" (March to Delhi) are shouted at their demonstrations.

Therefore it is not surprising that I, a Britisher, must have appeared to be prejudiced to many a Congressman when I questioned or disagreed with any aspect of his policy. To them, the Muslim League is a reactionary organisation, British-inspired, and Pakistan must be fought tooth and nail. The peasant movement is in the hands of the Communists who are traitors to the people because they sided with the Allies during the war. So it was not easy to discuss these

things—if I did, it only confirmed in their minds that the British people are "imperialist-minded". In any case, they would say, (this was before the arrival of the Cabinet Mission) had not the Labour Government, which had given rise to so many hopes, been shown to be as bad as any Tory Government?

When I asked how they would get the British to quit, they told me that their movement would develop into such huge proportions that there would be no alternative for them but to go. Many of the present problems only remained because of the British policy of "divide and rule", and with the end of this rule they would disappear. The Muslim League would be forgotten. They had a tremendous faith in their national leaders and trusted them to consider the problems of the future.

Congress is, and has been for half a century, the greatest liberation movement of the Indian people—it still claims to be the only genuine movement, representing the interests of all sections and all religions. It has always been broad and loosely organised, but today when it feels so near to power, it is very important to see what type is its leadership and what is their policy. When in the rural towns, I took every opportunity for discussions with the local and District leaders.

Congress and the Peasant Movement

A number of times I asked Congress leaders or officebearers to help me to see Congress at work in the villages. I remember the first one I asked—he was the assistant secretary of the party in the District and a merchant of some standing. I explained that I had nor long arrived and was particularly interested in seeing the peasantry and understanding their problems. The Kisan Sabha had offered to show me their

organisation at work. But I also wanted to see the Congress side of the picture.

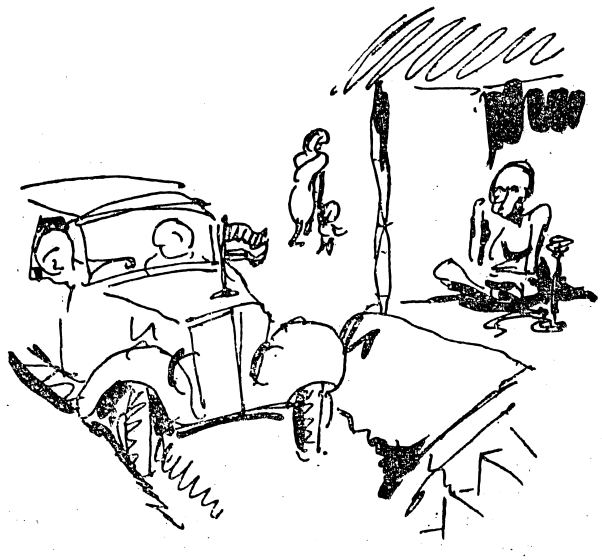
He immediately warned me against the Kisan Sabha—it was strongly influenced by the Communists, and Congress was opposed to it. What they objected to was the way the Communists took up the immediate issues of the peasantry and used them to their own advantage, while failing to put to them the political issue of freedom from British rule. How then does Congress work in the villages?—I asked. We then talked of Gandhi's village work, of his social uplift of the peasants and encouragement of village industry, of his campaigns for a spinning wheel in every cottage (a spinning wheel is emblazoned on the tri-colour flag of Congress). More than that, he said, Congress goes to the peasants and points out to them their grievances, explains that all these would disappear with British rule.

I asked how it was possible to go like this to unenlightened people and organise them on what was really an abstract demand—in spite of its being the root cause of their problems. Surely the basic principles of organisation are the same everywhere. In England trade-unionism was not established by educated people going to the masses of the downtrodden workers and telling them all their troubles were due to capitalism and that they should change the system of society. No, the workers got together and organised on bread and butter questions and wrung concessions out of their masters. It was as they grew in strength by their own efforts that they began to see the possibility of a socialist society. His reply was that in working in this way, the Kisan Sabha was working within the framework of Government machinery and Congress was against the Government. Rationing, control, Food Committees and such like are all part of the administration, rotten

and corrupt. I was so amazed that I asked him to repeat it, that Congress is against control and rationing at the present time. (Though it is interesting to note that the Congress Ministries in other Indian provinces never wanted to abolish control and rationing and rightly too!) To me this seemed so irresponsible, since it meant condemning millions more to die in Bengal—for however inefficient are the present arrangements, however weak are the Food Committees for instance, their removal would open the gates wider to the hoarders and profiteers. This could but mean another and perhaps a worse 1943.

However, he did not arrange to take me to the villages—nor did other such Congress leader in any town. I heard a lot from them about Congress strongholds in other Districts, Midnapore or Chittagong, but never in their own. The only conclusion I could reach was that they did not know the peasants, the peasants could not have known them as their friends. This was made very clear to me when one of them said if they had not been so busy with the elections, he would have taken me in the car to the villages! In a car to see the peasants! Nevertheless I did see many members of Congress, men who often had been in the movement all their active lives, working with the peasants in their organisation and I also saw the widespread general support there is for Congress in the villages–very largely amongst the middle peasantry, and among poorer peasants too where there is no Kisan movement and to the peasant as such the Congress stood, in a vague way, for all that is meant by Freedom.

