

INDIA IN THE WRITINGS OF FREDERICK ENGELS

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As the closest colleague of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels was both a collaborator (above all, as co-author of the *Communist Manifesto*, 1848) and a follower. One should not, owing to his own modesty, underrate his contributions to the intellectual storehouse of Marxism. A case in point is offered by India, on which Engels had something substantial to say, in regard both to the country's history and to the colonial mode of exploitation.

Though the *Communist Manifesto* had spoken of the history of all hitherto existing societies as the history of class struggle, logic suggested that it was only when human beings were able to produce a certain amount of surplus that class-exploitation could have arisen. Though prehistoric archaeology had not then developed adequately, linguistics and anthropology had made substantial advances, by the time Engels came to write *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). Engels drew the conclusion, in the light mainly of L.H. Morgan's anthropological researches, that in primitive communities, not only classes, but also the institutions of the family and the state could not have been established. Besides pre-Columbian American communities, Engels also found pre-family relationships and matrilinear survivals preserved in certain primitive communities in India.¹

Engels was naturally interested in how humanity began to achieve the ability to produce a surplus. He located it in the beginnings of the domestication of animals, notably, cattle. Here he drew on the work of linguists and held that 'Aryans, Semites, perhaps also the Turanians', first began to rear animals, especially cattle. It was only after animal power was available that agriculture

¹ F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, transl., Moscow, 1948, pp. 43, 87-88. Engels seems to have as his source for India, J.F. Watson and J.W. Kaye, *The People of India*, 6 vols. London, 1868-69.

could begin.² Archaeology and refinements in linguistics, however, have now given us a clearer picture. Animal domestication and the pursuit of agriculture in the Old World formed not successive, but simultaneous processes constituting what Gordon Childe called ‘The Neolithic Revolution’. At least in India, this process had been long established, culminating in the Indus Civilization (c. 2500–1800 BC), well before the Aryans appeared on the scene.³

But whether cattle-domestication and beginnings of agriculture were successive or simultaneous processes was marginal to Engels’ main purpose. This was to establish that there was an earlier time, when owing to primitiveness of life, no surplus could be obtained and, therefore, no institutions akin to the family, private property and the state could arise. Once he had established this, he ends with a general statement, clarifying how with the production of surplus, classes, class-exploitation, the state and the male-dominated family evolved.⁴

Long before he made these general statements Engels was driven by a desire to investigate how states had evolved out of societies in Asia. As early as 3 June 1853, he wrote to Marx about his having learnt Persian and so being able to enjoy the poetry of Hafiz, while but being bored by the flowery language of the famous world history, *Rauzatus Safa* of Mīr Khond (15th century). In this letter Engels points out that there being a desert belt extending from the Sahara across “Arabia, Persia, [Northwest] India and Tartary [Turkistan and Mongolia]”, “artificial irrigation” was “the first prerequisite of agriculture” here. Thus the states governing this zone, besides their departments of finance and war, had also to maintain one for public works mainly for purposes of irrigation. But the British Government had neglected this in India, so that “Indian agriculture is going to wrack and ruin”.⁵ Marx picked up this idea from Engels and in his article, ‘The

² Engels, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

³ This fact was overlooked by S.A. Dange in his *India from Primitive Communism to Slavery*, Bombay, 1949, when he attempted to find in Vedic literature and even the *Mahabhārata* seeds of ‘primitive communism’, by closely tailoring his interpretation to Engels’ *Origin of the Family*. See D.D. Kosambi’s critical review of his book (1949), reprinted in D.D. Kosambi, *Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings*, ed. Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 784-89.

⁴ Engels, *Origin of the Family, etc.*, *op. cit.*, chapter titled ‘Barbarism and Civilization’ (pp. 225-54).

⁵ *Karl Marx on India*, ed., Iqbal Husain, New Delhi, 2006, p. 13. This collection of Marx’s (and Engels’) writings on India, 1853-62, will henceforth be cited by its title only.

British Rule in India’, date-lined 10 June 1853, published in the *New York Tribune*, enlarged upon it.⁶

Twenty-five years later Engels himself underlined his original commendation of India’s precolonial rulers:

However great the number of despotic governments which rose and fell in Persia and India, each was fully aware that its first duty was the general maintenance of irrigation throughout the valleys, without which no agriculture was possible. It was reserved for the enlightened English to lose sight of this in India.⁷

