

## LAND & LIBERTY

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### A LESSON FROM INDIA

The much travelled and well known author Karl Eskelund, whose many books on foreign countries and their peoples have countless readers, has contributed to the Danish weekly journal *Hjemmet* ("The Home") a very interesting article entitled "They wanted to show that India could flourish."

Karl Eskelund describes a benevolent effort which a band of young American and English Quakers made in the way of assisting some of the Indian population, millions of whom live at starvation level.

The young idealists took up their task one spring day in 1946 when they arrived at the village district of Pifa, which lies in the Ganges delta. They were fully aware that their work would test their patience, for in India you can get no results "at five minutes past twelve." But after having outlined their plans to the peasants, the fishermen and the landowners, which met with general approval, they organised a co-operative enterprise in cultivating the land and in marketing the produce. This was formerly handled by middlemen who made something like 100 per cent. profit on the trade. They set up day schools for the children, evening schools for adults, clinics, etc.

After overcoming the initial difficulties, they saw signs of progress. Inspiration grew. Health conditions improved. All took greater interest in their work and their earnings increased. New ideas took shape—there was advance along the whole line—an advance, slow but sure.

Five years after the experiment began Karl Eskelund visited Pifa and with one of the Quakers as his guide, he went through the village to see how it was faring. The Quaker had lost more than two stones in weight and was as thin and spare as the natives. But what was worse, he had lost heart because the experiment had proved a total failure. The day school still existed, but only one-fourth of the children attended it. The evening school was closed. The clinic was hardly used. Agriculture, fishing and trade were back again to old methods.

The author asked for an explanation of this fiasco. The young Quaker offered quite a number of reasons. They had been too inexperienced; economic conditions and the tension between India and Pakistan had handicapped the work; the climate was against them, it was too humid and hot, exhausting both energy and will.

Eskelund could accept none of these explanations and finally he got to the root of the matter. We quote his own words:—

"In the first year after beginning the experiment, both peasants and fishermen earned more than ever before. What was the result? The large landowners at once

raised their rents and the smaller landowners followed suit. The peasants had to pay more for permission to cultivate the land. The fishermen had to find more money to buy permission to cast their nets on the flooded fields. In that way practically the whole of the increased earnings passed into landowners' pockets.

"The people of Pifa were unhappy at this. Nevertheless, in the next year they worked hard. Crops were plentiful; there was a rich catch of fish; good prices were paid for the produce. At once the landowners raised their rents still higher.

"The people then began to lose courage. What was the use if for all their efforts they got no benefit? The landowners waxed fatter. The peasants and fishermen did not become any thinner—that they could not, for otherwise they would die.

"Indians are ignorant but they are not stupid. They can put two and two together. They had found themselves momentarily enriched by the new methods but in the end all the extra money went to the landowners. If one of the new ideas would not work, what faith could they put in any other novelties? Perhaps after all the old methods were the best . . . ."

Yes, that is the story so far as it goes. And indeed it would be difficult to find an example that more simply and clearly and with less ambiguity, demonstrates the truth of what Henry George has taught. It is that as long as private property right to the rent of land obtains, so long will every advance crystallising in land values be gathered by the incidental owner of land; while he who works, he who produces, must toil the day long without gaining more for his labour than is enough to avoid death from hunger.

The lesson is so good because it reveals the problem in all its simplicity, because it is cleared of all that in civilised society makes it more difficult to see the importance of the land question.

We said there was no more to the story. Nor is there. Yet the author did write something else. He went on to say that the young Quaker would not lay any blame on the landowners. There could be no objection against the landowners trying to gain as much as possible and after all there was nothing unlawful in owning land. The young Quaker admitted the immorality of the circumstances, but that can only be mended by "re-making the law and remoulding the whole system."

The author himself sees clearly that the land question plays a part and proposes the sub-division of land (creation of small-holdings). Yet he is not sure that sub-division will solve the problem. For he writes:—

"Meanwhile there is evidence that you don't get rid of land ownership in that manner. Land ownership is like the weed that ever shoots up. The Indian peasant has a habit of using every penny he possesses to spend on festive occasions—when a son is born, or when a daughter is married. If he has no cash he goes to the money-lender, who is often the landowner, the only person in the village who has ready money. Of course that is stupid of the peasant, but he has so little in hand. Already there have been occasions where a man who had become owner of his plot got into debt and had to forfeit his land. Thus he became a day labourer again, to toil for the same landlord as before."

The story itself in all its nakedness reveals the curse of the private ownership of the rent of land. The comments of the Quaker and of the author both go to prove

that every form of palliative is in vain. The author is honest enough to acknowledge that smallholding schemes are no remedy, and the Quaker, although unconsciously, tells the truth that things cannot be changed without "remaking the law and remoulding the whole system." But what is related to that truth, namely, its consequences, he does not face.

For the truth is that we cannot reach a solution of the social problem without "remoulding the whole system," without recognising the joint property right of the people to natural resources and the community-created values—and taking the consequences thereof by demanding, everywhere in the world, that the whole rent of

land be collected for the community, to the abolition of taxes and all other encroachment upon property rights.

This truth applies in our own country and the world over. We can offer Marshall Aid, Atlantic pacts, help to undeveloped countries and what all else these modern organisations for help and co-operation are called. So long as we fail to solve the land question in the one rational way, all this help will be in vain. We will but continue to fertilise the ground for the Communism which *knows* that the land question is the life and death question for all mankind, and which uses that knowledge to bring the people under its yoke.—From "*Vejen Frem*," Copenhagen.