This opposition of the Congress leaders to the Kisan Sabha has gone so far that they are trying to launch a rival body under their own leadership. This was decided at their last all-India conference at Bombay, but the sub-committee



responsible has so far been unable to reach agreement on how it is to be done and has postponed any action for the time being. What a tragic and suicidal policy! A Congress peasants' organisation would inevitably be answered by a Muslim League peasants' organisation and with three bodies the divisions in town politics would be carried down to the peasantry. In the same way Congress has tried to set up rival Trade Unions to those in the All-India Trade Union Congress.

What is the reason for this attitude amongst the Congress leaders? It is mainly because they are that type of middle class and upper middle class people who, whether they realise it or not, have gained their present positions from the toil of the peasants (in Bengal they come mostly from that class

of landholders which has arisen from the Permanent Settlement). Often unconsciously their stake is on the side of the *status quo*—at least as far as the peasants and the common people are concerned. If the peasants' movement were to be successful they feel they would be the losers. Moreover the stand of Congress against the peasants' movement is attracting those zemindars and other individuals who have been known previously as the worst enemies of the people and have opposed Congress in the past. One example of the many I came across, was a certain sub-zemindar whom Congress had fought for years. They had fought him over land, they had had a court case against him, he had backed their opponent at the last elections—now he has joined Congress and is enrolling members. It is significant also that in their recent declarations, some of the top Congress leaders have proposed to compensate zemindars in settlement of the land question and have already made open pronouncements to that effect. Compensate the blood suckers of the country!

For British friends of India, who have followed the past struggles of Congress with sympathy and admiration, it is indeed tragic to realise the trends amongst its leadership now—more so if one has met those Congressmen who have made such sacrifices under its banner in the past and are now critical of the lead it is giving, or if one has seen the tremendous prestige it still retains as the freedom movement of the Indian people. One can only be confident that events will open the eyes of the people and they will carry their leaders forward and make them implement their repeated pledges to establish a "*Majdoor Kisan raj*" (workers' and peasants' regime) in India.

Congress and the Muslims

Congress is violently opposed to Pakistan. During many talks I had with local Congress leaders I heard a number of reasons for this repeatedly stated. The Muslim League is a reactionary, feudal organisation, basing its policy on religious and communal issues. It is British-inspired in the sense that it is playing the old game of divide and rule and preventing the Indian people uniting and achieving their freedom. Against this Congress holds that India is one nation and that all Indians of whatever religion or status should unite within its ranks—or at least that Muslims should support the "Nationalist Muslims" who are working with Congress.

However justified are many of these Congress criticisms of the League, it seems that certain other things should also be said to complete the analysis. Whatever were the causes, the fact is that Muslims have been left backward and the educated middle class people, the merchants and industrialists, are generally Hindus. Naturally a Hindu Congressman does not find it easy to understand how a Muslim feels about this or that. At this stage, the revolt of a Muslim against his status takes the form of resentment at the position of Hindus and the demand for Pakistan. A Congressman cannot see that behind the Muslim movement there is a genuine urge for freedom however distorted its expression may be and is the awakening of a backward section, previously almost dormant. With the British taking advantage of this unequal development of the two communities, it is but natural that a sense of mutual fear and distrust should grip them both. But the tragedy of it all is that the leaders of both these sections have yet to realise the British game and defeat it by getting over their mutual hostilities.

What of the accusation by the League that Congress is a Hindu organisation, when there are undoubtedly many Muslims within Congress? I met a number of these and without exception they had been in the liberation movement for many years—that is, since the time when Congress was the only effectual organisation and the League did not exist as a mass body. Even in those times there were relatively few Muslims, for the Hindus, naturally, the more advanced section, did the most to build up the national movement and there is nothing wrong in that. I did not meet any young Muslims or students who were backing Congress, yet there are many now in the League who were once in Congress or have worked with it, including Mr. Jinnah himself. Moreover the anti-Muslim stand of Congress also is drawing towards it many Hindus who were previously in reactionary communal bodies like the Hindu Mahasabha—many of these incidentally are oppressive zemindars. One of the main objects of the Congress election campaign, apart from discrediting the Communists, was to show up the League and prove that it has little support—in other words Congress was utilising the elections in the same way as the League. The results however showed up the lack of Muslim support for the Congress, for, except [in] North-West Frontier Provinces, most of the Muslim candidates put up or backed by Congress lost heavily to the League nominees. The fact that this gets nobody any further towards unity and freedom is the very indication that the policies on both sides are futile and is the reason why the elections meant so little to the peasantry.

I had many discussions with Congressmen about their claim that India is a single nation. To me it seemed so clear that it is not—any more than Europe is. A Frenchman and an Italian are surely as different as a Punjabee and a Bengalee.

