

Charles Petrasch

An Extract from An Interview with Mahatma Gandhi*

In your opinion, what is the method by which the Indian princes, landowners, industrialists and bankers acquire their wealth?

At present by exploiting the masses.

Can these people enrich themselves without exploiting the Indian workers and peasants?

Up to a certain point, yes.

Have these people any social right to live better than the simple worker or peasant who perform the labour from which they draw their wealth?

Gandhi was silent for a moment. Then he replied: “No right. My social theory is that, although we are all born equal, that is to say, that we have a right to equal opportunities, nevertheless we have not all the same abilities. By the nature of things it is impossible that we should all be of an equal stature, that we should all have the same colour of skin, the same degree of intelligence and consequently it is natural that some of us should be more fitted than others to acquire material gain. Those who are capable wish to acquire more, and they bend their abilities to this end. If they use their abilities in the best spirit they will be working to the benefit of the people. These people will be ‘trustees’ and nothing more.

“I should allow a man of intelligence to gain more and I should not hinder him from making use of his abilities. But the surplus of his gains ought to return to the people, just as the earnings of the children who work go to the common family fund. They are only the ‘trustees’ of their

*Extracted from “An Interview with Gandhi” by the French Journalist Charles Petrasch which he took at London in 1932.

38 / Charles Petrasch

gains, and nothing else. I may be sadly disappointed in this, but that is the ideal which I uphold, and that is what is understood in the declaration of fundamental rights.”

We asked Gandhi if he did not believe that one of the principal causes of the poverty of the Indian peasants and workers lay in the appropriation of the fruit of their labour by the landlords and capitalists, since only a minute portion of the profits of the latter class go to the Government.

Gandhi agreed.

Don't you think that the Indian peasants and workers are right in throwing themselves into a class struggle in order to secure their social and economic freedom and to rid themselves once and for all of the burden of supporting the parasite classes?

The Mahatma said no: “I myself am making the revolution for them without violence.”

What would be your attitude in face of a revolution of the peasants and workers against the princes, landlords, capitalists and their ally, the British Government? And also, what would be your attitude if such a revolution occurred in an independent India, in an India under a Protectorate, in an India with Dominion status, or in an India in no matter what kind of circumstances?

Gandhi replied quietly: “My attitude would be to convert the better-off classes into trustees of what they already possessed. That is to say, they would keep the money, but they would have to work for the benefit of the people who procured them their wealth. And for doing this they would receive a ‘commission.’”

The Maharajahs and the landlords have allied themselves with the English, and you wish to make them “trustees.” But your best followers are among the masses, who consider the Maharajahs and landlords as enemies. What attitude would you take if the masses, coming to power, decided to put an end to these classes?

“The masses at the present time do not regard the landlords and princes as enemies. But it is necessary to make them aware of the wrong which is

◆ THINK INDIA QUARTERLY ◆

An Extract from An Interview with Mahatma Gandhi / 39

being done to them. I do not teach the masses to regard the capitalists as enemies, but I teach them that the latter are doing themselves harm. My followers have never told the people that the English or General Dyer are bad, but that they are the victims of a system and that it is necessary to destroy the system and not the individual. That is why British officials can live with impunity among the people, although the latter are so inflamed by their desire for liberty.”

If you wish to attack the system, there is no difference between a British capitalist and an Indian capitalist. Why, then, do you not apply your system of non-payment of taxes to those which are demanded from you by your own landed proprietors (Zamindars)?

A landed proprietor is only an instrument of the system. It is not at all necessary to undertake a movement against them at the same time as against the English system. It is quite possible to distinguish between the two. We have told the people not to pay the Zamindars because it is with this money that they pay the Government. But we are on good terms with the Zamindars.

According to Tagore, Bernard Shaw and others, the suppression of the landlords, capitalists and financiers in Russia, and the establishment of the Soviet as the system of government has led in a very short time to a considerable betterment in the social, economic and cultural conditions of the people. Now, it is to be noticed that Russia at the time of the Revolution essentially an agricultural country, presented the same condition from a religious and cultural point of view as does India today. We should be curious to know your opinion on this matter.

“In the first place I do not care about basing my opinions on those of others. That is why I am unable to form an appreciation of the condition of Russia. Moreover, believing—for this is what the Soviet leaders themselves say—that the Soviet system is founded on the employment of force, I have strong doubts of its final success.”

What is your concrete programme for giving to the peasants and workers the absolute power of deciding their own destiny?

My programme is a programme which I am having elaborated by the

40 / Charles Petrasch

Congress. I am certain that it is resulting in the position of the peasants and workers being infinitely superior to what they have ever been able to have within human memory. I do not allude to their material condition. I mean the extraordinary awakening which has affected them and their capacity for resisting injustice and exploitation.

What do you mean by “machine”? Is not the charka (the primitive plough) a machine? Is it that exploitation is not inherent in certain kinds of machines, or do you think it is the manner of using machines which makes them an instrument of exploitation?

The charka and similar instruments are clearly machines, and from this you can gather my definition of machines. I am willing to admit that it is largely the abuse of the machine system which is responsible for the exploitation of the working class in the world.

You speak of stopping the exploitation of the masses, which implies the abolition of capitalism. Do you intend to suppress capitalism, and if so, are you ready to deprive the capitalist of his surplus wealth so as to prevent him from restarting a new capitalism?

“If I come to power I shall certainly abolish capitalism, but I shall not abolish capital, and it follows that I shall not abolish the capitalists. I am convinced that the coordination of capital and labour is perfectly possible. I have seen it realised with success in certain cases, and what is true in one case can become true for all. I do not consider capital in itself as an evil, no more than I consider the machine system in itself as an evil.”

Source: Marxists’ Internet Archive (2009).As per this source, Reprinted from *Le Monde*, February 10, 1932 by *The Labour Monthly*, Vol. 14, April 1932, No. 4 pp. 217-224.

Note- Questions asked by Petrasch have been put in bold letters and answers by the Mahatma are in normal font.

◆ THINK INDIA QUARTERLY ◆