On the other hand, Engels does not seem to have paid much attention earlier to the institution of the village community, which had attracted Marx’s interest already in 1853, based on his reading of Hegel and of British reports on this institution in South India.⁸ It was only in *Anti-Dühring* (1878) that Engels presented what might be regarded as the final views (of his own and of Marx) on the institution. Here he held that the village community, based on agriculture, implied some form of common labour and ownership of land, and that it co-existed, as in India, with the state until modern times, when intercourse with the outer world led to “inequalities of property” within it so that it “began to break up”.⁹ But “for thousands of years Oriental despotism and the changing rule of conquering nomad people, were unable to injure these old communities”.¹⁰ Rather, as Engels went on to speculate, as the village communities required its own “officers” — as “even today in India” — such persons could change gradually into chieftains or “lords”, forming, ultimately, a ruling class.¹¹ This suggestion is admittedly highly speculative; but bears a striking similarity to D.D. Kosambi’s thesis of “Feudalism from Below”.¹²

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13. The article was actually published in *New York Tribune*, on 23 June 1853.

⁷ F. Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow, 1946, p. 269. There is a slight difference in translation of this passage as given in Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Collected Works*, (henceforth, *CW*), Vol. 25, Moscow, 1987, p. 167, which here seems to be rather confusing in its reference to the state as “entrepreneur”.

⁸ This matter has been dealt with in Introduction to *Karl Marx on India*, pp. xxi-xxv.

⁹ *CW*, Vol. 25, pp. 136-37; cf. *ibid.*, 163.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 166-67.

¹² See D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1956, p. 275, where the phenomenon is thus defined: “where a class of landowners developed within the village, between the state and the peasantry, gradually to wield armed power over the local population”.

Coming back to Engels' earlier reflections on the state in India, it is significant that he associated pre-colonial India with a high degree of urbanisation. Indeed, he commended the Afghan and Mughal rulers for "the creation in India only 300 years ago of similar giant cities, Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Multan".¹³ Engels, therefore, did not believe that Asian societies were barbaric and backward.

Engels, like Marx, was clear too about what British colonial regime in India was about. In 1890 writing to C. Schmidt, Engels made an important remark about the initial object of the colonial conquest of India:

The conquest of India, by the Portuguese, Dutch and English between 1500 and 1800 had *imports from* India as its object — nobody dreamt of exporting anything there. And yet what a colossal reaction these discoveries and conquests, brought about solely by trade interests, had upon industry: it was only the need for *exports* to these countries that developed modern large-scale industry.¹⁴

Engels was writing in haste, not for print; but the short passage is rich in ideas. The colonial conquest of India was undertaken for imports without exports, i.e. simple tribute in the form of goods. Such tribute brought about by "the discoveries and conquests" accelerated the economic transformation of England, so as to bring about its industrial revolution. This, in turn, developed the need for exports. So now, India and the other conquered countries had also to serve as captive markets for industrial Britain.

It is a matter of some regret that this insight has been largely ignored in Marxist writing on the development of capitalism in Britain, as seen notably in Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, London, 1945. In that work the part played by gains from colonial acquisitions in enhancing Britain's capital resources ('primitive accumulation') and then providing it with captive markets has hardly been given any consideration.¹⁵

Engels himself lived and worked for over two decades, until 1870, in Manchester, which was then England's major industrial city. His own firm dealt in cotton trade, so that he was well aware of the large amounts of raw cotton

¹³ Letter to Marx, 28 May 1853 (*Karl Marx on India*, p. 261).

¹⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, 1956, p. 502.

¹⁵ The point is also missed by A.L. Morton, *A People's History of England*, London, 1964, p. 397, when he comes to describe India's relationship with Britain as a subject nation.

imported from India and the quantities of cotton manufactures exported to India from England. In some of his letters he took the prospects of this trade as providing an index of the prospects of business crises in Britain. Late in his Manchester phase, on 11 December 1868, he wrote to Marx on the increasing dependence of British yarn and textile manufacturers on markets in India: Owing to overproduction, however, those markets too were now saturated.¹⁶ Control over India, especially through tariffs, was, therefore, of crucial importance to British Industry. On 18 July 1892 Engels, wrote in a letter to N.F. Danielson, that unless Russia imposed protective tariffs, it would become like India “a country economically subject to the Great Central Workshop (England)”.¹⁷

Engels, like Marx, was convinced that the ruling class in Britain did not wish to carry out any substantive measures of reform for the welfare of the Indian people. In respect of the Charter Act of 1853, touted by the Whigs as a great measure of reform, Engels had written in an article in *New York Tribune*, 23 February 1855, of how its real purpose was the increase of posts and their salaries as spoils in the hands of the Party in power in England, not any reform in India.¹⁸

When in May 1857 the Great Rebellion broke out in India, both Marx and Engels, by natural instinct, sympathised with the rebels. On 14 August Marx’s wife Jenny, wrote in a letter to Engels telling him how a Chartist leader Earnest Charles Jones was celebrating the rebellion and applauding the “Indian patriots”¹⁹ — obviously, she felt this would please Engels.