They have the same sort of differences in language, culture and outlook—in fact the only peculiarity of the Indians in this comparison is that in their case they are both subject to the same foreign ruler. Some Congressmen would say it is old fashioned to have small nations, that the tendency should be towards big communities and ultimately a world community and that the continuous wars between the nations of Europe hardly demonstrate the desirability of muti-national solutions. My reply would be that the nations of Europe are not people's states, and that a people's Europe would not be at war even though it were multi-national, any more than a multi-national people's India would have internal strife. In any case India is still a feudal country and is it not most likely that its peoples will go through the stage of developing their own nationalities? Might it not be that the way to achieve real unity throughout India is by giving the peoples of different nationalities their own freedom, the right of self determination? Some Congressmen would agree that India really is many nations but they thought that this problem must sort itself out after the British have gone, it has no relevance to the immediate question of freedom from British rule. They would not concede that by taking a clear stand for self-determination for the different peoples of India they would help to arouse the backward sections—nor would they agree that Pakistan might be the distorted manifestation of a such an urge, or that other communities in India, besides the Muslims, are making their own voice heard even now.

National Leadership

What of the all-India leadership in which the Congress youth has such abounded faith? Even from the daily papers it can

be seen to be full of contradictions. When Birla, an Indian big business man as well as a power behind Congress, had a strike in one of his large enterprises, who were the people to support? Should they sympathise with the workers who have the usual inhuman conditions in Indian factories and have built up a strong Trade Union—or should they back the Congressite boss? Again, at the very time that Calcutta was seething with demonstrations for "Quit India" and leaders were saying that the British hold on India had irretrievably weakened, Gandhi had no less than seven private interviews with the Governor and the Viceroy came to the city specially for discussions—many times before, Gandhi has negotiated compromises with the British rulers. Nehru used to be well known as a socialist, but now he appeals to the Princes to become enlightened and install progressive regimes—previously these same Princes had been condemned by Nehru himself to be feudal and reactionary, mere puppets who only survived because of the support the British gave them and who would have to be swept away in any solution of the Indian problem.

At its last conference (September, 1945), Congress virtually declared war on the Muslim League. Who could suggest this helped the unity of the Indian people? And who stands to gain by rival peasants' organisations and Trade Unions other than the zemindars, the industrialists and the British authorities? Have not the violent anti-Communist sentiments and accusations which continually come from the leadership encouraged the riff-raff and the hooligan elements to carry out their numerous assaults on individual Communists—in the name of Congress? (At Bombay they even set fire to the Communist Headquarters, injured a large number of persons and partly destroyed their printing press.) Has all this helped

towards national unity?

There can be no doubt that a similar development has taken place in the leadership at the top as has happened in the case of the local leaders in Bengal. In the same way that, in Bengal, zemindars, merchants and other middle class sections oppressing the people have found their place in Congress to fight the peasant—on a national scale the Indian industrialists and other powerful elements of the middle class are in Congress opposing the organisations of the common people, both the peasantry and the industrial workers. No doubt they desire freedom from British rule which they so vigorously demand, but to them this cannot mean freedom for the people from all oppression—for then their own position would be threatened. Under these circumstances, notwithstanding all the campaigns for "Quit India", there is always the possibility of an attempt at a compromise solution with the British administration—in reality directed against the forces of the people. Indeed even before the British Cabinet Mission arrived, Congress leaders were exhorting the people to stop the waves of strikes and demonstrations that were sweeping India and telling them that "freedom is coming this year", that they should test the sincerity of the British Government by waiting for the results of the negotiations. Do they not realise that the very fact that as many as three Cabinet Ministers were spared to come to India was in itself a measure of this "unrest" in India? Why not arouse the people? Are they afraid of an angry people they will not be able to control?

Most tragic is the fact that this opposition to the common people finds them sometimes at one with the British authorities. Thus Patel, a most important Congress leader, can say of the unrest in connection with the Royal Indian Navy strikes

in Bombay (with Nehru sitting on the same platform) "There is much talk of condemning this firing. True, in some places the firing was excessive. But tomorrow after we get power, if such goondaism (hooliganism) takes place, we might have to resort to firing also ... If on such occasions we have to use the military, what will you say then?" (And actually the Congress Ministry in Bombay which assumed office a few months later decorated with medals some of the police officers who became conspicuous by their suppression of the unrest following the August movement.)

Therefore, in spite of the fact that Congress is still the movement which represents the aspirations of large sections of the Indian people, the present policy of its leadership will not achieve that freedom from all oppression which the masses of the common people desire. Ten or twenty years ago Congress might have led India as a whole on at least the first steps to her freedom—independence from British rule. Today however, the leadership, like that of the Muslim League, is becoming more and more opposed to the forces of the people and more eager to come to some sort of deal with the British. Now the peasants and the workers—the common people of India—have powerful and growing organisations struggling against their oppressors, brown and white, and backward sections and communities are awakening who want their national independence. It is these new forces, together with the masses of the ordinary Indians who support Congress and the League, who will achieve real independence for India. And freedom for them must solve their basic demands for food and land, for jobs and human conditions of work and living.

INDIANS AND THE BRITISH

"Bengal is indebted to the enterprise and sound management of the jute mill industry for the fact of its being the wealthiest Province in India."

—British businessmen in India.
(From the Annual Report of the
Indian Jute Mills Association, 1940).

The common man of Britain is a participant in the Indian scene no less than a Congressman or a Leaguer, an Indian peasant or a mill worker—for India is ruled in the name of the British people. Yet many times I found that never before had the people in the villages and towns been able to talk to a common Britisher—often I was the first they had ever seen. They were intensely interested to hear what the British people thought about India and how it was that they could allow it to continue in subjection for so long.

