

India, a Great Power?

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With a population of over a billion, approaching that of China, and an economic growth rate above the world average, India is now frequently identified as one of the prospective great powers of the twenty-first century. The purpose of this article is to question this prognosis, as the conditions necessary for India to become a great modern power seem to me far from assured.

My doubts derive from the crucially important fact that independent India has not tackled the major challenge of radically transforming structures inherited from colonial capitalism. No doubt, the ruling class of independent India decided to graft a national bourgeois plan onto this legacy, which for the most part has been preserved. By examining the successes, limitations, and even the failures of this project, I shall pose the questions which the dominant modernist liberal discourse has evaded from the outset: Is the Indian bourgeoisie condemned to the compradorization inherent in the status of the peripheral capitalist structures of the country, and consequently, is India's accession to the status of a great modern power impossible without undergoing real social revolution?

Colonial Inheritance

British colonization essentially transformed India into a dependent agricultural capitalist country. To this end, the British systematically established forms of private ownership of agricultural land that denied the majority of the peasantry access to it. These forms gave rise to the development of large dominant estates in the north of the country and were less disadvantageous to the medium-sized properties of the comparatively comfortable peasantry of the south. The majority of the peasants found themselves transformed into a poor, practically

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landless peasantry. The price of this lopsided capitalist approach to agricultural development is the incredibly poverty-stricken conditions in which the vast majority of Indian people live.

The universal way of organizing land management is not through private ownership, as modern minds deformed by Eurocentrism automatically believe, but ownership emanating from a political community. In pre-colonial India the village communities apportioned access to land (on the basis of highly inequalitarian principles related to the hierarchical caste system). These, in turn, were subject to a superior political community, the state, (which levied taxes on the communities under its authority). The British promoted those responsible for this political management, with varying degrees of authority, to the rank of private owners, imposing their particular model of Western capitalism. This pattern was followed by other Europeans as well in America and in the colonies of Asia and Africa. Today, World Bank officials do not have the intellectual means to comprehend that what they recommend as the sole universal approach (private ownership of the land) is merely an exceptional approach whose success in one small part of the world hides the fact that it represents an impasse for the rest of the world.

At the outset, Indian communists in the 1930s recommended that this legacy be challenged and subscribed to the most radical program of agrarian reform—"land for those that till it," that is, for practically all peasants. The bourgeois in the Congress Party never carried it through and independent India reduced its promises to the peasantry to a semblance of agrarian reform with no real impact. The fact remains that, as in West Bengal and Kerala, when the local parliamentary communist powers went a little further, as far as the Indian constitution allowed, the positive results recorded in social and economic terms were significant and the popular support for the reformers was reinforced.

Although the fundamental question of the ownership of agricultural land had formerly been one of the major areas of debate within communism and elsewhere (including the democratic bourgeois and populists), the penetration of liberal ideology after the Second World War (even before its apparently total triumph at the end of the century) succeeded in imposing the mistaken ideas that the private ownership of land was essential, that there was no alternative to the Western approach (in which the peasantry disappears as it is absorbed by urban capitalist development), and that the demand for

agrarian reform was therefore outdated. The World Bank put the green revolution and the forms of so-called market-supported agrarian reform in place. Their implementation always ended in disaster—the reinforcement of social inequality and the increased submission of agricultural producers to dominant capital (which was in fact the real, though unconfessed, objective of these policies). India is a fine example of this. We also know that the market-supported agrarian reforms implemented by the World Bank from Brazil to South Africa have ended in farce. Unfortunately, much of the left today is contaminated by the nonsense propagated by liberal ideology, including important sectors of the Indian communist parties. The traditionalists, who aim to establish what they imagine was the original authentic social order, are careful not to challenge this legacy of colonization that benefits the privileged minorities! In India, Hindu nationalists, like the defenders of political Islam elsewhere (Pakistan in particular), submit to the expansion of dependent peripheral capitalism.

