THE CREATIVITY OF DESTRUCTION:
WARTIME IMAGININGS OF DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL
POLICY, C. 1942–1946*

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Introduction

During the Second World War, relatively abstract discussions about
the future of an Indian economy and an independent Indian political
order began to coalesce around the problems of a wartime economy
and the anticipated problems of adjusting to peacetime. It has been
suggested that the origins of Indian economic planning can be found
in the war economy, and furthermore that a state apparatus that was
being increasingly decentralised from the 1920s was in the course of
the war turned into an extremely centralised state, that then fit the
needs of centrally directed developmental planning in the years after
independence.1 Although this view needs some qualification, in par-
ticular in terms of questions of intentionality (many of the schemes
were practical, ad hoc and a response to particular circumstances), and
in terms of attempted uses of languages of legitimacy (Indian national-
ists were reluctant to concede that British imperialism had been able to
author anything of value for a post-independence Indian state, while
British government propaganda tried to dress many of its schemes as
Indian nationalist),2 much thinking on developmental issues was indeed

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* This is a survey piece that contains a certain amount of self-plagiarism (for the
sources of which, see footnotes), in addition to new work, much of which is still at
a preliminary stage. I thank Franziska Roy and Aditya Sarkar for their comments, as
also the participants in the conference ‘The World in the World Wars’ at the Zentrum
Moderner Orient in Berlin, and the editors of the volume. I also thank Franziska Roy
for her editorial assistance, without which this piece would have been unreadable.

1 See Dietmar Rothermund, “Die Anfänge der indischen Wirtschaftsplanung im
Zweiten Weltkrieg,” in Dritte Welt: historische Prüfung und politische Herausforde-
runung: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Rudolf von Albertini, eds. Peter Hablützel,
Hans-Werner Tobler and Albert Wirz, (Beiträge zur Kolonial und Überseegeschichte)

2 Sanjoy Bhattacharya and Benjamin Zachariah, “‘A Great Destiny’: The British
Colonial State and the Advertisement of Post-War Reconstruction in India, 1942–45,”
South Asia Research 19, 1 (1999), 71–100.
catalysed by the Second World War. Efforts by the imperial government to manage and control the war economy sometimes provided the mechanisms and schemes that Indian inheritors of state power wished to see materialise; and even as documents like the Advisory Planning Board Report of 1946 underplayed this, major documents of social policy were written during the war with an imagined post-war context in mind. This essay will examine the wartime contexts for the emergence of these schemes, and provide a brief survey of some of the schemes themselves.

**Rhetorical Conventions and Political Projects**

At the outset, it is worth restating the terms on which Indian debates on ‘development’ were conducted. These provided the language of legitimacy within which the specifics of the end-of-the-war debates that are the subject of this paper were placed. Claims to ‘socialism’—or to some social concern for the poor and downtrodden—were obligatory, and were by the 1940s made by capitalists and avowed socialists alike (capitalists were extremely worried that socialism was in the ascendant, and decided that the best way to protect themselves was to appear to concede ‘socialism’ while maintaining the ‘essential features of capitalism’). Also invoked were ‘science’, technology and technical expertise as ways of achieving ‘modern’ social and economic goals—even by the Gandhians, who tried to redefine the ‘modern’ in such a way as to justify a decentralised, village-based and labour-intensive socio-economic order as more in keeping with ‘modern’ trends. To achieve these goals, a good deal of ‘national discipline’ was required, and the ‘masses’ were to have to make some sacrifices in the short-term, or in the ‘transitional period’. And lastly, all solutions to social, economic or political problems had to conform to ‘indigenous’ values: borrowings from ‘foreign’ systems were to be treated with suspicion. This was a particularly useful tactical argument used against socialists and communists by Gandhians and by the right (often strategically merging with the Gandhians); but it was also used by socialists to argue that communists were ‘foreign’ elements controlled from Moscow. The appeal of the ‘indigenist’ strand of argument in a colonised

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