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ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN INDIA

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN INDIA

BY

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TO

SIR JOHN GHEST CUMMING, K.C.I.E., C.S.I.,
M.A. (OXON.),

*Governor of the London School of Economics and Political
Science; Formerly Member of Council, Government of
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CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	ix
INTRODUCTORY NOTE	xi

PART I

CHAPTER

I ECONOMIC EVOLUTION OF INDIA	I
II THE DEMAND FOR INDUSTRIES	35

PART II

III AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT	69
IV SOME PROBLEMS OF LAND AND LABOUR	99

PART III

V INDUSTRIAL ORGANISATION	129
VI LARGE-SCALE PRODUCTION	160
VII THE COTTON-MILL INDUSTRY	188
VIII IRON AND STEEL PRODUCTION	213
IX THE LABOUR PROBLEM	233
X THE FINANCING OF INDUSTRY	267
XI THE STATE AND INDUSTRY	305

PREFACE

AN attempt is made in the following pages to study the economic life of India with special reference to her industrial organisation, and to take stock of the possibilities of developing Indian industries on modern lines. The topic is one of absorbing interest at the present day in India, where publicists, business-men and economists are all alike endeavouring to frame a programme for the future development of the country which would enable her to make the most of her teeming population and vast economic resources. An adequate discussion of the entire problem, based upon a careful survey of existing conditions in which the peculiar merits and defects of India's industrial structure are shown in their proper perspective, is an essential pre-requisite to the formulation of any definite industrial policy; and the aim of the present writer, in co-ordinating and summarising the scattered economic data bearing on the question, has been to provide a basis for such a discussion.

A word of explanation may be permitted as to the ground which this volume proposes to cover. Part I is an attempt to answer two main questions: First, "Has there been any organised industrial life in India in the recent past, and if so, what lessons can we derive from it for guidance in the rehabilitation of an industrial system suited to modern times and needs?" And secondly, "Can India attain full prosperity by keeping to the present relative position of agriculture and manufactures?" The first chapter is devoted to an investigation of India's industrial past; its limitations are fully discussed; and it is shown that it affords no useful precedent for guidance in a recasting of economic life on account of the changed conditions of the present day. That the present demand for large-scale manufactures is the outcome as much of an imperative economic necessity as of a new national awakening is the subject-matter of the second chapter. These two chapters help to bring together in their proper relation most of the main contentions of the rival schools in Indian economic thought, and to clear the ground for a survey of modern conditions. Part II deals with agriculture in its main phases: emphasis is laid on the necessity for a

fully developed agricultural system, not only because agriculture is the principal occupation of the country, but also because of the consequences of a neglected agricultural system on the general economic situation, and more particularly on the possibilities of an early industrialisation. Part III examines the present industrial situation objectively. The position and prospects of cottage industries and large scale production are here considered ; and the vignettes from the industrial life of India here presented sets forth those achievements of any size which may be claimed in support of the possibilities of the future. The industrial problem is further studied in all its important bearings of capital, labour, and organisation, and in discussing the leading industries, account is taken of the comparative cost of production. The concluding chapter outlines the scope of Governmental activity in the stimulation of industries with reference to the recommendations of the Industrial and Fiscal Commissions, and to the national attitude of mind in relation to the subject. Very little has so far been done to bring to light the economic implications of the Indian social organisation ; and it has therefore been necessary to indicate here and there the extent to which the people of India suffer from self-remediable evils, and the disastrous consequences which would follow any forced pace or the acceleration of distorted tendencies.

These essays are now published more or less as they were submitted to the University in May, 1923 ; the pressure of official work, unfortunately, has prevented their being revised as thoroughly as could have been desired.

In conclusion, the author wishes to express his gratitude to Sir John Cumming, K.C.I.E., C.S.I., Professor Gilbert Slater, M.A., D.Sc. (Econ.), and Mr. W. H. Moreland, C.S.I., C.I.E., for the kindly interest they have taken in this work ; and to the Secretary of State for India for sanctioning a grant in aid of its publication. He is also deeply indebted to the Editors of the *Asiatic Review*, the *Calcutta Review*, the *Indian Journal of Economics*, and *Economica* for permission to reproduce articles which have appeared in their journals ; and to Mr. B. M. Headicar, the genial Librarian of the London School of Economics and Political Science, for all the trouble he has taken to see the book through the press.

