

# 'Freedom' mocks the landless peasants

*THE constitutional independence of India from Britain was celebrated in August: but there was insufficient inquest into the record of the past 50 years of freedom. Much talk about the shortcomings of the colonial masters was not matched by examination of how the sub-continent has been betrayed by the new political élites. The plight of children tells it all, reports Paul Knight.*

ACCORDING to India's constitution child labour is banned. And yet, child labour features as an important part of the economy in many rural areas.

Instead of combating the economic conditions which necessitate the employment of children of tender years, the Indian government has been fighting to defend itself by trivialising the problem.

India is one of the top five nations that exploits child labour. The International Labour Organisation is seeking to enforce Convention 138 which prescribes the minimum age of child labour. India is not even a signatory. A government survey which puts child labour at 400,000 has been branded as "fraudulent and bogus" by the South Asian coalition on Child Servitude, which led a protest march in New Delhi on August 14.

Campaigners want a total ban on child labour. The prospects are not good, for the economic conditions favour such exploitation. An alternative measure of social conditions is provided by the statistics on suicide: 252 people committed suicide in Delhi between May and July. In the rural areas, Kerala has

the highest suicide rate, about four times the national average. Family suicide pacts are on the increase: there were 17 cases in June and July. Most of the victims were killed by what the Indian press call the "bread-earners". But in most cases these men have taken their desperate actions precisely because they could not earn the bread for their families.

In one case a family of three jumped in front of a goods train. In another the family consumed poison. Other tragedies were executed by hanging or

**According to the World Bank, the poor in India have increased from 164 million in 1951 to 312 million in 1994. Infant mortality rates are one of the highest in the world. One-third of children aged between six and 10 do not attend school. The World Bank stresses that India needs to spend more on physical infrastructure to stimulate economic growth. But it makes no proposals about how to reap the increased land values for the nation's benefit. Such investment, in other words, would make farm and residential land even more unaffordable and thereby further widen the gap between rich and poor.**

the use of a chopper.

One sociologist, John Kattakkayam, said that poverty was the most important factor. Even middle and upper income group families were being pushed into believing they were failing by not being able to maintain a rising consumer based living standard, and were therefore driven into a debt trap.

Behind all these tragedies is the continuing breakdown of traditional support systems such as the extended family, one of the features of rapid urbanisation in states such as Kerala.

But the government hides behind the claim that reforms are not possible at one go because of "complex social problems".

In reality the causes that underly poverty are very simple. The land tenure

and tax systems between them crush the capacity of people to earn a decent living. One result is that India is a country of massive seasonal migration as families abandon their fields for part of the year to supplement their incomes with wages from menial jobs wherever these can be found.

THE independence celebrations inspired critical analysis of colonial history and global politics. Missing from the debate, however, was an appreciation of the fundamental flaws in the economic structure for which the Indian government (and not its colonial forebears) must accept responsibility.

Tragedy is being played out every day in impoverished districts where upper caste landlords tyrannise the landless peasants. In Bihar, for example, the landlords commissioned a private army which to date has resulted in the slaughter of over 300 people in the district of Bhojpur during the last two years.

Bihar is one of India's poorest states where the landlords remain in control despite their being in a numerical minority. Democratic rights under the constitution count for nothing: the real power remains with those who control the land. According to a leader of the Communist Party of India in the village of Chakarda: "Our whole struggle revolves around the efforts of the landlords to maintain their prestige and dignity. If we sit upright on our Charpai [string mattress] or go out in new clothes, they beat us".