In India, the hindrance to progress constituted by this colonial inheritance is aggravated by the persistence of the caste system. The “lower castes” (today known as the Dalit) and the tribal populations given the same status account for a quarter of the population of India (around 250 million people). Deprived of access to land, they are a mass of workers available for any task and period of time for a mere pittance. The persistence of this situation reinforces the reactionary ideas and behavior of the “others” and benefits the exercise of power by and to the benefit of the privileged minority. It plays a part in attenuating and even neutralizing any protest by the exploited majority who are stuck between the minority exploiters and oppressed status of the Dalit and tribal communities.

Of course, British colonization was careful not to challenge the caste system, hiding behind the hypocritical pretence of respecting tradition (which the British did not do when it did not suit them, for example, when privatizing ownership of land!). Colonial power simultaneously manipulated the situation to its own benefit by allowing some Dalit access, through education, to collaborative positions. It could be said that the powers in independent India have continued this tradition, which was only seriously questioned during the short time the left alliance led by V. P. Singh (and supported by the parliamentary communists) was in power. The Hindu right has, of course, nothing to say on the subject! And the United States today—using as

its intermediaries the NGOs that claim to defend human rights—tries to manipulate the Dalit community's protests and contain them in spaces that are inoffensive to the management of capitalism as a whole.

Fortunately, this situation may be in the process of being overcome by the radicalization of the struggle in the form of uprisings led by Naxalite Maoist peasants in particular. It is true that these uprisings have been put down, in the sense that they have not yet managed to establish and stabilize liberated regions of popular power. Nonetheless, the Maoist-led armed resistance, by beginning to challenge the property structures inherited from colonialism and the caste system, has paved the way for revolutionary mobilizations to come. The arrival of the Dalit on the political scene, a major event in the last two decades, is, without doubt, at least in part the product of Naxalism.

Successes and Limitations of the Populist National Project

The Congress Party governments of independent India implemented a national plan that, typical of its time, was influenced by the victories of the national liberation movements of Asia and Africa after the Second World War. The parties (political forces that were mobilized during this fight for independence, modernization, and development) henceforth in power enjoyed undeniable legitimacy, but the plans they put into effect were undermined by the ambiguities that characterized the liberation movements themselves. These plans were anti-imperialist inasmuch as they fully understood that modernization and development required national liberation first of all. But that is where they stopped, believing they could impose the adjustments on the globally dominant system (world capitalism) necessary to allow the nations of Asia and Africa to establish themselves as equal partners and by this means progressively overcome the handicaps of their "backwardness." In spite of their successes, the scope of which has never been negligible, they did not ultimately succeed and rapidly encountered the limitations of their strategic ideas.

The debates of the time—in India as elsewhere in Asia and Africa—specifically concerned these strategic ideas. Was it a necessary stage, described in the Marxist jargon of the time as a "revolutionary democratic bourgeois" phase, which was preparing for its own move to the left by shifting to "the construction of socialism"?

Beyond its established national dimension, the plan of those in power included social measures of greater or lesser significance

imposed on them by the great alliance of the people against imperialism, imposed even on those in the dominant classes who could see no further than the benefits of capitalism. Across the various situations, one common denominator connected all the legitimate powers that originated from national liberation: namely, their populist character—on the one hand, their will to ensure the benefits of development were shared by the whole (or the majority) of society, and, on the other, their desire to control the process by depriving the dominated classes of the opportunity to organize themselves freely beyond their control.

The communists have often expressed a clear awareness of this contradiction and the limitations it imposed on the system's achievements but, for various reasons that I will not discuss here, like others under the influence of the Soviets (and the attitudes recommended by them, set out in terms of the "non-capitalist approach"), the majority of communists in Asia and in Africa ended up becoming, to a greater or lesser extent, "critical" forces of support for the populist national plans in question. The split that pitted Maoism against the Soviets sometimes curbed the extent of this support, in Asia in particular. Indian communists to varying degrees kept their distance from the Congress Party's populist national plan. The degrees of this distance distinguish the dominant parties and tendencies of today's Indian communists. To the extent this distance was kept, the Indian communists hold a strong position within their society that cannot be compared, for example, with that of the Arab communists whose parties almost unconditionally rallied to Nasserist, Baathist, and Bumedian populism.