P. PADMANABHA PILLAI.

Geneva, Christmas Day, 1924.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

MR. PADMANABHA PILLAI'S work does not need any words of commendation from me. The single-mindedness with which he has pursued his definite aims, the accurate ascertainment of facts, clear thinking with regard to their significance, and lucid presentation, will be manifest to all his readers. But it is worth while to point out that in this respect he is representative of the rising school of Indian students of economics, a school almost entirely of young men, whose work is now just beginning to be available for the enlightenment of their countrymen. It was no doubt inevitable that when, following such leadership as that of Ranade and Naoroji, Indian students and writers began to turn their attention to economic problems, and to realise the intense poverty of India in the commodities that are bought for money, they should aim, with much effort and ingenuity, at fastening the responsibility for that poverty on the alien rule, first of the East India Company, and then of the British Government. Such efforts produced the theory of the Drain, in its various forms, originally in the form of a drain of Indian "treasure" to Britain, and later, when the great net Indian import of gold and silver could no longer be ignored, in a drain of other commodities; the theory of crushing taxation, particularly in the form of taxation of agricultural land; theories that railway building and stabilisation of exchange were injurious; widening out into the general theory that the aim of British rule in India was the continued exploitation of Indian poverty for the benefit of British capitalism, a theory to which the disastrous yielding of the House of Commons and the Secretary of State for India to Lancashire interference with Indian cotton duties gave only too much colour. Thus, in the hands of the older generation of writers and orators who dealt with Indian economics, that study became the handmaid of political agitation, and in proportion as the nationalist movement increased in fervour, the search for economic facts or fancies

that could be used against the government became keener. Of the latter, perhaps, the favourite was the suggestion, based on the fact that Lord Curzon in 1901, using statistics of a year or two previous, stated that the average money income per head in India was not less than Rs. 30, and that it was increasing, that therefore it could be safely asserted, even in 1920, that the average income must be something less than Rs. 30, as this was the official estimate, which was bound to be too sanguine. A simple calculation shows that an average income of Rs. 30 would have allowed to the whole population only the meagre allowance of 18 oz. of rice (at the current price of four measures a rupee) per head per day, leaving absolutely nothing for any other expenditure whatsoever. But the manifest absurdity of the statement was not recognised as a sufficient reason against its constant repetition.

It is a very different spirit that animates the younger students, of whom Mr. Padmanabha Pillai is so excellent a representative. They feel that, after all, the fate of India lies almost wholly in the hands of Indians. When I explained the proposals of the Montagu-Chelmsford report to the B.A. Hons. class in the Presidency College, Madras, they said, "the test of the genuineness of these reforms is whether India is given fiscal autonomy." I replied that, according to my belief, the reforms did involve fiscal autonomy, and that the protective tariff which they regarded as economic salvation for India could be enacted if desired, but that it would prove a great disappointment. The confirmation of this view, at least in the first particular, is bound to make a deep impression on candid minds. As it becomes recognised more and more clearly in India that the economic policy of the government is determined by the conclusion of Indian opinion as to what is best for India, the Indian demand for such scientific enquiry as will serve as a guide to wise action will grow stronger and stronger, and the welcome for such work as Mr. Pillai's correspondingly warmer.

The poverty of India is a grim fact. In the main it is, as Mr. Pillai shows, the result, not of unequal distribution of what wealth is produced, excessively large incomes being very few though conspicuous, as of a very small production *per capita*. A reasonable estimate of money income would be, for the present day, somewhere about Rs. 100 per annum, or

