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# The Roots of the Current Crisis

By Lal Singh

Everyone who even marginally follows international events knows that Indian society has undergone a series of upheavals recently which culminated in the declaration of a state of emergency. However, in the face of erratic media coverage, a distorted popular image, and rhetorical accusations and counter-accusations about democracy vs. law and order, there has been a great deal of confusion generated about the situation. Few people seem to understand clearly the logic of current events on the subcontinent. That is understandable, since these events, like all political changes of consequence, have a long pre-history in the economics and politics of the region.

### The Feudal Legacy in a Modern state

To many, India still remains the land of a picturesque and intriguing culture, at once medieval and modern, with many valuable lessons to teach western culture about meditative ways of achieving personal liberation; a nation which has been "making a go" of democratic modernization, but which has recently been dragged down by the accumulating problems of food production and poverty. In actual fact, the current crisis of India has been ongoing for most of this century and is nothing short of a crisis of a 4000 year old civilization on the verge of collapse.

The irony of it all is that the very material conditions which fostered the Indian culture now being offered for sale on the Western market as the greatest thing since tranquilizers are the very material conditions responsible for India's chronic poverty, and for the slow disintegration of those cultural values on the home soil. Population is not the problem; feudal agriculture is.

After all, what was India for thousands of years? An overwhelmingly agrarian society with a culture typical of a mass rural lifestyle. The famous caste system served to ritually define acceptable social behaviour for all groups in society, including the upper classes. The predominance of the group over the individual in daily life helped foster the lack of a sense of individuality on which all mysticism is based. The world was made of cotton, not nylon; wood, not steel; and the musical phrases, poetic images, and religious metaphors of the high culture reflected a nonmechanized life close to nature. This is the pastoral culture discovered in the 60's by Western youth who had a quarrel with the industrial pattern of their own society. This is the face many Indians would like to present to the world, yet the facade is melting. Why?

Essentially, the system which in 500 A.D. made Indian one of the most developed cultures in the world could not compete with the new European societies organized around the new principles of scientific method and capitalism. Rather than undergo a similar transformation, however, Indian society became, with the active encouragement of colonialism, even more feudal and anti-democratic. Contact with the commodity economy of the West transformed the caste system into a much more efficient form of oppres-

sion, now utilized to extract even more wealth than before. Upper class/upper caste Indians now want the latest/digital electronic toys from America, the finest scotch, the latest L.P.'s. And somehow that has to be paid for. The social stratification in the cities and countryside increasingly serves less than ritual purposes.

Clearly, the central problem of India's developmental crisis today is the question of land and the relationships between people in relation to the land. The system has been called feudalism in analogy to the European pattern of agriculture in the middle ages. There certainly exist landlords, tenant farmers, and landless agricultural labourers and understandably the caste system has rightly been implicated as the major ideological prop of the economic system.

Yet the analogy with Europe is misleading, for it implies that the same processes which destroyed feudalism in Europe-free enterprise and democratic revolutions-will work in India. Indeed, many see in India's Independence in 1947 such a democratic revolution; moreover, the entire economic effort of the Congress Party, despite its lip-service to socialism, has been based on this premise: the extension of market relations, the mechanization of farming, and the supposed destruction of casteism through legislation--in short, the creation of a modern democracy and economy--would lead somehow to an automatic prosperity.

