

Dec., 1945

Two peculiarly striking facts about India are: the richness of the country, and the poverty of its inhabitants

Too Many Indians?

George B. Bringmann

IN NO equal area, in like period of time, have so many famines occurred as in India. Including the 1940 famine, in which three million died of starvation and associated diseases, there have been no less than twenty-five such holocausts since 1770. An average of one famine every seven years, or four in a generation!

No one knows the total number of deaths from starvation and the consequent diseases following the recorded famine periods. In 1770, in the Province of Bengal, 10 million people, or one-third of the population, died, while in 1917-18, deaths totaled 13 million, including the influenza toll. In the 1874 Bengal famine, prompt relief action by Viceroy Lord Northbrook prevented a single mortality.

The 1943 famine was attributed to various causes by various groups. British officials blamed everyone and everything but themselves. The Indian Nationalists blamed the inept British administration. Disinterested, competent observers, though cognizant of the administrative breakdown, nevertheless were more inclined to blame the previous floods and hurricanes and the amazingly high Indian birth rate.

One of these observers, after taking many factors into account — the weather, the birth rate, the religious scruples against birth control practices, the primitive agricultural methods of the Indian ryot (peasant), and the exhausted earth of India — “reluctantly” concluded that there were “just too many Indians.”

AT FIRST GLANCE, and on the basis of these factors considered responsible for famine, this conclusion seems in some degree plausible; but it cannot stand in the realm of logic, or after an examination of all the facts.

“Too many” of anything must bear a relationship to “too few” or “too little” of something else. “Too many Indians” (there are 400 million) must be related to the size of India, to the food supply the Indians can produce, or to both.

Indians have more than enough physical room. The average density of population in India is approximately 218 per square mile, ranging from a heavy saturation of 814 in Cochin State to five in Baluchistan State. Since the population density of England and Wales combined is 482, that of Belgium 675 and Holland 577, the

Indian density of 218 compares favorably with conditions in other mature civilizations.

Thus, in relation to the physical dimensions of India, there are not "too many Indians." Can the allegation, then, be related to the capacity of the Indians, with their continuing primitive productive modes, to produce enough food to avoid famines?

There were not always 400 million Indians; they did not always increase in number at the rate of five million a year. Yet India had famines under the Mogul emperors and in the early days of British occupation, when the population was much less than the current figure. And, as famines in these earlier periods were more frequent and equally costly in lives, it is apparent that the constancy of population increase is not the basic cause of India's present-day famines.

India always has produced enough food to avoid famine! Incredible as this statement may sound to persons who have been imbued with the overpopulation doctrine of Malthus, it is nevertheless a fact.

To quote the conclusions of the Famine Commission (1880) — there had been no less than seven famines in the preceding twenty-five years — "... all Indian famines are to be traced to occurrences of seasons of unusual drought, but British India *invariably grows sufficient food supplies for its population.* The prevention of famine, therefore, resolves itself into measures for increasing cultivation by irrigation; while the mitigation of famine depends upon the means of com-

munication, timely relief works, wages for those who can work, and gratuitous relief for those who cannot."¹

Means of communication have been improved since 1880. Irrigation projects have been established on a better than modest scale. Yet India has had many famines since then, culminating in that of 1943. India's millions still starve, and the average life expectancy of a native is thirty-two years. Why?

IN 1835, during the heyday of The East India Company, Montgomery Martin made a survey of Bengal and Behar. He wrote:

"It is impossible to avoid remarking two facts as peculiarly striking: first, the richness of the country surveyed, and second, the poverty of its inhabitants. The annual drain of three million pounds sterling has amounted in thirty years, at 12 per cent (the usual Indian rate) compounded interest, to the enormous sum of 723,900,000 pounds sterling."²

Mr. Martin observed that "so constant and accumulating a drain" on a people whose average wage is "two to three pence a day" was certain to result in economic ruin.

