Karl Marx on India

From the *New York Daily Tribune*

(including Articles by Frederick Engels)
and Extracts from Marx–Engels
Correspondence 1853–1862

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The British Rule in India

(New York Daily Tribune, June 25, 1853)
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Telegraphic dispatches from Vienna announce that the pacific solution of the Turkish, Sardinian and Swiss questions, is regarded there as a certainty. Last night the debate on India was continued in the House of Commons, in the usual dull manner. Mr Blackett¹ charged the statements of Sir Charles Wood and Sir J. Hogg with bearing the stamp of optimist falsehood. A lot of Ministerial and Directorial advocates² rebuked the charge as well as they could, and the inevitable Mr Hume³ summed up by calling on ministers to withdraw their bill. Debate adjourned.

Hindostan is an Italy of Asiatic dimensions, the Himalayas for the Alps, the Plains of Bengal for the Plains of Lombardy, the Deccan for the Apennines, and the Ile of Ceylon for the Island of Sicily. The same rich variety in the products of the soil, and the same dismemberment in the political configuration. Just as Italy has, from time to time, been compressed by the conqueror's sword into different national masses, so do we find Hindostan, when not under the pressure of the Mohammedan, or the Mogul, or the British, dissolved into as many independent and conflicting States as it numbered towns, or even villages. Yet, in a social point of view, Hindostan is not the Italy, but the Ireland of the East. And this strange combination of Italy and of Ireland, of a world of voluptuousness and of a world of woes, is anticipated in the ancient traditions of the religion of Hindostan. That religion is at once a religion of sensualist exuberance, and a religion of self-torturing asceticism; a religion of the Lingam, and of the Juggermnt; the religion of the Monk, and of the Bayadère.⁴

I have not the opinion of those who believe in a golden age of Hindostan, without recurring, however, like Sir Charles Wood, for the confirmation of my

³² John Bright (1811-1889); famous Radical and Free Trader; chairman of Select Committee to enquire into obstacles to cultivation of cotton in India in 1854; recommended that the Government of India should be made a department of the British government in 1853; later advocated decentralisation in India, 1858 and 1879.
³¹ Sir James Blackett (1779-1876); British politician, Preston, M.P.; 1835-57; President of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, 1846-47, 1852-53; later Member of Indian Council, 1858-72.
³³ The articles are signed Karl Marx: Marx, in his letter of 14 June 1853 to Engels, speaks of this as "my first [full scale] article on India" see CW, Vol. 39, p. 346. Marx draws upon some points suggested by Engels; see Engels's letter to Marx dated 6 June 1853, in CW, Vol. 39, p. 335.
¹ John Frewick Burgoyne Blackett (1821-1856); British MP.
² That is, supporters of the Court of Directors of the East India Company.
³ Joseph Hume (1777-1856); radical politician; entered medical service of the East India Company in 1797; MP from Montrose, 1812-55.
⁴ Dancing girl, from Portuguese bailadares.
view, to the authority of Khuli Khan. But take, for example, the times of Aurungzeb; or the epoch, when the Mogul appeared in the North, and the Portuguese in the South; or the age of Mohammedan invasion, and of the Heptarchy in Southern India; or, if you will, go still more back to antiquity, take the mythological chronology of the Brahman himself, who places the commencement of Indian misery in an epoch even more remote than the Christian creation of the world.

There cannot, however, remain any doubt but that the misery inflicted by the British on Hindostan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindostan had to suffer before. I do not allude to European despotism, planted upon Asiatic despotism, by the British East India Company, forming a more monstrous combination than any of the divine monsters startling us in the Temple of Salseatte. This is no distinctive feature of British colonial rule, but only an imitation of the Dutch, and so much so that in order to characterize the working of the British East India Company it is sufficient to literally repeat what Sir Stamford Raffles, the English Governor of Java, said of the old Dutch East India Company:

The Dutch Company, actuated solely by the spirit of gain, and viewing their subjects with less regard or consideration than a West India planter formerly viewed a gang upon his estate, because the latter had paid the purchase money of human property, which the other had not, employed all the existing machinery of despotism to squeeze from the people their utmost mite of contribution, the last dregs of their labor, and thus aggravated the evils of a capricious and semi-barbarous Government, by working it with all the practised ingenuity of politicians, and all the monopolizing selfishness of traders.

All the civil wars, invasions, revolutions, conquests, famines, strangely complex, rapid and destructive as the successive action in Hindostan may appear, did not go deeper than its surface. England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindoos and separates Hindostan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history.

