AN EXPERIMENT IN INDIA

The much travelled and well known author, Karl Eskelund, whose many books on foreign countries and their people have countless readers, describes the 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 in 1946 at the village district of Pifa, which lies in the Ganges delta, 45 miles east of Calcutta and four miles by bus from Basirhat railway station. 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. 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, none of which he could accept. Finally he got to the root of the matter. This is what he says: —

"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 land-owners 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 . . ."

—"Land and Liberty."

This depressing story illustrates the futility of dealing with superficial remedies when a radical reform is necessary. It is like applying skin ointment to a sick person when what is really needed is a surgical operation. All well-meaning efforts to help poverty in India or elsewhere will not get to the basic cause unless the social cancer of land monopoly is dealt with. Where people can get access to natural resources they will be able to earn a living for themselves without resorting to aid and hand-outs from others, and their dignity will be restored as responsible human beings.
LAND-VALUE TAXATION WILL PROVIDE THAT ACCESS.