In 1837 Sir Frederick John Shore of the Bengal Civil Service said:

"... she (India) has been drained of a large portion of the wealth she once possessed, and her energies have been cramped by a sordid system of misrule to which the interests of millions have been sacrificed for the benefits of the few."³

These authorities were Englishmen. They knew what they were talking

about. The Indian ryot was not getting the fruits of his labor.

In 1765 The East India Company made a deal with the Mogul emperor. For a guaranteed annual sum paid to him, the company was empowered to act as revenue minister (Diwan) and to keep all collections over and above the guaranteed sum. Rack-renting followed immediately. The company doubled the land rent the first year by collecting £1,417,000. In 1791 the land revenue collected was £2,680,000; in 1813, £4,900,000; in 1823, £13,600,000; in 1858, £15,700,000. These enormous sums represented only two-thirds of the company's "revenue." And when one realizes that these pounds sterling represented the value of produce taken from the Indians and shipped out of the country, with no return, the famines of those days are accounted for. Obviously, India was being exploited shamefully by its own rulers and by The East India Company.

And this exploitation has continued under different guises, by different agencies, for different beneficiaries. There has been no letup. In 1859, the year after the company collected £15,700,000 as land revenue from the users of Indian lands, Major Wingate, Revenue Survey Commissioner for the Bombay Presidency, had this to say:

"Tribute is a transference of a portion of the annual revenue of a subject country to the ruling country without any material equivalent being given in exchange. Its effect is to impoverish the one country and to enrich the other . . . The exactions of a tribute

from India, as a conquered country, would sound harsh and tyrannical in English ears; so the real nature of the Indian contribution (tribute) has been carefully concealed from the British public under the less offensive appellation of 'Home Charges on the Indian Government.'"³

One R. C. Dutt writes, in 1900, in *Economic History of India*:

"A sum reckoned at 20 million pounds sterling or 100 million dollars in American money — some authorities put it much higher—is remitted annually from India without any direct equivalent. It should be borne in mind that this sum is equal to one-half the net revenue of India. . . . one-half of what India pays every year in taxes goes out of the country and is of no further service to those who paid the taxes. No other country suffers like this. No country on earth could bear such an annual drain without increasing impoverishment and repeated famines."⁴

To meet the government levies from their low wages and to avoid starvation in lean years, the millions of ryots have been driven to borrowing money at interest rates upwards of 100 per cent. And, as ancestral debt is collectible in India, it is impossible for the ryots to relieve themselves of this combination of inherited and self-incurred indebtedness. Despite new laws against the practice, the ryot often will sell himself to his creditor and so render lifetime service, if need be, in the payment of his debts, receiving in return a bare subsistence and three rupees a year, about one dollar.⁵

Stated in terms of American money, India's rural indebtedness has snow-balled to:

1911	\$1,095,000,000
1931	3,285,000,000
1935	3,650,000,000

Another drain on Indian subsistence, as a matter of shameful record, was her payment of *all* the ordinary expenses of the following wars waged in the expansion of the British Empire:

<i>First Afghan</i>	1838-42
<i>First China</i>	1839-40
<i>Persian</i>	1856
<i>Abyssinian</i>	1867-68
<i>Perak Expedition</i>	1875
	(Cost £41,000)
<i>Second Afghan</i>	1878-80
	(Cost £17,000,000)
<i>Egyptian</i>	1882
	(Cost £1,200,000)
<i>Soudan</i>	1885-86 ^a

Certainly this steady drain must account, in part at least, for the ten famine periods immediately preceding, during and succeeding the years covered by these wars.

The "Home Charges" against the Indian Government for 1929-30 were £25,166,731 net. In addition, there were *annual* Army Contract System costs of £41,300,000 (1928).⁶ When India was hungry, ill, diseased, illiterate, the expense of maintaining a military establishment was greater than the totals expended for:

<i>Education</i>	£9,600,000
<i>Public Works</i>	9,600,000
<i>Police</i>	9,000,000
<i>Medical and Hygiene</i>	4,400,000
<i>Agriculture</i>	1,900,000
<i>Law and Justice</i>	4,400,000
	<hr/> £38,500,000 ⁷

No picture of the Indian economy would be complete without some consideration of the British economic interests involved in the annual drain upon India.