4½d. per day. Taking the whole population together, rich and poor, it may be said that about two-fifths of the available income must be spent merely on the grains that form the basis of the Indian dietary—rice, millets and wheat; leaving only about 3d. per head per day for all other foods, including even such indispensable supplements as salt and pulse, for clothing, education, medical aid, housing, religious festivals and observances, all the luxurious expenditure of the relatively inconsiderable number of well-to-do families, and the conventional necessities or rare indulgences of the poor, such as tobacco, betel, toddy, and a modicum of jewellery. This, or something like this, being the average condition, that of the poorest classes can be guessed. A detailed examination, family by family, of a Madras *parchy*, *i.e.*, a Pariah settlement, in the middle of the city, by Mr. Ramachandran, Reader in Economics to the University, showed an average income of only 2½d. per head per day, which means only ½d. per day, in addition to a bare sufficiency of rice; and a very recent inquiry by Mr. Ranga Nayakulu yielded an estimate of Rs. 30 per annum as the average income per head for the labourers of untouchable castes in the Godavari delta. This estimate may be unduly pessimistic; but of these people, and of the kindred castes of Pallans, Parayans, Cherumas, etc., on whose toil the cultivation of the ricefields of Southern India mainly depends, it may be said generally, that their earnings in grain and coin barely suffice for the subsistence of families large enough to maintain their numbers from one generation to another, the surplus offspring dying, that they are habitually hungry, and that it is only because they make their own huts in their spare time, collect their own fuel, need scarcely any clothing, and enjoy abundant sunshine, that they can subsist at all. The Bombay investigations quoted by Mr. Pillai show an average income per head for a large number of working-class families of Rs. 149. 6. 0. That this should be considerably more than the average income measured in money for the whole Indian population is a significant fact; it shows, on the one hand, to how small an extent the average income of all India is swollen by the incomes of the few rich; and, on the other, the effect of the extra cost of city life in forcing up wages; for, in spite of his relatively high money income, the condition of the Bombay

cotton operative or dock labourer is deplorable, far worse than that of the average villager, and scarcely better than that of the untouchable village coolie.

It is, I think, unquestionable that, during the twentieth century, while the average Indian income reckoned in rupees has increased very greatly, the real income, measured in commodities, has also risen considerably; and the standard of living still more, so that, with increasing wealth, there has been increasing consciousness of poverty. The advantage of increased commodity income has been largely offset by increased inequality of income; and in some respects the rise in the standard of living has brought physical disadvantage. Thus, for example, rice-mills have multiplied, saving house-wives the laborious toil—but perhaps healthful exercise—of husking the paddy by pounding, but also robbing the rice of much of its nutritive value, the vitamins in the outermost layer of the grain being removed with the husk by the machinery. Still, there has been progress, and Indian politicians have held out hopes of very much more rapid progress as soon as they have completely superseded the “sun-dried bureaucracy” of the British members of the Indian Civil Service in the government of India; but it is very doubtful whether they themselves take these promises seriously. Some of the great obstacles to the general well-being of India have been cleared away wholly or in great part, as internal warfare, starvation due to famines, insufficient communications and insufficient irrigation; others have been attacked, and, with increased governmental revenue and expenditure could be attacked effectively, as agricultural and technological ignorance, hookworm, malaria, smallpox, cholera, plague and cattle diseases. But there remains untouched, and even magnified, the greatest obstacle of all, the enormous birth-rate, the stubborn tendency of population to press upon the means of subsistence.

Owing to the very imperfect registration of births and deaths, no one knows what the birth rate of India is. It is certainly over 40 per thousand per annum, and perhaps is close on 50 per thousand. If it were not for the deaths directly or indirectly due to poverty, the death-rate might probably be about 20 per thousand. That death-rate, with the existing birth-rate, would give an annual natural increase

of population of over six millions. In other words, in order to relieve the pressure of population on subsistence, and to reduce to a minimum the deaths due to poverty, India would require to provide decent means of subsistence, either by emigration, or extension of cultivation, or more intensive cultivation, or industrial development, for six million additional human beings every year, as well as for an increase in the means of subsistence for the 319,000,000 already in India, provided Indian customs with regard to procreation remain unchanged—and, obviously, change in this matter is very difficult.

How is this extra provision to be found? The dominant opinion in India finds the solution of the problem in rapid industrialisation by the help of a protective tariff for manufactured goods indirectly laying additional taxation on the agricultural population without increasing the revenue. Assuming, what is rather doubtful, (1) that the tariff does produce the rapid industrialisation desired, and (2) that its benefits are not neutralised by the injury to the agricultural classes, who form the bulk of the population, how far does this solution take us? India had in 1921 3,957 factories and workshops liable to inspection, employing 1,263,658 men, women and children. It would be a great achievement if in ten years these were increased to such an extent as to double the number of hands employed. But even this would only accomplish the absorption of workers, with their dependants, to the number of about a quarter of a million per annum. Certainly we must allow also for the increased employment which such an increase in factory activity would demand in mining, transport and distributive trade; but, on the other hand, we must also make allowance for the throwing out of employment of vast numbers of hand-loom weavers and other craftsmen whose occupation would be taken away by increased factory competition.