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There have been in Asia, generally, from immemorial times, but three departments of Government: that of Finance, or the plunder of the interior; that of War, or the plunder of the exterior; and, finally, the department of Public Works. Climate and territorial conditions, especially the vast tracts of desert, extending from the Sahara, through Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary, to the most elevated Asiatic highlands, constituted artificial irrigation by canals and waterworks the basis of Oriental agriculture. As in Egypt and India, inundations are used for fertilizing the soil in Mesopotamia, Persia, etc.; advantage is taken of a high level for feeding irrigative canals. This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which, in the Occident, drove private enterprise to voluntary association, as in Flanders and Italy, necessitated, in the Orient where civilization was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralizing power of Government. Hence an economical function devolved upon all Asiatic Governments, the function of providing public works. This artificial fertilization of the soil, dependent on a Central Government, and immediately decaying with the neglect of irrigation and drainage, explains the otherwise strange fact that we now find whole territories barren and desert that were once brillianly cultivated, as Palmyra, Petra, the ruins in Yemen, and large provinces of Egypt, Persia and Hindostan; it also explains how a single war of devastation has been able to depopulate a country for centuries, and to strip it of all its civilization.

Now, the British in East India accepted from their predecessors the department of finance and of war, but they have neglected entirely that of public works. Hence the deterioration of an agriculture which is not capable of being conducted on the British principle of free competition, of laissez faire and laissez aller. But in Asiatic empires we are quite accustomed to see agriculture deteriorating under one government and reviving again under some other government. There the harvests correspond to good or bad governments, as they change in Europe with good or bad seasons. Thus the oppression and neglect of agriculture, bad as it is, could not be looked upon as the final blow dealt to Indian society by the British intruder, had it not been attended by a circumstance of quite different importance, a novelty in the annals of the whole Asiatic world. However changing the political aspect of India's past must appear, its social condition has remained unaltered since its remotest antiquity, until the first decrees of the 19th century. The hand-loom and the spinning-wheel, producing their regular myriads of spinners and weavers, were the pivots of the structure of that society. From immemorial times, Europe received the admirable textures of Indian labor sending in return for them her precious metals, and furnishing thereby his material to

1 Misattribution apparently of Khuli Khan (author of Mantikushabat Lushah), whose statements about disturbed conditions in the early eighteenth century were well known.
2 Heptarchy, the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that were supposed to have divided England among themselves before the tenth century. Marx apparently used this word by analogy to denote the political dismemberment of the Thirteen states into conquest by the Moghuls.
3 Reference to cave sculptures in the island of Salseatte, to the south of Mumbai.
5 Since 'Indian' is American usage referred to the American Indians (Red Indians), the editors of NYTD seem to have changed Marx's 'Indian' uniformly to 'Hindoos', unless Marx, in the knowledge of this usage, had already written 'Hindoos'.
8 Laissez faire, 'let everyone do as he pleases'; laissez aller, 'let go without constraint'.
9 Laissez faire, 'let everyone do as he pleases'; laissez aller, 'let go without constraint'.
the goldsmith, that indispensable member of Indian society, whose love of finery is so great that even the lowest class, those who go about nearly naked, have commonly a pair of golden earrings and a gold ornament of some kind hung round their necks. Rings on the fingers and toes have also been common. Women as well as children frequently wore massive bracelets and anklets of gold or silver, and statuesque of divinities in gold and silver were met with in the house-holds. It was the British intro-er who broke up the Indian hand-loom and destroyed the spinning-wheel. England began with driving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindostan and in the end inundated the mother country of cotton with cottons. From 1818 to 1836 the export of twist from Great Britain to India rose in the proportion of 1 to 5,200. In 1834 the export of British muslins to India hardly amounted to 1,000,000 yards, while in 1837 it surpassed 64,000,000 yards. But at the same time the population of Dacca decreased from 150,000 inhabitants to 20,000. This decline of Indian towns celebrated for their fabrics was by no means the worst consequence. British steam and science uprooted, over the whole surface of Hindostan, the union between agriculture and manufacturing industry.

These two circumstances — the Hindu, on the one hand, leaving, like all Oriental peoples, to the Central Government the care of the great public works, the prime condition of his agriculture and commerce, dispersed, on the other hand, over the surface of the country, and agglomerated in small centres by the domestic union of agricultural and manufacturing pursuits — these two circumstances had brought about, since the remotest times, a social system of particular features — the so-called village system, which gave to each of these small unions their independent organization and distinct life. The peculiar character of this system may be judged from the following description, contained in an old official report of the British House of Commons on Indian affairs:11