When a peasant had told me of the sufferings of his family and his village and then asked me about the people in Britain, I would have to put a complicated situation as simply and correctly as I was able. There are two sorts of British people, I would tell such a peasant, the common people, many of whom are workers in large factories, and the big men who own these factories and also have most of the money

in the banks. So these men are very powerful and the common people who work for them struggle against them and have Trade Unions—in the same way that the Indian peasants have their Kisan Sabha. These same sort of big men get profit and wealth out of India also and exploit the common people there—so the peasants of India and the working men of Britain have the same oppressors and are comrades. They would ask whether the workers are poor, whether they starve and die. Yes, some are poor, I would tell them, and although they do not starve like the Indian people, often they can get no work and have a struggle to keep their family. Many do not get enough to eat and are cold in the winter, because they have not enough fuel.

How many British people would agree with what I told the peasants? They saw it clearly enough and were encouraged—they had never thought of a Britisher as other than a big official or a soldier. However, such a simple explanation would not satisfy an educated man, a local leader say, who closely followed British politics—for every question in Parliament about India or any resolution passed by an organisation in Britain is prominently displayed in the national press. Such a man might be acutely disappointed with the Labour Government. At first he had had such high hopes, but it had turned out to be as bad as any Tory government. He might say it was even worse because it covered up what it was doing with so much talk and statements about its good intentions, whereas Amery did not even pretend to be anything else than an imperialist. Although the police had been firing in their usual way on demonstrations in different parts of India the Labour Secretary of State had refused to set up inquiries. Moreover under the Labour Government Indian troops had been used against the Indonesians (every Indian

I spoke to—whatever his views on other matters—saw the happenings in Indonesia as an attempt by the imperialists to retain their hold over a colonial people). An example of the attitude of the Indian people was their reaction to the appointment of Mr. Burrows as the new Governor of Bengal. He is an ex-railway worker and a Trade Unionist and those in London who appointed him thought, no doubt, what a gesture this was, what a sign of good faith. It was only when I was near the end of my tour that I realised this event had not been mentioned by any Indian! I remarked on this to one or two and they saw no significance in it—in any case when he had accepted a knighthood they knew for certain that it meant no change.

Yet amongst the middle class people were conflicting and changing opinions. At the time of the elections, for instance, when the "Quit India" campaign was at its height, Congressmen had had nothing good to say of the Labour Government, but, with the coming of the Cabinet Mission, all this seemed to change. Very many accepted their leader's views that "freedom is coming this year" and gained a sudden faith in the sincerity of their British rulers. One can only be sure that in their hearts they still realised that India will only achieve her liberation by virtue of the strength of the movements within India itself and that, until all the different sections are united and working together, freedom will never be given them by their rulers.

At the same time as I put my point of view that the decisions of the Cabinet Mission could not mean independence for India, I remained convinced that the Labour Government is better for the Indians than a Tory Government—because the British people have an altogether greater chance of changing its policy. I explained how it is a Government based on

the organisations of the common people and is not a collection of company directors and upper-class individuals with an eye on their investments. Its foreign policy is so bad and its attitude to India has not improved because the people have not woken up to the seriousness of the situation and so brought pressure to bear on it. Without this it has just fallen into the arms of the imperialists and is using the present administrators from the India Office and other "experts" who always have run India. True, they have at last accepted the fact that India wishes to be independent but not many of the Bengalee people I spoke to thought this was as a result of a change of heart—rather it was an inevitable reaction to the upsurge of the Indian people which could not be ignored. Labour men were on the Cabinet Mission but behind them were these officials and imperialists who are so experienced in finding constitutional "solutions" to the Indian problem—"solutions" which help to divide the country and ensure their rule.

So I seemed to put all the responsibility on to the British people themselves and I had many discussions with Bengalees as to why Britishers had not aroused themselves more to achieve liberation for India. There is a considerable and growing section who clearly understands the issues, I said, and if one stopped any British working man in the street and asked him the simple question, whether he agreed with independence for India, he would say "yes"—if Indians thought that British people were flag wavers and thought of "their" Empire on which the sun never sets, they were wrong. But beyond that, our man in the street, like the majority of the common people, would not be very clear. He has vital ind important problems of his own—whether he will be able to keep his job, whether his earnings will go down, the diffi-

culty of getting a house for his family, the shortage of food and cloth. These are very real problems in Britain (although I knew only too well that no Britisher is facing anything approaching the lot of millions of Indians). The reason the people of Britain are not more concerned about India is that they do not understand that their own problems, their own freedom and prosperity, are dependent to a large degree on the liberation of India. India is impoverished and Britain is in dire economic straits—yet between them they have tremendous natural and industrial resources. They do not fully understand that it is British rule itself that is holding back and strangling the development of India and that only a free India can be a prosperous India, and an asset not a liability for Britain.

The realities of British rule and the effects of this on India are hidden from the British people—one has only to look at the reports about India in the newspapers. They know that much is wrong, that there is poverty and oppression, yet they are given the impression that in India there is a measure of justice and fair administration such as they are used to at home (although democracy as it exists in Britain today has only been achieved by the past struggles and organisation of the common people themselves). They could hardly believe the true facts of police activities and the meting out of justice in India today—they are used to a regime where "law and order" means the protection of the individual. They are told there is some measure of democracy in India and they have heard of the elections going on.

