

# Agricultural Policy of British Imperialism in India.

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Recently, Lord Reading, the outgoing Viceroy of India, announced the appointment of a Commission to study the agricultural condition of the country. This comes after a series of official statements, both in India and England, that agriculture is the greatest problem confronting India today. The nomination of the next viceroy, who is to succeed Lord Reading, has also been meant as a sign that agriculture is to occupy official attention during the next few years to a considerably greater extent than before: Lord Irwin, the viceroy-designate, having been a minister of agriculture in a Conservative cabinet.

It is significant that this discovery of the importance of agriculture has been made now. Many of the Swarajist critics of the British government's new agricultural policy have, however, missed the significance. They have run away with the hasty assumption that it is meant to divert the "attention of the public from the political problems (namely agitation for autonomy etc.) which alone are important".

Now, the new agricultural policy of the British government is not designed to take attention away from the "political problems". That may or may be one of its effects in the sense of the Swarajist interpretation. On the other hand it is clear that it is designed as a further overhauling and modernisation of the mechanism of oppression.

The economic exploitation of the Indian population is done according to a certain system. The system changes with developing circumstances; simple robbery by force giving place to robbery by subtle methods of fraud on national scales in the history of colonial expropriations. Till the beginning of the last imperialist war, India was used by the British capitalists as a vast reservoir of raw materials, and in the second place as a dumping ground for the industrial products of England. There was undoubtedly here and there a considerable amount of British capital "working" on the spot in India, invested in the nascent industries. There was also developing an active participation of native capital in these industries.

But the economic characteristics of pre-war India remained, in spite of the commencing processes of industrialism, those of an industrially backward country. The proletariat consisted, for the most part, of the vast masses of the miserably-paid agricultural workers and the coolies on the plantations, with a fringe of industrial workers, properly so-called, in the large cities like Bombay, Cawnpore, Calcutta and Madras. The function of these labouring masses was to produce raw materials and to prepare them for export to England and in the second place to absorb, according to their buying capacity, the industrial imports from England. The surplus-value from this process had been shared between the foreign and the native bourgeoisie, the lion's share of course going to the former.

Already during the war, a start was made with a more extensive development of industries, for the immediate purpose of supplying the war needs of British imperialism in the Near and the Middle East. Since then, the industrialisation of India has become the accepted policy of British imperialism, as laid down by the Industrial Commission 1916—1917. There is now a constant flow of capital from London to various industrial areas in India, where, in collaboration with capital supplied by the native bourgeoisie, the foundations have been laid for what is practically an industrial revolution after the model of that which happened in Europe generally in the 19th century in the period of transition from the economy of guild and craft industries to the higher economy of high scale industrialism.

As is well known, the industrialisation of a country must have in the beginning, as its basis, a "protected" home-market. This is the necessary condition of its growth. It means that the competition of foreign countries for the supply of goods to India must be regulated, controlled, and if necessary, made to cease. This is precisely what is being done in India now by a system of protective tariffs, "discriminate protection" and bounties. The large firm of steel manufacturers in India, namely Tata and Co., has received large bounties. Many other industries are "protected".

But the absence of foreign competition is only one of the factors in the creation of a home-market. Another and a more important factor is the buying-capacity of the population, con-

crisis because protected industries means higher prices. The second phase of the industrial policy of the British government is precisely to take measures to increase the buying capacity of the Indian peasants, who, as the overwhelming majority of the population, are responsible for the greatest consumption of goods.

The appointment of the agricultural commission is a step towards estimating the actual economic position of the Indian peasantry with a view to increase its power of absorbing the products of the new industrialism. In the imperialist press, the commission has been presented as a philanthropic gesture for the unique benefit of the peasants; it is of course nothing of the sort. It does not propose to consider the question of the relation of the peasants to the landlords, the question of ownership of land, the pivotal question in any scheme of peasant improvement. The labours of the commission will leave the Indian peasants, in the future as in the past, completely at the mercy of the landlords, the hierarchy of rent-collecting intermediaries, and the Sahukar (money-lender) to whom the indebtedness of the peasant has assumed colossal proportions.

Nor will there be any attempt to abolish the system of minute fragmentation of holdings which obtains in many parts of India. No measures are to be taken to improve the position of the small-holders. As a matter of fact, legislation is being proposed in some provinces to buy out the large number of small-holders with the double purpose of facilitating large capitalist farming and pauperising vast masses of the peasants for their eventual employment as necessary man-power in the new intensive industrialism.

The question of land-tenure is expressly left out of the agenda of the commission. It is quite evident that the commission has been called into being with the eminently capitalist object of making the Indian peasants work harder, so that the yield of his labour may be greater, and his exploitation, in the interests of the British capital invested in India, more intensive.