A village, geographically considered, is a tract of country comprising some hundred or thousand acres14 of arable and waste lands; politically viewed it resembles a corporation or township: its proper establishment of officers and servants consists of the following descriptions: the potah or head inhabitant, who has the general superintendence of the affairs of the village, settles the disputes of the inhabitants, attends to the police, and performs the duty of collecting the revenue15 within the village, a duty which his personal influence and minute acquaintance with the situation and concerns of the people render him the best qualified for this charge.16 The Karumans17 keep the accounts of

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11 The following quotation is from the Fifth Report (hereafter FR) of the Select Committee on Affairs of the East India Company (London, 1812), p. 85. Variations from the original text are noted by placing the words of the Fifth Report in italics hereafter.
12 FR: ‘some hundreds and thousands of acres’.
13 FR: ‘already described’.
14 FR: ‘reserves’.
15 FR: ‘renders him best qualified to discharge’.
16 FR: ‘Karumans who’.

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15 FR: ‘appearing to consist in a wider and more enlarged sphere of action’.
16 FR: ‘must’.
17 FR: ‘two hundred and thousand acres’.
18 FR: ‘Brass’.
19 FR: ‘Vardin’.10
20 FR: ‘Sakdar-Brahmin’.
21 A large omission from FR occurs here in lieu of ‘the’, who proclaims the lucky or auspicious periods for sowing and reaping. The Smith and Carpenter who manufactures the implements of agriculture, and build for the dwelling of the rice. The Portun, or porter, the Women, the Cow keepers, who looks after the cattle, the Dancing Girl who attends the reaping, the Musicians and the poet.
22 FR: ‘which have been described’.
23 FR: ‘and’.
24 FR: ‘give’.
26 FR: ‘and’.

In a letter to Engels, dated 14 June 1853 (CW, Vol. 39, p. 347), Marx quotes this passage from the Fifth Report, but also incorporates within the quotation material from Wills, Historical Sketches (originally published, London, 1810). The passage on which Marx drew occurs in Murray-Hamitck's edition of the work (Murray, 1930, Vol. 1, pp. 236-37. Wilks's passage was itself probably the main source for the account of the village community in the Fifth Report.
These small stereotype forms of social organism have been to the greater part dissolved, and are disappearing, not so much through the brutal interference of the British tax gatherer and the British soldier, as to the working of English steam and English free trade. Those family communities were based on domestic industry, in that peculiar combination of hand-weaving, hand-spinning and hand-tilling agriculture which gave them self-supporting power. English interference having placed the spinner in Lancashire and the weaver in Bengal, or sweeping away both Hindu spinner and weaver, dissolved these small semi-barbarian, semi-civilized communities, by blowing up their economical basis, and thus produced the greatest, and, to speak the truth, the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia.

Now, sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness these myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organization disorganized and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization, and their hereditary means of subsistence, we must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unerring tool of superstition, enshrining it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. We must not forget the barbarian egotism which, concentrating on some miserable patch of land, had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties, the massacre of the population of large towns, with no other consideration bestowed upon them than on natural events, itself the helpless prey of any aggressor who deigned to notice it at all. We must not forget that this undignified, stagnant, and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence, evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction, and rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindostan. We must not forget that these little communities were comminuted by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Hanuman,²⁶ the monkey, and Sabala,²⁷ the cow.

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever

²⁶ The famous monkey-god, helper to Lord Rama. *Kasmana* in the original, as in CW, Vol. 12, p. 132, is an obvious mistake.
²⁷ Sabala is one of the names of the divine cow Sutashti, who grants bosom and who himself true from the Milk Ocean.

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may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about the revolution.

Then whatever bitterness the spectacle of the crumbling of an ancient world may have for our personal feelings, we have the right, in point of history, to exclaim with Goethe:

Solbte diese Qual uns quälen,
Da sie unter Lust verkehrt.
Hast nicht myriaden Seelen
Timur's Herrschaft aufgezehrt?

[Should her shrill complaint torment us

Since it has increased our joy?

Did not Timur's hand's dominion

Myriads of souls destroy]?²⁸

²⁸ The stanza is from Goethe's *Westindischer Dichter, 'An Suleika';* the English rendering, not in the original, is that of Alexander Rogers. Goethe here tells us of the nightingale's complaint against the destruction of nightingales to produce the rose-scent that Suleika uses. The first stanza of the poem thus reads:

Thou with sweet notes to cease

Sell thy pleasure to increase,

A thousand rose-buds none the less

Must in flames their being cease.