In spite of their limitations, the successes of Jawaharlal Nehru's and Indira Gandhi's Indian populist national plan were significant both in economic and political terms.

From the outset, colonization carried out a systematic deindustrialization of India, advanced at the time, to the benefit of Great Britain, which was in the process of industrialization. Therefore, independent India gave priority to its industrialization. This was envisioned with a high degree of systematization, at least initially. Furthermore, combining large private Indian industrial capital with public sector enterprises was promoted to fill the shortcomings in the production system inherited from colonization, accelerate growth, and reinforce basic industries.

The macropolitics of regulation implemented at that time were designed to serve this modernization plan. Price and foreign exchange

control, subsidies, regulation of foreign enterprises, and borrowed technology were used to secure the main objective of protecting Indian industry from the devastating effects of the domination of the world markets by imperialist capital. Only second to this did the regulations in question pursue social objectives—the redistribution of wealth but above all a reduction of the extreme poverty of the popular classes. This accelerated industrial modernization plan accompanied by a plan to develop agricultural production (food crops in particular) based on the green revolution (which replaced the abandoned agrarian reform—the red revolution!) was destined principally to make the country self-sufficient in terms of food. The intention was to allow it to channel all its export revenue exclusively to covering the imports needed by its industry.

The whole plan was truly capitalist in nature, in the sense that the benefits of production and the technologies chosen did not challenge the fundamental rationale of capitalism, although it could be said, in this respect, that the experience of really existing socialism (even to some degree in China) was not as different as it then seemed, in spite of the exclusive nature of public property. The Indian plan was, however, clearly less radical in the sense that the degree of its production system's disconnection from the dominant world system was less systematic than it was in the Soviet Union or China where wages and prices—in theory planned—were really detached from any comparison with those of the global capitalist system. This characteristic of the Indian plan, which can be found in other non-communist populist national experiences (in the Arab world for example), was closely linked to the failure to challenge social structures inherited from colonization.

The full extent of this close relationship was revealed through the option of the green revolution, which we know reinforced rather than weakened the position of the dominant rural classes and large property owners in particular.

These differences between the national Indian model and that of Communist China account for the visible differences in their results. The growth rate of industrial and agricultural production in India was not bad at that time, it was significantly higher than it had been during colonial times and above the world average for postwar capitalism, but on the whole growth rates remained at considerably lower levels than those of China. Moreover, whereas growth in China was accompanied by a marked improvement in the popular classes' standard of

living, this was not the case in India where growth exclusively benefited the new middle classes (who were the minority although in a thirty year period they expanded from 5 to 15 percent of the overall population of the country). The poverty of the dominant popular classes remained unchanged, even worsened slightly.

Liberal discourse does not take these basic realities into account. And that is why I do not subscribe to the optimistic conclusions drawn by many futurologists that India is about to enjoy accelerated growth that will raise it to the status of a great modern power, following China's example. So far, China has the advantage of the legacy of its radical revolution whereas India is handicapped by the unchallenged legacy of colonization. This is why economic growth in China, supported by investment systems that are more favorable to the development of the whole production system, continues to prevail compared with growth in India. The fact remains that if China were to become too liberal, and if India were to continue on the ultra-liberal course of the last fifteen years or so, we would see growth flag. In my opinion, the agrarian question lies at the heart of the challenge the two countries are currently facing, by which I mean the fundamental question of the access of all the peasantry to land and production, access that people still have today in China (for how long?) but has always been refused in India.