Moreover they are given the impression that Indians cannot agree amongst themselves and that it is the British who try to do everything to reach a settlement. Indian politics seem so complicated to them and they cannot clearly see the

way India can achieve her freedom without falling into anarchy and internal strife.

Real Hold on India

In the train on the way back to Calcutta I spoke to two Britishers—soldiers going home to be demobbed. They were disgusted with what they had seen in India—not with the effects of British rule but with the Indian people. The whole country seemed rotten and corrupt, and the first thought of those Indians with whom they had come in contact was to swindle them. They had seen mass enthusiasm for a figure like Subhas Bose who seemed to them to be a traitor on the side of the Japs. With it all they were "browned off", soldiers in a foreign and often hostile land, and all they wanted was to see the last of the country and get back to their own own civilised home. They were not against giving the Indians their freedom, rather the country seemed to be in such an impossible mess that the easiest way seemed to be to give it back to the Indians and let them clear it up for themselves—although they did not have much confidence that they were capable of doing it.

How little did they realise the stark realities of the rule and exploitation being carried out in their name! I thought of them when, later on, I went through Clive Street, the business centre of Calcutta. Here were the names of those great British firms—Andrew Yule, Mcleod's, Bird and Co.,—who have a grip on jute, coal steamer transport, pulp mills, insurance and such like in Bengal. The most important is jute—of 106 mills 97 are in the Indian Jute Mills Association and 84 percent are British owned. This is the industry whose exports are half those of the whole of Bengal, an industry

where profits of 50 per cent a year are quite common and which even reached 400 per cent, an industry whose aggregate gross profits are not far short of the revenue of the Government of Bengal. The workers in the mills, a quarter of whom are women, are shamelessly exploited and survive on a few rupees a week. It is these same mill owners who ultimately purchase the raw jute from the peasant growers whose condition we have already seen, and who control the market prices and therefore the destinies of millions of people.

The British economic hold is the key to the state of affairs in India today as in the past. In Bengal we have seen that it was as a system of collecting revenue that the Permanent Settlement was established. and that this is the root cause of the material and moral disintegration of the province. It was the way the British flooded the country last century with their cheap manufactured goods that finally ruined the village industries and the village sciety of India. Today it is British capital which has a hidden stranglehold on India. In spite of advances by Indian capital, this dominates in banking, exchange, shipping, plantations and such like—by means of the system of "managing agents" even enterprises which appear to be Indian are very often under British control. Most important is that the Reserve Bank of India, which controls all credit and has a similar importance in economic life in India as has the Bank of England in Britain, is in British hands and is controlled in the interests of British capital—not in the interest of the Indian people.

It is because of this also that the industrial development of India is held back, the reason that India is kept poor and backward. How could those who hold this capital afford to let Indian industry and banking develop, who would allow such competition to develop if they were in a position to

prevent it—as the British interests are? So we find a continual and sordid story of the thwarting of Indian interests at every turn—in particular heavy industry has been denied to India although this is the basis of any real improvement in the standards of life of the Indian people including improved methods of farming, irrigation and such like. How often is it realised that in the twenty years before the war the numbers employed in industry in India actually decreased! The same story was repeated during the war. Alone of all the Allied countries which remained unoccupied, India had no basic or important industries developed. Australia increased its steel production and made aircraft and built ships. Canada had many important industries established. But India increased her production mainly by increasing the number of shifts on obsolete machinery and the workers who were absorbed are now being thrown back on the streets—or to the villages. The *"Eastern Economist"* (31-8-45) has bitterly summed it up. "During the war we were asked to do plenty of odds and ends but never the whole thing. We can repair ships, we can make small craft, but never the whole big thing. During the war we repaired 6,500 ships but we did not develop this into a regular shipbuilding industry ... 'Hindustan Aircraft Limited' started as a manufacturing concern, and changed from manufacturing to servicing. The story in Ordnance and steel factories was the same. We could make everything and yet nothing. We were just general suppliers of anything and everything, but the makers of none. We had no system, no plan. Rather there was a plan—clear-cut and thorough—to prevent the industrialisation of the country in the post-war period."

Indian industrialists had more success in the last war for it was at that time that the most important ones which exist

now first broke through—in particular some heavy industry was established. It is sign of the times that today the bigger Indian industrialists are coming to terms with the British interests, as for instance the Nuffield-Birla scheme for making cars—a sign on the one hand of the irresistible urge for industry in India, on the other hand of new methods by which British interests can retain their hold. Also is the sinister fact that thus they both present a United front against the Trade Unions of the working people.

However, it might be pointed out that the affairs of India are surely not in the hands of a gang of British financiers. What of the Government of India? Does it not have considerable powers over industrial development? In fact are not many of the railways, originally British owned, now State Railways under their control? Yet we find it is the Government of India itself that has thwarted Indian industry and refused, delayed or whittled down under all sorts of pretexts, plans for the industrialisation of India. The explanation should be clear from what we have seen of Bengal. There, all important administration, all real power, is in the hands of Authority—from the Chief Secretary down to the District Magistrate and all the rest of the officials—and their function is to sustain the *status quo* (that is, British power.)