The Future Results of British Rule in India

(New York Daily Tribune, August 8, 1853)
London, Friday, July 22, 1853

I propose in this letter to conclude my observations on India. How came it that English supremacy was established in India? The paramount power of the Great Mogul was broken by the Mogul Vicegerets. The power of the Viceroyalty was broken by the Marathas. The power of the Marathas was broken by the Afghans, and while all were struggling against all, the British rushed in and was enabled to subdue them all. A country not only divided between Mohammedan and Hindoo, but between tribe and tribe, between caste and caste; a society whose framework was based on a sort of equilibrium, resulting from a general repulsion and constitutional exclusiveness between all its members. Such a country and such a society, were they not the predestined prey of conquest? If we knew nothing of the past history of Hindostan, would there not be the one great and incontestable fact, that even at this moment India is held in English thrall? by an Indian army maintained at the cost of India? India, then, could not escape the fate of being conquered, and the whole of her past history, if it be anything, is the history of the successive conquests she has undergone. Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society. The question, therefore, is, not whether the English had a right to conquer India, but whether we are to prefer India conquered by the Turk, by the Persian, by the Russian, to India conquered by the Briton.

England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundation of Western society in Asia. The Arabs, Turks, Tartars, Moguls, who had successively overrun India, soon became Hinduized, the barbarian conquerors being, by an eternal law of history, conquered themselves by the superior civilization of their subjects. The British were the first conquerors superior, and therefore, inaccessible to Hindu civilization. They destroyed it by breaking up the native communities, by uprooting the native industry, and by levelling all that was great and elevated in the native society. The historic pages of their rule in India report hardly anything beyond that destruction. The work of regeneration hardly transpires through a heap of ruins. Nevertheless it has begun.

The political unity of India, more consolidated, and extending farther than it ever did under the Great Moguls, was the first condition of its regeneration. That unity, imposed by the British sword, will now be strengthened and perpetuated by the electric telegraph. The native army, organized and trained by the British drill-sergeant, was the sine qua non of Indian self-emancipation, and of India ceasing to be the prey of the first foreign intruder. The free press, introduced for the first time into Asiatic society, and managed principally by the common offspring of Hindoos and Europeans, is a new and powerful agent of reconstruction. The Zamindarees and Ryotwars themselves, abominable as they are, involve two distinct forms of private property in land—the great desideratum of Asiatic society. From the Indian natives, reluctantly and sparingly educated at Calcutta, under English superintendence, a fresh class is springing up, endowed with the requirements for government and imbued with European science. Steam has brought India into regular and rapid communication with Europe, has connected its chief ports with those of the whole south-eastern ocean, and has reinvigorated it from the isolated position which was the prime law of its stagnation. The day is not far distant when, by a combination of railways and steam vessels, the distance between England and India, measured by time, will be shortened to eight days, and when that once fabulous country will thus be actually annexed to the Western World.

The ruling classes of Great Britain have had, till now, but an accidental, transitory and exceptional interest in the progress of India. The aristocracy wanted to conquer it, the moneyocracy to plunder it, and the millicity to undersell it. But now the tables are turned. The millicity have discovered that the transformation of India into a reproductive country has become of vital importance to them, and that, to that end, it is necessary, above all, to gift her with means of irrigation and of internal communication. They intend now drawing a net of railroads over India. And they will do it. The results must be inappreciable.

Article signed: Karl Marx.

1 Marx here seems to be greatly influenced by Hegel, who said: '...the Hindoos have no history in the form of annals (histoire), that they have no history in the form of transactions (negotiations); that is, no growth expanding into a veritable political condition.' See Philosophy of History, translated by J. Miller (New York, 1856), p. 183.

2 'Reinvigorated' means 'revived, reformed, restored as a rightful possession' (1837).

3 This quotation occurs in Dickinson, India Reform, pp. 81-82, where the words 'in the rains' occur additionally at the end.
The introduction of railroads may be easily made to subserve agricultural purposes by the formation of tanks, where ground is required for embankment, and by the conveyance of water along the different lines. Thus irrigation, the sine qua non of farming in the East, might be greatly extended, and the frequently recurring local famines, arising from the want of water, would be averted. The general importance of railways, viewed under this head, must become evident, when we remember that irrigated lands, even in the districts near Ghauts, pay three times as much in taxes, afford ten or twelve times as much employment, and yield twelve or fifteen times as much profit, as the same area without irrigation.

Railways will afford the means of diminishing the amount and the cost of the military establishment. Col. Warren, Town Major of the Fort St. William, stated before a Select Committee of the House of Commons:

The practicability of receiving intelligence from distant parts of the country in as many hours as at present it requires days and even weeks, and of sending instructions with troops and stores, in the more brief period, are considerations which cannot be too highly estimated. Troops could be kept at a more distant and healthier stations than at present, and much loss of life from sickness would by this means be spared. Stores could not to the same extent be required at the various depots, and the loss by decay, and the destructions incidental to the climate, would also be avoided. The number of troops might be diminished in direct proportion to their effectiveness.