On the other hand, Mr Gandhi, and the small band who accept his economic doctrine, look with horror upon the physical and moral evils engendered in India by the massing together of helpless immigrants from the countryside into slum-cities like Bombay and Ahmedabad to supply labour power to factories, and advocate, instead of a more rapid forward rush into big capitalist business, a retreat to more primitive industry and social organisation. If all India were

resolved to wear nothing but hand-woven, hand-spun cloth of Indian manufacture, there would be work in the villages for the many months in the year in which agricultural employment either ceases altogether or requires only a fraction of the available workers. That waste of time would become productive ; many a man who now has to leave his village in the Deccan or Konkan to go to Bombay to work, to live with his family in *one corner* of a single room, and to see his children die as fast as they are born, would be able to live happily in his native place ; and as the production of food in a village is largely determined by the supply of labour available in the week or two of maximum pressure of work, the total output of food would be increased, and therefore the real prosperity of the country.

There is more reason in this gospel of the *Charkha*—the spinning wheel—than would be supposed by people unfamiliar with Indian conditions. In the Gandhi programme it should be combined with other reforms—Hindu-Moslem unity, abolition of untouchability, the maintenance of caste modified by the treatment by each caste of all other castes as brothers, the practice of *Ahimsa*, commonly translated by the weak and negative term non-violence, which really means resolute avoidance of the infliction of suffering, physical or mental, on others even at the cost of suffering oneself, and, finally and notably, prudent control of births by means of marital restraint. The one objection to this programme is that it requires that the ordinary man should become much more like Mr Gandhi than he possibly can for many generations to come.

Mr Padmanabha Pillai is a realist, and stands aloof from both of these schools. He endorses the demand for more rapid industrialisation, and recognises that India must try the experiment of protective duties for manufactures, if only for the sake of learning by experience the inadequacy of that supposed panacea and its drawbacks. After that, public opinion may begin to pay fuller attention to the other requisites of industrial efficiency. He rightly urges that an increase of agricultural efficiency is equally necessary, and that no relaxation of the efforts of the existing agricultural departments should be permitted, but rather, they should be intensified continuously. He further emphasises the importance of village handicrafts. Certain comments are so

obvious that I imagine Mr Pillai has only refrained from making them himself because he preferred to let the facts of the actual economic condition speak for themselves. They are :—

(1) That the programme of simultaneous trilinear advance in agriculture, rural handicrafts utilising the spare time of agricultural families, and large scale industry (mining, engineering, steel production and textile and miscellaneous manufacture) demands greatly increased governmental expenditure on railways, roads, education, medical and veterinary services, which must involve either a great increase in revenue or a drastic reduction of military expenditure, or both.

(2) That it demands strong and honest government, actively supported by public opinion.

(3) That no policy, however wise, can lift the Indian population out of poverty as long as the conventions hold almost universally that every girl must be married young, must begin bearing children as soon, or almost as soon, as she is capable of doing so, and must continue to bear children till exempted by death or by the cessation of fertility.

Historic causes have made the patriotic unity that Indian well-being requires difficult of attainment; debilitating tropical diseases, of which malaria is the worst, diminish muscular and nervous energy; Bright's disease, resulting from too starchy a diet, cuts off many of the intelligentsia at the age when their influence should be reaching its maximum; the mere heat of the summer months in the north and of the whole year round in the south, tends to create disinclination to manual labour and a strong disposition to throw the whole of that burden on the shoulders of those who are so poor that they cannot escape it. These historical and geographical factors are a very serious handicap.

In these circumstances there can be no easy road or short cut to material prosperity for India. Least of all will the mere imitation of measures which have been adopted in other countries avail. Instead, Indian problems must be examined by the original thinking of minds at once bold, original and conservative; eager to explore all the practicable measures for amelioration, but equally determined not to let go anything that is valuable in the ancient traditional culture of India, which we have recently learnt has a history of

5,000 years. And, in the face of all the difficulties and perils of the future, no one need despair of the land that produces three such men as Bose, Tagore and Gandhi.

One of the hopeful signs is the existence of students of economics like Mr Padmanabha who are painstaking and thorough, and who turn neither to the right hand nor to the left in their pursuit of truth.

GILBERT SLATER.

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