

The black hole of Calcutta

What might be termed the sequel to the historical incident we know by the above term has been, and is being written in the blood of thousands of starving, pestilence-stricken Indian workers and peasants of Bengal. Daily references in the newspapers to the famine in India have provided grim evidence of the ghastly scenes enacted on the streets of Calcutta by actors unable to choose the part they wish to play. Stories have been related of children being sold for a handful of rice, and of skeletons of men and women feeding on jungle roots and leaves. Figures of the death rate show it to have increased to nearly four times the normal average. The whole tragedy is graphically epitomised by the Calcutta *Statesman* which said:-

"Thousands of emaciated destitutes still roam the streets in the ceaseless quest for food, scouring dustbins and devouring rotten remains of castaway food and fruit. Rickety children clutching imploringly the tattered garments barely covering the bones of their mothers are seen in all quarters of the city."
(Quoted in *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, October 15, 1943.)

Famine has always been a factor to reckon with in the economy of India, and has usually meant suffering for large sections of the population. It is commonly understood that a famine means a shortage of food owing to the natural failure of crops, but what is not generally recognised is that the character of the famine, and the way in which it affects the people, varies with the type of society in which it occurs. To the middle of the nineteenth century famines in India were localized in the area in which there was a shortage of crop, and meant an appalling lack of food in that area and of employment. Even if one had money there was no food to be brought, and the general solution was to migrate to areas where food was available. From about 1850, however, capitalism, under the tutelage of the British, became superimposed on the old Indian feudal economy at an ever quickening rate, with an ever greater intensity.

With the spreading of capitalism the growth of industrialisation, the development of the plantation and factory system, the production of goods for sale came more and more into evidence. Concurrently with this development the means of transport and communication were vastly increased and extended. Hence, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it became relatively easy to shift quantities of foodstuffs into famine-stricken areas, and a change in the general character of Indian famines took place. They now meant, not so much an appalling lack of food as high scarcity prices and lack of employment, and whilst the growth of the means of communication lessened the danger of local famines, it tended to widen the area where high prices would prevail.

Thus the famine, from being a calamity of the natural order, turned into a calamity of the social order, aggravating the sufferings inflicted on the poorer sections of the population, notably the peasants, the landless day-labourer, and the growing urban working class.

It is true that in the area most affected by the recent famine, Bengal, Bombay, and Madras, there has been some destruction of crops due to natural causes, but at the same time there have been good crops in other provinces. In the reports that have

arrived in this country there is a general insistence that the catastrophe has not come about because of any basic natural shortage, but because such deficits in supply as did exist have been taken advantage of by hoarders and speculators. The loss of the Burma rice crop, excessive inflation, and general economic dislocation (all factors arising out of the war), and natural shortages in certain districts, all tended to encourage the farmers and merchants to hold on to their stocks in order to get still higher prices and greater profits when they did at last decide to sell.

This was the position as early as January 15, 1943, when in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* it was reported that "price control has never been rigorously enforced, except against small retailers. The impression is widespread that there are considerable stocks which would be brought out if price control was removed and this would relieve the shortage until next harvest." The same issue of the paper also stated that black markets flourished everywhere.

After seven months had elapsed the same paper wrote as follows (August 13, 1943):-

"The Government of India's Food Member did not deny last week the allegation that men in authority have obstructed the Government's measures to bring relief to the masses. The Food Secretary on Sunday admitted that Sind had made enormous profits through the sale of surplus wheat and rice. Lack of foresight, the toleration of profiteers, and the fear of alienating certain favoured sections like the landlords, have created the food crisis."

Whilst we learn on the one hand of the fear of alienating certain favoured sections of the property owning class, we learn that there was no such fear during the period of alienating those sections of the population with little or no property. Side by side with the blackest of black markets, dealing in the very life-blood of the poverty-stricken masses, there were "long queues of hungry workers waiting all night outside Government controlled grain shops in places like Bombay." (*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, January 15, 1943.)

Investigations conducted by Calcutta University have revealed that 50 per cent of the families of destitutes have been broken up, and that 47 per cent are landless labourers, 25 per cent small cultivators, 6 per cent town beggars, and the remainder unclassified.

Such evidence as this throws into bold relief the fact that it is the propertyless who suffer and die, whilst the propertied reap excess profits and get all want in the black markets.

The Indian scene, in normal times, is a picture of a vast mass of humanity living in the grip of abysmal poverty. Utter destitution resulting in a prolonged death through starvation, or a quicker death through mal-nutritional diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera and typhoid, is the lot of Indian workers and peasants. What then must be their lot when the price of the food they require for a bare existence soars far and away above their means? What can they do but wait for death to claim them, their bony hands held out imploringly for food, on the pavements of the second largest and one of the "most prosperous" cities in the British Empire! In other parts of the same empire the granaries of Australia and Canada are full to overflowing with the wheat that would bring succour to those in need. The problem, however, according to Mr.

Amery (Secretary for India), speaking in the House of Commons, October 12, 1943, was "entirely one of shipping, and has to be judged in the light of all the other urgent needs of the Allied Nations." Yet the Allied Nations are producing ships faster than they have ever been produced before in the history of mankind, and the USA is able to boast of a production of 15,000 naval ships of all dimensions in the past three years.

Well might the reader at this point exclaim, "This is madness!"

No, reader, this is not madness—simply another example of the ever present anarchy in CAPITALISM, the economic system of society that holds the world enslaved.

An economic system that is based on the ownership of the means of life by the few, and the exclusion of the means of life from the many. Only under capitalism is it possible for conditions to arise where hoarders, speculators, and black marketeers of every nationality can flourish on the one hand, and be the social complement of starvation, unemployment, squalor, disease and poverty on the other.

Only with the abolition of this private property basis of society and its replacement by the ownership of the means of wealth production and distribution by the whole of humanity, can humanity solve the evils with which it is confronted.

This is the job, the only worth-while job, of the working class. Not only the working class of this country, but of the working class of the world acting in unison. No longer must they acquiesce in the retention of a system which condemns great numbers of men and women to exist like a seething mass of gentils beneath a rotten, stinking piece of meat. Just as the meat is a condition of existence of the gentils, so is capitalism a condition of existence of the working class. It must be removed, and with it will go all class divisions.

This can only be done by a working class conscious of the cause of its troubles, desirous of solving them, and with knowledge of the solution. Even in the case of the Indian working class the solution to their problems is the same as ours. It does not lie in the substitution of one kind of capitalism for another. It does not lie in the substitution of a native Indian master class in place of the British Raj; their fellow countrymen are among their most ruthless exploiters. In common with the rest of the workers of the world, their solution lies in the establishment of a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means of life—the establishment of SOCIALISM. Along this road alone, however tiresome may be the journey and however many pitfalls may be on the way, lies the emancipation of all mankind without distinction of race or sex.

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