We know that the municipal organization and the economical basis of the village communities has been broken up, but their worst feature, the dissolution of society into stereotype and disconnected atoms, has survived their vitality. The village isolation produced the absence of roads in India, and the absence of roads perpetuated the village isolation. On this plan a community existed with a given scale of low conveniences, almost without intercourse with other villages, without the desires and efforts indispensable to social advance. The British having broken up this self-sufficient inertia of the villages, railways will provide the new want of communication and intercourse. Besides, one of the effects of the railway system will be to bring into every village affected by it such a knowledge of the conveniences and appliances of other countries, and such means of obtaining them, as will first put the hereditary and stipendiary village aristocracy of India to full proof of its capabilities, and then if needful supply its defects. (Chapman, The Cotton and Commerce of India)

I know that the English illogicity intend to endow India with railways with the exclusive view of extracting at diminished expenses, the cotton and other raw materials for their manufactures. But when you have once introduced machinery into the locomotion of a country, which possesses iron and coals, you are unable to withhold it from its fabrication. You cannot maintain a net of railways over an immense country without introducing all those industrial processes necessary to meet the immediate and current wants of railway locomotion, and out of which there must grow the application of machinery to those branches of industry not immediately connected with railways. The railway system will therefore become, in India, truly the forerunner of modern industry. This is the more certain as the Hindus are allowed by British authorities themselves to possess particular aptitude for accommodating themselves to entirely new labor, and acquiring the requisite knowledge of machinery. Ample proof of this fact is afforded by the capacities and expertise of the native engineers in the Calcutta mint, where they have been for years employed in working the steam machinery, by the natives attached to the several steam engines in the Hardwar coal districts, and by other instances. Mr Campbell himself, greatly influenced as he is by the prejudices of the East India Company, is obliged to avow, 'that the great mass of the Indian people possesses a great industrial energy, is well fitted to accumulate capital, and remarkable for a mathematical clearness of head, and talent for figures and exact sciences. Their intellect,' he says, 'are excellent.' Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labor upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power.

All the English bourgeoisie may be forced to do will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social condition of the mass of the people, depending not only on the development of the productive powers, but of their appropriation by the people. But what they will not fail to do is lay down the material premises for both. Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and people through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?
classes, 'plus fies et plus adroits que les Italiens'; whose submission even countenanced by a certain calm nobility, who, notwithstanding their natural longueur have astonished the British officers by their bravery, whose country has been the source of our languages, our religion, and who represent the type of the ancient German in the Jat, and the type of the ancient Greek in the Brahmin.

I cannot part with the subject of India without some concluding remarks.

The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked. They are the defenders of property, but did any revolutionary party ever originate agrarian revolutions like those in Bengal, in Madras, and in Bombay? Did they not, in India, borrow an expression of that great robed, Lord Clive himself, resort to atrocious extortion, when simple corruption could not keep pace with their rapacity? While they prated in Europe about the inviolable sanctity of the national debt, did they not confiscate in India the dividends of the sepoys;* who, having invested their private savings in the Company's own funds, while they combated the French revolution under the pretext of defending 'our holy religion', did they not forbid, at the same time, Christianity to be propagated in India, and did they not, in order to raise money out of the pilgrims streaming to the temples of Orissa and Bengal, take up the trade in the murder and prostitution perpetrated in the temple of Juggernaut? These are the men of 'Property, Order, Family, and Religion'.

The devastating effects of English industry, when contemplated with regard to India, a country as vast as Europe, and containing 150 millions of acres, are palpable and confounding. But we must not forget that they are only the organic results of the whole system of production as it is now constituted. That production rests on the supreme rule of capital. The centralization of 'capital' is essential to the existence of capital as an independent power. The destructive influence of that centralization upon the markets of the world does but* reveal, in the most gigantic dimensions, the inherent organic laws of political economy now at work in every civilized town. The bourgeois period of history has to create the material basis of the new world — on the one hand, the universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind, and the means of that intercourse; on the other hand, the development of the productive powers of man and the transformation of material production into a scientific domination.


* Spelt 'singer' in N.Y.D.

* 'Clive is said to have amassed huge wealth from plundering Bengal.

* So spelt in N.Y.D.

* By centralization of capital, Marx means what in the parlance of modern economists is called 'concentration of capital'. By concentration of capital, on the other hand, he means the increase in the relative size of constant capital, that is capital other than wage-fund. See Marx, Capital, edited by Duna Tor, Vol. i, pp. 587-89.

* Omited in As.