The political successes of independent India are certainly significant. India is far more heterogeneous than China. It was only by playing precisely on the diversity of its Indian peoples (and states) that British colonization succeeded in imposing its power. Credit is due to the national liberation movement for its successes in sustaining the unity of the federal Indian nation. The reason for this success is the secularism of the Indian state, which even the wave of Hindu culturalism has not succeeded in undermining. The difference in the behavior of Indian governments and the majority of Indian society toward its Muslim minority and the behavior of Muslim-dominated governments and societies toward their Christian minorities, for example, demonstrates the value of secularism. This democratic progress is not found in other regions of the world (the Arab and Muslim world in particular). Of course, this assertion needs to be qualified. There is abundant evidence (including the Sikhs on the one hand and the national struggles of the peoples of the northeast on the other) of the limitations of the regime's capacity to deal correctly with national questions.

The experience of modern-day India demonstrates the unquestionable superiority of democracy and the futility of arguments in support of autocratic management, which is often claimed to be more effective. This remains true despite the evident limitations and the class content of bourgeois democracy in general, and the reality of it in India's experience. To the credit of the national liberation movement (Congress and the communists), this option was probably the only effective way of managing the various social and regional interests (even if limited to those of the privileged classes). It was also the only way of winning popular support for the plan of the minority making up the hegemonic bloc.

On the international scene, independent India applied itself to shaping the Southern front of the time, the Non-Aligned Movement, whose origins lay in the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung (1955). Not even India's head-on collision with China called this overtly anti-imperialist strategy into question.

The Liberal and Culturalist Drift

The erosion of the national populist plan was as unavoidable in India as it was elsewhere because of its inherent limitations and contradictions. This and the delegitimization of power that accompanied it gave rise to an offensive by obscurantist forces supported by the dominant compradore class and a large proportion of the middle classes (whose expansion was dwindling and increasingly beset by difficulties) motivated by the discourse and maneuvers of United States imperialism. The 1991 turn toward liberalism originated in the compradore leadership of the Congress Party, but its political beneficiaries, as elsewhere, have been culturalists who found a ready audience for their irrational illusions in the social tensions and misery always attendant to liberal reforms.

In India, these obscurantist illusions have a name: *Hindutva*. This term designates the affirmation of the priority of adherence to the Hindu religion defined as the "real identity" of the peoples of the country, as opposed to the concept of "*Bharatva*," which refers to the nation. Of course, this Hindu affirmation does not challenge the colonial legacy concerning land ownership or the respect for the hierarchical caste system in particular. In this respect, as Indian communists have not ceased to point out, the obscurantist illusions serve the interests of compradore and imperialist powers perfectly. The "specificities" with which their pseudo national, or even quasi anti-imperialist, discourse is filled are absolutely worthless. They fuel a renewal the divisive communitarism

(in this case anti-Muslim) that colonial power used, in its day, to counter the rising aspirations of secular, democratic, modernist national liberation.

Nothing in this respect differentiates this regression from that which afflicts other peripheral societies that are victims of the same erosion of the national populist plan, Arab and Muslim societies in particular. The parallel with political Islam is clear.

Nevertheless, this adverse drift does not necessarily seem to be as marked in India as in Arab and Muslim countries. The reason for this no doubt lies in the fact that Indian communist parties kept their distance from the Congress Party's plan for independent India whereas those of Arab and Muslim countries rallied almost unconditionally to similar populist plans. As a result, the communists in India have maintained (or even expanded upon) a degree of popularity that protects society from regression at the very time when almost all communist movements were entering a phase of decline.

The decline was therefore accompanied here by the renewed radicalization of social struggles. Evidence of this can be seen in the Naxalite offensive which, in spite of tactical errors of judgment, has reawakened revolutionary awareness among the peasantry in vast areas (approximately a third) of India. Further evidence can be seen in the brutal entry of the Dalit into political and social combat (itself, no doubt, a result of the radicalization of the peasantry) and in the confirmed attachment of the middle classes to democracy.