In a letter to Marx dated 24 September Engels, described the military situation dispassionately, held the British attempt of concentrating forces against Delhi to be a major error (“The English general who ordered the march on Delhi deserves to be cashiered and hanged”).²⁰ But within a month thereafter, rebel Delhi had actually fallen.

¹⁶ See for Engels’ letters to Marx dt. 20 April and 24 August 1852 and 28 January 1860, *Karl Marx on India*, pp. 257-58, 259, 280. For the 1868 letter see Marx and Engels, *CW*, Vol. 43, p. 181.

¹⁷ Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, *op. cit.*, p. 528.

¹⁸ *Karl Marx on India*, p. 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

Marx now asked Engels to write for him on the military aspects of the suppression of the Indian revolt. Eleven articles on the Mutiny followed from Engels' pen, ranging, by publication dates, from 5 December 1857 to 1 October 1858.²¹ In most of the articles we see him writing as an expert military observer (which, indeed, he was). We must remember that despite his cautionary attitude towards the official reports and English journalists' dispatches from India, these were still the sole sources of information available to him. While critical of some of the moves of the British army from a military point of view, Engels largely commended British strategy, especially praising Colin Campbell, the Commander-in-Chief. He had throughout very poor opinion of the rebels as an organised military force, especially as displayed in the fighting at Lucknow (Nov. 1857 and Feb. 1858). He could even speak of the rebels as "no better than savages", being only a little superior to "cowardly Bengalees"²² — a curious infection of British racial prejudice against Indian communities. He even spoke of the rebels as "Asiatic rabble", of their "Asiatic ignorance and wildness".²³ When he recognises through some rebel actions during the defence of Delhi that "some notions of scientific warfare had penetrated among the Sepoys", he wonders if this was made possible because of "some of the Europeans that are with them".²⁴

But this is only one side of the picture. Engels bitterly denounced the repression and plunder by the English that accompanied the suppression of the rebellion. He condemned the notorious Canning proclamation, confiscating all land in Oudh — "the lands of a whole people, every rood, perch and acre over an extent of thn thousand square miles."²⁵ He minces no words in condemning the depredations and loot committed by British troops in Lucknow, and earlier still in Delhi.²⁶ And in 1870 he was to write in a London journal that the English while stamping out the Mutiny violated the norms of war by shooting down prisoners of war.²⁷

²¹ *Ibid.*, (initial pp.) 119, 127, 131, 142, 155, 160, 173, 175, 179, 191 and 202.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 128-29.

²³ The quoted words occur in *ibid.*, pp. 132 and 134.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123. There were, of course, no Europeans with the rebels.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-63, 175-76.

²⁷ Marx and Engels, *CW*, Vol. 22, pp. 165-66.

Moreover, it must not be overlooked that Engels obviously entertained innate sympathy for the rebel cause and was irritated that the rebels did not do better on the battle-field. After their reverses in the open field, he hoped the rebels would yet carry on a guerilla war, for after all, there was behind the rebels “the strength of a national insurrection”.²⁸ In June 1858 he noted that there were “still in the field” against the English “not less than a hundred and fifty thousand men, while the unarmed population fails to afford the English either assistance or information”.²⁹ The very next month, however, he felt the resistance needed to expand, otherwise it would be suppressed, despite the fact that the natives hated “the ‘pale-faced invaders’”.³⁰

Yet, Engels did not lose hope. In his last article on the Revolt, he wrote:

“The Great Rebellion, stirred up by the mutiny of the Bengal Army is, indeed, it appears, dying out. But this second conquest has not increased England’s hold upon the mind of the Indian people. The cruelty of the retribution dealt with by the British troops, goaded on by exaggerated and false reports of the atrocities by the natives, and the attempt at confiscating the Kingdom of Oude both wholesale and retail, have not created any particular fondness for the victors. On the contrary they themselves confess that among both Hindus and Mussalmans, the hereditary hatred against the Christian intruder is more fierce than ever”.³¹

Less than twenty-five years later, in 1882, Engels continued to look forward to a revolution in India. In a letter to Karl Kautsky dated 12 September, he wrote:

India will perhaps, indeed very probably, make a revolution, and as a proletariat [in Britain] in process of self-emancipation cannot conduct any colonial wars it would have to be allowed to run its course. It would not pass off without all sorts of destruction, of course, but that sort of thing is inseparable from all revolutions.³²

Full sixty-five years before India’s attainment of Independence, this was real display of confidence in Indian people’s aspiration for freedom. One notes too that it was combined with a firm admonition to the British proletariat not to oppose the Indian struggle.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 174.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

³¹ Ibid., p. 205.

³² Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