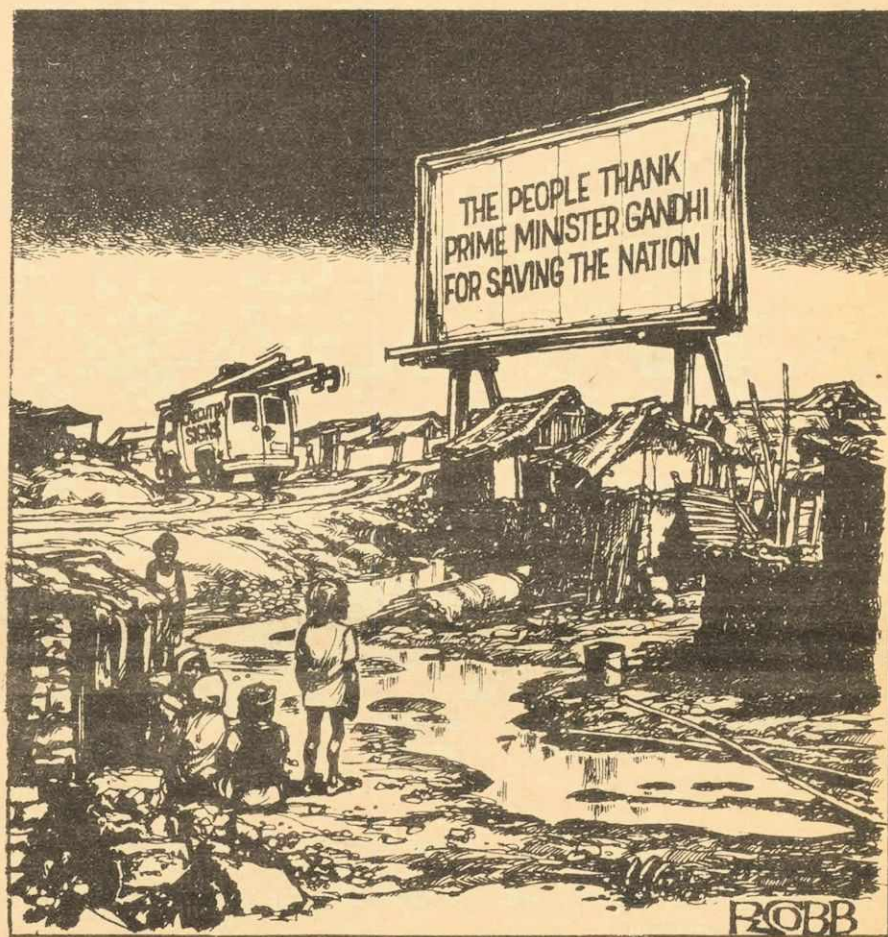
If land relations in India were of the sort that existed 500 years ago in either Europe or India, that might be true; but the crucial point to understand is that India's current form of feudalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, structurally different from classical feudalism. It is a land system that is not dissolved by capitalist development, rather, it is reinforced by it. Thus, with each foreign loan, with each new factory, the conditions in the country side get worse rather than better. India is not backward today because it got "left behind" in the great economic sweepstakes, or because poverty inexplicably refuses to go away in the face of computers and satellites and nuclear bombs. Rather, India's underdevelopment has to be seen as an active process.

Few people realize that the landlord class as it exists today in India was primarily a creation of British colonialism. Lord Cornwallis went to India in the 1790's fresh from defeat at the hands of the American rebels, and his letters make clear that he was intent on establishing a method of indirect taxation that would make British rule more permanent on the subcontinent that it had been in America. Land was consolidated into large estates where "rent" was collected by native Indian landlords rather than by the British. Nevertheless, surplus produce/wealth ended up in the same place.

Even fewer people realize that Indian cotton goods technology, a potential source for the capital for industrialization, was highly developed and

competitive on the world market with the British industry. Considering the role that the textile industry played in the early 1800's in the industrialization of Britain, it is not surprising that the native enterprises were eliminated by

tiller, since it was a mass movement in favour of democracy and freedom. However, when the leadership of that movement was taken by the very men who grew rich under British tutelage, the Indian National Congress was in



Cobb, Los Angeles Free Press

the new colonial authorities. The subsequent development of industry and agriculture in India was conducted in tandem with British needs, and necessarily with British financing. The economic development of India as a century-old dependency of Britain has led to number of features in Indian society that have a direct bearing on the current crisis.

Firstly, the extraction of agricultural surplus in the countryside was determined not by the relatively modest consumption needs of the landlords as in the old days, but by the needs of the British economy in the period of its epochal expansion. Thus feudal relations and obligations between landlord and tenant were already being put under a strain not seen in ancient India. More and more tenants burdened by the high rents fell into a vicious circle of debt payments lasting a lifetime, usually owing them to their lords, and becoming virtual slaves. Naturally, the peasant population has been becoming restive in this century.

Secondly, the landlords and industrialists historically have had a much more comfortable relationship with Britain and the West. This had great implications for the independence movement led by Gandhi and Nehru. That movement certainly represented a genuine possibility for modernizing agriculture on the basis of land to the

control of the most conciliatory and cautious group in society.

The monopoly of political power held by the Congress party, essentially a party of the rich, over the last 30 years since Independence, must thus throw into doubt the kind of freedom that has existed in "the world's largest democracy"; one must question whether Indira Gandhi abolished anything of significance in the declaration of Emergency. Certainly for the poor peasants in their hundreds of millions the everyday violence and denial of democratic rights was always present, even in the heyday of parliament and a free press. It is now not suddenly worse because a few newspapers are censored, though it probably will become so. After all, with each agricultural crisis the Westernized rulers have gone running to the World Bank for aid rather than instituting land reform. To expect the Congress Party, a party with strong landlord influence, to preside over a serious reform would be like expecting the U.S. Republican Party to call for the nationalization of the oil industry.

(The First of a Series)

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