This explains why the collapse of the legitimacy which the Congress Party had enjoyed almost exclusively did not produce a definitive victory for the right. The first right-wing government was overturned by a left-wing electoral alliance led by V. P. Singh who offered the communists greater influence in the political life of the country. This still fragile alliance was unable to prevent the electoral recovery of the right but, in turn, this second experience of a Hindu-compradore government, which wholly subscribed to the dictates of imperialism on the offensive (accelerating economic liberalization), failed. In the 2004 elections the premises of Hindu culturalism and liberalism promoted by the compradore bourgeoisie and its imperialist masters were jointly held responsible for the social catastrophe by the majority of the Indian electorate. This association is not made elsewhere, especially not in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

But the battle is far from being won by the Indian left. The organizational questions facing the divided Indian communist movement are

daunting. Effective cooperation in struggle will require a massive effort to overcome historical obstacles, not the least of which are undemocratic forms of organization.

The Long and Difficult March of Alter-Globalization

Dominant liberal discourse not only considers there to be no alternative to economic liberalism and the form of globalization that accompanies it but also claims that support for this choice is progressive and that all people endowed with an enterprising spirit must win. Recognizing this to be nonsense, which has been disproved by facts, and which cannot stand up to any serious theoretical reflection, is not enough. Building a progressive social alternative that would form part of a different global integration—one wholly apart from neoliberal world politics, economics, and ideology (i.e., real alter-globalization) is still difficult and the march in this direction will be long.

Where India is concerned, the creation of such an alternative necessarily means that appropriate responses must be found to meet the following four main challenges:

1. To find a radical solution to the Indian peasant problem based on the recognition of the right of access to land for all peasants in the most egalitarian conditions possible. This, in turn, means the abolition of the caste system and the ideology that legitimizes it. In other words, India must progress toward as radical a revolution as that of China.
2. To create a united workers' front that integrates segments of the relatively stabilized working classes with those that are not. This challenge is common to all countries of the modern world and particularly all those of the periphery of the system which are characterized by the enormously destructive effects of new poverty (massive unemployment, a lack of job security, and the excrescence of wretched conditions in the informal sector). It is the duty of the unionists, communists, and activists of popular movements to invent new forms of struggle that will advance participatory democracy and together be capable of defining the stages of a common long-term strategy.
3. To maintain the unity of the Indian subcontinent while establishing local democratic self-government, and to renew the forms of association of the various peoples that make up the Indian nation

on reinforced democratic bases. To defeat the strategies of imperialism which, as always, pursues (beyond its tactical options) its objective of disempowering the great states, since these are better able than microstates to withstand the assaults of imperialism.

4. To focus international political options on the central issue of reconstructing a front of the peoples of the South (the solidarity of the peoples of Asia and Africa first and foremost) in circumstances that, of course, are no longer those that surrounded the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement at the time of Bandung (1955-1975). To give the highest priority to the objective of derailing the United States' plan for military control of the planet and thwart the political maneuvers of Washington whose purpose is to prevent any serious rapprochement between India, China, and Russia.

The political and social forces that prevent India from moving in the above-mentioned directions are considerable. They constitute a hegemonic bloc that accounts for a fifth of the population—behind the great industrial, commercial, and financial bourgeoisie, and the big landowners, the great masses of well-off peasants and middle classes, and the high bureaucracy and technocracy. These 200 million Indians are the exclusive beneficiaries of the national plan implemented so far. No doubt, at the present time of extreme liberal triumph, this bloc is collapsing under the effect, among others, of the end of the upwards social mobility of the lower middle classes who are threatened with loss of job security and impoverishment if not outright poverty. This situation provides the left with the opportunity to develop tactics, if it can, to weaken the coherence of these reactionary forces in general and in particular their compradore approach which is the drive belt for globalized imperialist domination. However, it also offers opportunities to the Hindu right in the event the left fails.

We often hear it said that this “nation of 200 million people,” which alone constitutes a large market comparable to that of several large European countries, is India's future whereas the majority who number some 800 million poverty-stricken Indians are nothing but a ball and chain to which the country is shackled. Besides being abhorrent, this reactionary opinion is utterly stupid. The minority is only privileged because it exploits the country's resources and the workers who are the majority.