So in India as a whole real power is in the hands of British or British-nominated people. The administration in India, far from working in the interests of the people, is, in reality, but another means whereby the British interests retain their hold. Just like the bureaucracy in Bengal, the Government of India is by its very nature opposed to the forces of the people, the law it enforces is designed in the interests of British power and it is carrying on a tradition of 150 years of playing on the differences amongst the Indian people, retain-

ing the puppet Indian princes' States and such like.

So any talk of real freedom for India which does not involve the ending of this British economic domination is meaningless—it is interesting to reflect how rarely it is mentioned in the many statements from Britain reiterating good intentions about freedom for India. In any case the Indian people would be fully justified in seizing all the British capital and assets in India. They have been produced from the exploitation of India and are only held by the rnoneyed classes in Britain.

Moreover, Britain now owes India a sum of money referred to as the "Sterling Balances" which exceeds in amount all the British capital investments—and there are few signs that it will be repaid. These balances have become of paramount importance in the relations between Britain and India. They represent that part of the expenditure of the war in the East which, it had been previously agreed, was the liability of the British Government but which was, in fact, paid by India. The fact that they are so big, of the order of 1,500 million, is a measure of the extent of the contribution of India to the war. The only way the impoverished country was able to stand the strain was by inflating the currency and this reduced the standard of living to its present depths and was partly responsible for the present famine conditions and semistarvation of millions. Perhaps many a British soldier would have had a different attitude to Indians if he had realised he was being kept and maintained not by Britain, hut by the labour of the poverty-stricken people he saw around him.

Thus the liquidation of the Sterling Balances (by handing over British capital assets in India) is bound up with the granting of real freedom to India. But could Britain stand the strain, is she not in dire economic straits herself? This very

common question implies that India must go on starving to save the British -and it would be as well if those who asked it were to remember this. It is the same point of view as expressed by Mr. Bevin in Parliament when he said "If the Empire fell, the greatest collection of free nations would go into the limbo of the past—and the standard of living of its constituents would fall considerably". Is not the reverse the truth—that only when India has freed herself from the shackles of British economic interests will she be able to develop and prosper and, when she does, she will need in tremendous quantity the very industrial equipment and machinery that Britain is able to produce, and she will be able to supply to Britain in ever increasing amount the goods and raw materials without which Britain cannot prosper. The only problem is the planning of this exchange of wealth, the only losers would be that class of British people which has its money invested in India. It is in this light that the settlement of the Sterling Balances in London must be treated—as part of the granting of freedom to India.

Way to Freedom

What is the way forward to a solution of the Indian problem? Why is the award of the Cabinet Mission foredoomed to failure? Indeed how is power to he handed over and India granted her independence?

To consider these questions it is necessary to bear in mind the policy of the present administrators of India. We have seen something of them in Bengal and one can hardly expect them to view with enthusiasm the prospect of handing over India to the Indians. They are enmeshed in an administration which has gained its strength and retained its hold

over this vast subcontinent for nearly two centuries by virtue of the backwardness and divisions amongst its peoples. They are part of that super-structure of British power in which the law and the civil service, the armed forces and the police, revenue and finance, trade and commerce, have been controlled for all this time in the interests of the foreign ruler. Today, as a result of their administration, the divisions amongst the peoples have so sharpened that solution seems well nigh impossible—except to those with the understanding that the future of India, as with all countries of the world, rests with the coinmon people. And this is a thing a British colonial administrator will never be able to understand.

To them, India still remains the basis of British world power. Not only is it the largest unit under British domination, but strategically it holds the key to the whole of colonial South East Asia. Moreover it abuts the southern borders of the Soviet Union and in this respect also they have a long tradition of hostility to Russia. Indeed, are not the words of Rabindranath Tagore, written nearly half a century ago, still very true even in the changed circumstances of today?

> "From time to time we realise and are surprised that our British rulers, lofty in their sovereign authority and powerful beyond compare, yet live in this country in fear and trembling. We have felt, grievously, how the very anticipation of Russia's distant footsteps gives them a sudden shock. For every time their heart beats startle there ensues an earthquake in the treasury, nearly empty, of our Mother India, and the little morsels which were meant for the hungry stomachs of the poor and exploited skeletons who are our people, turn in a trice into the cannon's hard, iron balls, which

is not exactly the kind of food we can easily digest."