Investors in Indian coal mines frequently get returns of from 100 to 120 per cent. Miners in the mines earn 16 cents a day.⁸

Jute manufacturing, mainly in the hands of Scottish investors, and the principal export item of India (to the value of about one-fourth of the total exports), is also a lucrative investment. Between the years 1918-27, fifty-one of these jute mills paid as much as 100 per cent in at least one year; 10 paid never less than 40 per cent; 29 never less than 20 per cent. That is economic interest, and to spare, for jute exports in 1919 had an approximate value of £75,000,000. For every \$500 profit to the Scottish owners, \$60 went to their Indian help.⁸

OBJECTIVE as one may wish to be, sooner or later differences of opinion as to Indian affairs revolve on a choice between two opposed political philosophies — between the ideas of Thomas Jefferson and of Warren Hastings of India. Said Hastings in defense of himself, replying to Burke's accusation of his "abominable tyranny and lust for power":

"The people (of India) have no laws, no rights, no property. They are nothing but a herd of slaves to be governed by the arbitrary will of a master."

Said Thomas Jefferson:

"The mass of mankind has not been

born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few, booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."

When a cow suckles its calf, there isn't much milk left for the buttery. Any farm boy knows that. Conversely, even the calf discovers that when a farm boy takes its dam's milk to the buttery, there isn't much milk left for the calf. A simple fact, understood by a farm boy and felt by a calf, becomes obscure when economists and officials talk in terms of political science as they answer the problems of India's 400 million. Among these people are 100,000,000 who from birth to death are hungry and have no reason to want to live.

No, there are not "too many Indians." They can and do produce enough to feed themselves. The solution of their problem of hunger lies in allowing the workers of India to re-

tain enough of what they produce to enable them to exist, in accordance with humanitarian standards. The simple truth of the matter is that justice has been denied them. The applicability of the buttery versus the calf illustration seems to have escaped, somewhat inexplicably, many articulate observers.

REFERENCES

- 1-*World Wide Encyclopedia*
- 2-*Agrarian Problems in India*, by Z. A. Ahmad (1936).
- 3-*Home Charges on the Indian Government*, by Wingate. Wm. Blackwood & Son, London (1859). B. D. Basu, Allahabad (1936).
- 4-*Open Letter to Lord Curzon*, R. C. Dutt et al.
- 5-*India (1920)—Report to Parliament* by L. F. Rushbrook Williams, Director, Central Bureau of Information, Government of India.
- 6-*Modern India* (ch. v, *The Army*), by Gen. Sir George Burrow, G.C.B., K.C.M.G. Oxford Univ. Press, London (1931).
- 7-*Modern India* (ch. xiv, *Public Finance*), by the Rt. Hon. Lord Meston of Agra and Dunottar, K.C.S.I., LL.D.
- 8-*Rebel India*, by H. N. Brailsford, New York (1931).



Playtime at Moss Hart's

The Man Who Came to Dinner was the direct result of a typical visit, by Mr. Alexander Woollcott, to Moss Hart's Bucks County estate. He bullied the servants, condemned the food, invited friends of his own from Philadelphia to Sunday dinner, and wrote in the guest book, "This is to certify that on my first visit to Moss Hart's house, I had one of the most unpleasant times I ever spent." He also suggested that Moss write a play in which he could star.

The next day Hart was describing Woollcott's behavior to George Kaufman. "Wouldn't it have been horrible," he ruminated, "if he had broken a leg and been on my hands for the rest of the summer?" The collaborators looked at each other with dawning delight on their faces and took the cover off the typewriter.

BENNETT CERE, *Try and Stop Me*