

N o M a g i c W a n d

Socialism and Peasantry. By Asoka Mehta. A Praja Socialist
Publication. January 1953. Pages 88. Price Rs 2

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THOUGH slender in volume, *Socialism and Peasantry* is a work of vast range, not sufficiently indicated by the title. It is a book of wide learning so characteristic of the works by Asoka Mehta, but more important, it is an intensely stimulating book pulsating with ideas of vital significance and has the refreshing quality of the breath of fresh air on a hilltop.

The book is divided into two parts, the first historical and the second analytical. The first five chapters deal separately with the attitude towards peasantry of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Fre-tung and finally, Tito. Lenin found it necessary to revise the assumption of Marx relating to the peasantry and while Stalin, under the regime of dictatorship, could adopt collective farms ignoring peasant resistance, in a democratic frame-work the peasant problem is intractable. The enormous preliminary task of capital accumulation still remains to be worked out.

Without minimising the value of the first part, however, it is perhaps more useful to deal with the second part and discuss some of the practical issues which have been raised by the author. Worn a wealth of statistics dealing with the comparative industrial development of advanced countries, the author derives the postulates of development and the compulsions of a backward economy. He points out that in the UK, Japan and even Russia, the pattern of industrialisation in the earlier stages had been the same, viz, the growth of textile industry as a light and consumption foods industry came first and was followed by greater and greater emphasis on heavy capital goods industries. The rising tempo of industrialisation involves a deepening process of production, a rising rate of capitalisation. He gives revealing figures about Japan indicating that while in 1953 the ratio of heavy to light industry was 38 : 62, by 1942 it had risen to 73 : 27. The author, however, would have done well to underline that in Japan, "Russia and USA alike, the rising ratio has been very largely a function of military and defence preparations and even in India, a similar growth can be regarded as a not too distant possibility.

The impact of industrialisation

on agriculture is then brought out by a rising demand for food and by a shift within agriculture from energy producing to protective foods. But when agricultural economies such as those of India and China are to be developed, the enormity of the problem and the difficulties in the path of capital accumulation begin to be realised. According to one estimate, for absorbing one worker in industry an investment (A \$2,500 is necessary. If the surplus labour on land estimated at 25 per cent of the total population employed in agriculture is to be absorbed in industry, an immense amount of capital will be necessary which may amount to 15 per cent of the national income. How far is this possible in view of the present low level of *per capita* income and how much more can the masses bear?" How the transformation in Russia was rendered possible and what was the price that had to be paid for it is then discussed in order to show that India and China do not have some of the advantages which Russia had, e.g. more land per head of the population, apart from Stalinism.

After dismissing the Communist alternative, Asoka Mehta proceeds to discuss the peasants' alternative. The peasant is land hungry and he has his own conception of "income" and "development". The peasant is basically interested in changes which would increase the yield per acre, not in changes that reduce man-hours and displace labour. Modern big industry and capitalist technology which threaten to separate him from his land and family are loathsome to the small peasant, the is suspicious of the encroachment of towns and cities, lie demands a new position and status for the village, not its extermination.

In the chapter "The Socialist Answer" Asoka Mehta accepts that mere redistribution of land, with millions of small holdings, will only lead to stagnation, unless generous aid is given to revitalise the land. From this, however, he jumps to an unwarranted conclusion that the key to this revitalisation is the nationalisation of the developed sector of the economy—the banks, insurance companies, foreign trade and large industries. He assumes, altogether wrongly, that the developed sector has a pool of idle capital which can

the rural sector. The dearth of capital and the problem of capital formation which Asoka Mehta earlier admits to be a basic one, is now gratuitously taken for granted as solved. His call to the peasant to join the Socialist Party stands on its own merit but the peasant is not going to be convinced that nationalisation is the magic wand by waving which the fields can be made to smile and the valleys turned green. It in Japan between 1890 and 1920 agricultural production could be increased by 77 per cent through improved agricultural methods, why is it not possible to achieve a similar development in India in a steady and ordered manner, instead of searching for panaceas and short-cuts which do not exist?

Mobilisation of voluntary labour, new technology rendered possible through electrification of the country side, accent on small industries where the turnover of capital is quicker—these are the directions which are rightly pointed out for the pattern of development that is possible in this country, and Japan's concentration on smaller industries is especially acclaimed. It is therefore all the more surprising that the logic of his own findings is not fully accepted by Asoka Mehta. He draws a parallel with Japan. Must not his conclusions lead him in the same direction rather than in a different *direction*?

Perhaps the most interesting discussion is in the concluding chapter entitled "A Theory of Development". Here the author pertinently observes that not only the degree but the *form* of industrialisation also has to be determined in an underdeveloped economy such as that of India. There are different limits to employment and the test of a correct policy is to attain the maximum possible employment at each level. In order that higher levels of production may not "flood" production at lower levels of technique use of "technological locks" (e.g. reserving production of dhoties for handlooms?) is suggested. This is a novel suggestion worth exploring, but it is not easy to see how it can be effectively employed. The new techniques which will offer the maximum of employment for any given investing capacity still remain to be worked out. Which, this may be the task of Socialist Economics, it may well be that little socialist content will remain when it is fully worked out. It is unfortunate that this fruitful line of approach is only touched but not developed.