Today the British rulers have greater cause for fear and trembling. For within India itself there have developed tremendous movements for freedom from foreign rule. India has changed from a backward peasant country to a sub--continent seething with demands for liberation. The administrators must seek for new methods to retain their hold, new methods which appear to concede the demands of different sections but which will prevent them uniting on the common ground of complete freedom from British rule. Even during the war, they had anticipated this post-war upsurge and had been getting ready with their "solutions". The earliest of these was prepared by Professor Coupland, generally assumed to be the greatest "constitutional authority" on India today and the Secretary to Sir Stafford Cripps on his "mission" of 1942. In his scheme a part of India is carved off as "Pakistan" and so would get the support of the leaders of the Muslim League. But it also includes "Princestan" by retaining the puppet Princes' States which are in reality the Fifth Column of British Imperialism in India. Thus, with the remainder of India as "Hindustan" the country is artificially divided into three. Greater powers of Government would be given in "Hindustan" and "Pakistan", but the calculation is clear. The country would be in such an unsettled state and there would be so many bickerings in deciding boundaries that the British hardly could leave—there would have to be some "independent" party to keep the peace. The key feature of the scheme, however. is the retention of "Princestan". It is even pointed out how suitable are the Princes' States for a chain of aerodromes across India and, as this is clearly the "safest" of the three areas, one can only reflect how modern

THE THREE INDIAS OF THE COUPLAND SCHEME. **Black** shows "Princestan" (with 63 separate autocratic states). **White** shows "Hindustan" and **Hatching** shows "Pakistan". Compare with next map showing the different nationalities of India.

garrison armies can be airborne and how quickly they could be transferred to any source of "discontent" to restore "law and order".

It must be conceded that the award of the Cabinet Mission comes very close indeed to the proposals of Coupland.

The main features are the same. The retention of the Princes' States; the division of the remainder of India into groupings based on religious areas; no termination of the British control of finance or of the armed forces; a "weak centre" which includes the puppet Princes and which controls the vital matters of defence, foreign affairs and communications. In spite of the fact that the Indian leaders themselves are anxious to accept it and pass it off before their own people as a step forward, who would suggest it is any solution? Who can honestly envisage a real independent India as a result of this award? What hope does it hold for the common people of India, for the peasants of Bengal? Rather it envisages a bloody trail of civil war in which the British will be called upon to mediate every time.

The tragedy is that a Labour Government, resting on the radical and progressive sections of the British people, could be the means of such an imperialist award. India in this way is being turned into a real base for imperialist domination, a base which threatens not only the freedom of South Asia but British people themselves. The "experts" from the India Office, the lawyers, the "constitutional authorities", who are so willing to give their advice to Labour Ministers, are themselves following the traditions of the old administration. Only when these are bypassed and the Labour Government reaches out a hand to the common people of India will a solution be in sight.

What then were the shortcomings of the Cabinet Mission and what steps must the Labour Government still take, if it is to help India to its freedom?

Firstly, there was no declaration by the Cabinet Mission that its object was to grant complete and unqualified independence to India. If the Labour Government is sincere it

must state that it intends to hand over all power to the Indian people and that this includes a settlement of the Sterling Balances and of British financial assets in India and the immediate withdrawal of British armed forces (for, in the last analysis, control over the armed forces is the ultimate strength on which the administration rests). The fact that within India there are great differences amongst her people is no valid reason for the continuance of foreign rule. These are India's own problems and will be solved by the Indian people themselves—indeed they cannot finally be resolved with the British dominant in India, for their existence is the only reason the British are able to remain.

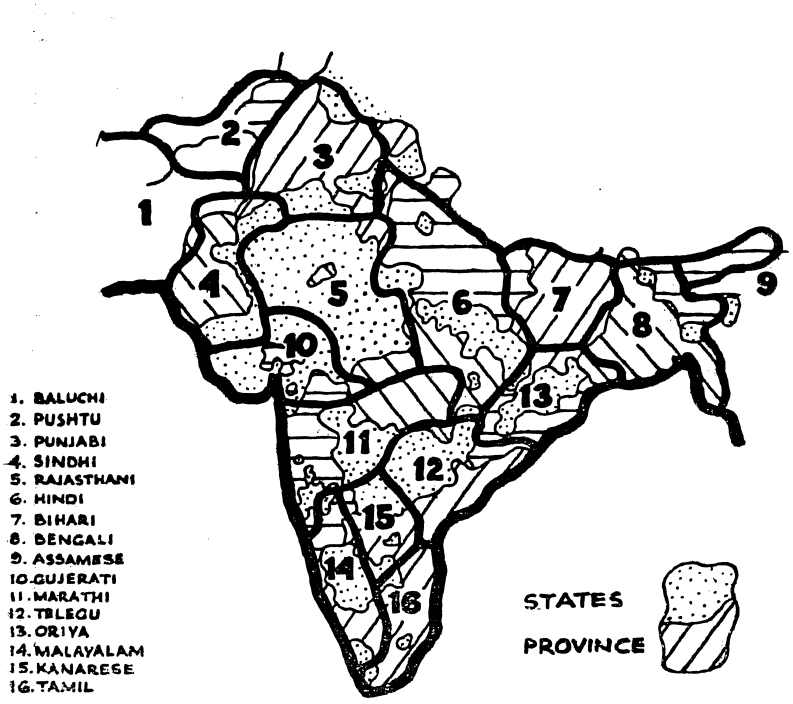
Secondly, all the negotiations on the part of the British were with a narrow section of the Indian people, the middle classes and the landed and industrial sections. It is one of the results of British rule that the mass of the common people are not enfranchised and have no say in the future of their country. Moreover these middle sections have themselves attained their present position mostly as a consequence of the British administration—as we have already seen in the case of zemindars and the middle classes of Bengal. While the leaders of Congress and the Muslim League are at the head of mass movements representing the aspirations of millions for freedom, yet they are actually opposed to the rising forces of the common people, the organised peasants and workers. In this they were on common ground with their British rulers, and it was because of this common danger that they felt the British would be forced to come to terms. So both Congress and the League tried separately to force concessions from the British instead of uniting and putting forward common demands. To any British friend of India their behaviour was certainly a sorry spectacle, but the object of the imperialists

was achieved. The Mission was able to demonstrate to the world that the Indian leaders themselves would not agree, and so the British were able to adopt the pose of peacemakers trying their best to bring the warring parties together.