The minority that make up this bloc is, therefore, in a situation that excludes the reproduction in India of the historic capital-labor com-

promise on which the social democracy of the developed West was founded. The discourse that compares peripheral Fordism to the Fordism of the developed regions is based on a huge failure to understand the impact of each of these two formulas: Western Fordism shared benefits of capitalist expansion with the majority of the working classes, while peripheral Fordism operates for the sole benefit of the middle classes. India is not the only example of this; Brazil and China today are in similar situations.

The management of this hegemonic bloc through political democracy, such as it is in India, does not lessen its reactionary class dimension. On the contrary, it is the most effective way to establish it.

This hegemonic bloc that rules Indian society is well integrated into the rationale of dominant capitalist globalization and so far none of the various political forces through which it is expressed challenges it. Yet the Indian national project remains fragile, incapable by its very nature of extending to the whole of society even in the limited form of a "rationalized" capitalism.

This vulnerability results in the frequently opportunistic behavior of the Indian political class, justified most often by short term real-politic arguments. Faced with the United States plan for overall (military) control of the planet and the collective imperialist alignment of the triad (United States, Europe, and Japan), the Indian political class has so far been incapable of producing and implementing the necessary counter measures. That would entail the creation of a front uniting India, Russia, and China, all threatened in equal measure by the compradorization resulting from the expansion of the new imperialist collective. It might also entail the more systematic pursuit of a rapprochement with Europe, depending on the extent to which the latter would keep its distance from Washington's hegemonic plan. India's rulers do not properly value this perspective, including those associated with most determined government formulas to undermine the Hindu-compradore right. On the contrary, they continue to give priority to their conflicts with China, perceived as a potential military adversary and a dangerous financial rival in the markets of globalized capitalism. They even believe they may be able to use a possible rapprochement with the United States in order to become its major ally in Asia. There are others in the third world who have adopted a similar deluded reasoning: in Brazil, South Africa, and even China.

The measures required to counter the deployment of a new collective imperialism require the reconstruction of a Southern peoples'

front. Here again, the task is far from easy. The conflicts between the countries of the South, especially in the area between India and Pakistan, largely caused by the culturalist-compradore deviation (for which the responsibility of political Islam is considerable), take precedence and reinforce the short term tactical calculations of the Indian political class.

This opportunism will not only in the long term destroy the conditions necessary for the construction both of a progressive national alternative and an alter-globalization to support it, but it blinds its defenders to the point of making them lose sight of the vulnerability of Indian unity and the maneuvers of an imperialism which seeks to destroy it. There are no illusions to be had in this area. Even if today Washington diplomacy chooses to “support India and its unity” for a while for tactical reasons, its long term plan is to disable the capacity of this great country to become a great power. Submitting to the project of the expansion of global capitalism reinforces centrifugal tendencies, for this submission accentuates the regional inequalities of development. The vision of India as a great power is inconsistent with the harsh requirements of a global capitalism under the hegemony of the United States.



At least since Watergate Americans have come to take for granted a certain story line of scandal, in which revelation is followed by investigation, adjudication and expiation....

When Alberto Gonzales takes his seat before the Senate Judiciary Committee today for hearings to confirm whether he will become attorney general of the United States, Americans will bid farewell to that comforting story line. The senators are likely to give full legitimacy to a path that the Bush administration set the country on more than three years ago, a path that has transformed the United States from a country that condemned torture and forbade its use to one that practices torture routinely. Through a process of redefinition largely overseen by Mr. Gonzales himself, a practice that was once a clear and abhorrent violation of the law has become in effect the law of the land....

After Mr. Gonzales is confirmed, the road back—to justice, order and propriety—will be very long. Torture will belong to us all.

—Mark Danner, “We Are All Torturers Now,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2005, Op-Ed page.

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