The bodies which are to take over power and which are to decide the constitution of the new India are to be based on the last Provincial elections—on restricted and complicated electoral rolls ingeniously designed by British administrators of the past to accentuate the differences amongst the people and to check the real expression of the common people. (In Bengal it is the European members who traditionally hold the key votes between the nearly equal Hindu and Muslim members.) This stumbling block can be swept away by the adoption of the elementary democratic step of a simple, universal franchise as the basis of the Assembly to take over power. Then the common people would be able to make their voice heard and isolate and remove their own reactionary leaders. From what we have seen of Bengal, can we have any doubt that the peasants know who are the real friends and enemies of the people? Would not a vote for all of them release a tremendous democratic response, just as it would amongst the working people of the towns? The Cabinet Mission, of course, gave the stock answer to this proposal that the electoral rolls would take too long to prepare. We can hazard a guess who supplied them with this answer—those civil servants whose efficiency and democratic sympathies we have already noted. We call be certain they did not consult the organisations who are close to the people—Food Committees (who already have the mass of the people registered on the basis of ration cards), the peasants' organisations or the Trade Unions—nor have they cared to call for cooperation of all the various parties in the preparation of a nation-wide

electoral roll.

However, the key to any step by a British Government to solve the Indian problem can be found in their attitude to the Princes' States. Once again the Cabinet Mission adopted the imperialists' point of view and treated them as if they had some divine right to a separate existence, and gave them representation side by side with the Provinces of British India in the proposed Union of India. Any democrat is aware that they are ruled by autocrats who refuse their people even the limited rights of the common people in the rest of India, and that they were created and are only artificially bolstered by British power. They are the "safest" stronghold of the imperialists and can be manipulated like puppets by their masters. (Even while the Cabinet Ministers were still in India, the people of Kashmir, the largest Indian State, gave them their answer, when there were widespread disturbances directed against the puppet ruler. These were countered, of course, by savage repression and mischievous references to the Red bogey.) Once again, universal franchise for all the people of India would be the surest way of sweeping away the States, for there is no doubt what would be the opinions of the State's peoples if they were allowed to have their say. Universal franchise for all the peoples of India would have one further effect—the present artificial boundaries, both of the States and the Provinces, would be nullified. These boundaries bear little or no relation to the communities and nationalities of India and they have only arisen to suit the convenience of British administrators in the past. Once again the Cabinet Mission accepted these boundaries as the basis of their award. In fact they are a straitjacket artificially dividing people of the same nationality from each other. In India today we are witnessing the emergence of these differ-



THE FUTURE MAP OF A FREE INDIA?

The map actually shows the extent of the main languages. It also gives an indication of the different nationalities that comprise India—for a common language is one of the most important features of a nation.

These national areas are here superimposed on the present artificial structure of India. Note the extent to which most of them are divided between two, three or more provinces and dozens of states. Could "Balkanisation" be carried much further? (Bengal is one of the few cases where the present boundaries bear some relationship to the nationality.)

No mere "readjustment" of boundaries will solve the national problem of India. Nor can its different peoples develop until the Princes' states are swept away.

ent peoples of India, and the removal of these boundaries would give the various nationalities the opportunity to unite and develop within their natural homelands. No doubt, in the free India of the future these different peoples will be interdependent and will have Assemblies of their own—whether they unite into a single Indian Union is for the Indian people themselves to decide. In this way the demand for Pakistan will be resolved into what it really is, a demand for freedom and independence for the different peoples and communities of India.

By such elementary democratic steps the Labour Government could remove the hindrances to Indian democracy so carefully prepared by British administrators of the past. By doing so it would be imposing no "solution" on India, but would be assisting the common people to work out their own future.

And these steps must be coupled with the complete and unconditional withdrawal of British power and the handing over of power to an Assembly of the Indian people. If the Labour Government refuses to do so and continues to remain in the arms of the imperialists, India will still achieve her freedom—her common people will see to that. But the British people will bear a serious responsibility for the untold suffering and misery that this will mean to India, and they will find it more difficult to capture the friendship of a sub-continent which has within it a fifth of all mankind and which is destined to play a most important part amongst the free nations of the world of tomorrow. For the forces of freedom are irresistible and, dormant for so long, the common people of India will triumph.

Then there will be a new and free India and a happy and prosperous Bengal—although this can never be under-

stood by the British administrators and imperialists. But, amongst the common people of Britain, such words as those of Buddhadev Bose, a well-known Bengali poet will surely find a response:

> "They do not know, my Bengal,
> Of your ambrosia, the happy strength
> You have churned through centuries,
> The complete life, where ripeness is all.
> You have been a victim of endless sorrow
> Only when you were weak.
> But in your strength you are inviolate,
> Beyond conquests and invasions."