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A POINT
OF VIEW
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A Report from Europe

There has been a great deal of justifiable concern about the precipitate drop in India's prestige abroad as a result of the Indian Government's unrealistic and unfair attitude towards the West Asian dispute. What is perhaps not as widely appreciated is the fact that the deterioration in India's image is a process that has been going on for quite a while and that the Indian Government's West Asian posture is only one of many things that has damaged our country's image abroad.

On a recent visit to Europe, where I went to participate in the Annual Conference in Oxford of the Liberal International, of which I was elected a Patron, to preside over a meeting of the General Assembly of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris, and to address a meeting on India in Berne at the invitation of the Swiss-East Institute there, I made it a point to keep an eye on the kind of news about our country that trickles through in a sketchy manner to the newspaper reader in England and on the Continent. Naturally, the British papers have more to say about India than those on the Continent but there is some honorable exception to this, and that is the Neue Zürcher Zeitung of Zurich. This is a daily of the highest repute which publishes more detailed and more reliable information about India than do perhaps the London Times and New York Times put together.

During the first twentyfive days of September when I was abroad, a variety of items of news became available. There were some of a gossippy nature like, for instance, the announcement by the Beatles that they would fly to India in October for a two-month holiday and meditation study under their new mentor, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, in the Himalayan foothills, and another which reported that Mr. Morarji Deesai, our Deputy Prime Minister, was taken to have his first look inside a London pub and, like Queen Victoria, who made the celebrated remark: 'We are not amused', he, on emerging, observed not very surprisingly that "there was not all that much to see. Not very impressive at all."

There was another category of items which evoked sympathy for us in the minds of the reader. Such, for instance, was the report from India entitled "India flood death toll mounts", which pointed out how the capricious rain gods, having denied water last year, were now flooding the country and washing away the homes of a large number

of people.

Mr. Chagla's resignation created considerable interest, largely because of the issue of language which he had raised in his letter of resignation. A summary of Mr. Chagla's letter, as also an exclusive interview with him, was published in the Times and there was an editorial on the subject.

The firing across the Sikkim border was reported from day to day and given considerable prominence in an objective manner. The Times of September 15, in a report entitled "Indian Guns Silent as Chinese Fire", explained this phenomenon by saying that "the Indian Government is apparently hoping that the Chinese will interpret the silence from the guns as Indian loss of face and will be satisfied with the resulting propaganda", an explanation which must have looked somewhat peculiar to the eyes of the reader abroad.

An appreciative story was that from Bombay entitled 'Sterilisation Queues in India', which was an interview with Dr. Rafiq Akaria, Maharashtra's Minister of Health, about his strategy and plans to control births "on a commercial basis" in place of any compulsion.

Alongside of reports saying that the Japanese were going in for major investment in Ceylon and that Indonesia and the Philippines had introduced new legislation to open the doors more widely to foreign capital and to create a better climate for such investment, there was a report from India entitled "Record Crop May Prove Mixed Blessing For India", which mentioned the concern in certain official circles lest the good monsoon might induce countries elsewhere to halt food aid now being received by India, since "this would also mean a halt to the revenues the Government earns by selling the food in its ration shops."

A large proportion of the news items about India were not such, however, as to do the country's reputation any good and some of them made painful reading abroad. Thus there was a long report in the Daily Telegraph from Trinagar entitled "The Hindu Girl of Trinagar", where the story of the deplorable riots over the marriage of a Hindu girl to a Muslim was told in considerable detail.

There was a report on how several distinguished teachers and members of the Executive Council of Delhi University were insulted and manhandled by students demanding the restoration of the M.A. (Pass) class with retrospective effect from 1966 and how a college principal was kicked in the shin and the head of a research institute was slapped.

Other items of news not very creditable to our country included a story about Keith Satterthwaite, a voluntary worker with Tibetan refugees in India, who was forced out of the country. "I know of several cases personally", he told the Times correspondent, mentioning a Swiss doctor with a mobile dispensary who was told to stop work among the Tibetans, although he could continue to work for Indians and an English teacher in Delhi had also been told to leave. What was most damaging was when he described how in May this year the local District Commissioner summoned the Tibetan community's head in Dalhousie to ask that the foreign

voluntary workers should be expelled and "applied pressure on the Tibetan group by not issuing ration cards for cheap rice and wheat flour." "We realised that if we did not go," said Satterthwaite, "they would put on more pressure." The Indian Government's attitude, he explained, is that refugees are not working enough. They do not want voluntary workers as the Tibetans would not become self-supporting. Commenting on this, the Times correspondent observed that there was a feeling in pro-Tibetan circles in England that the Indian authorities resent the greater hold on British sympathies exercised by the Tibetan refugees.

Another unfortunate incident was that of the seizure of gold on a BOAC aircraft. The trouble, according to reports, arose because the BOAC plane which was flying to the Far East carrying gold to the Portuguese colony of Macao had been delayed in Delhi due to the plane needing refitting with a new engine. When the BOAC asked for security measures to protect the gold, the gold was taken into custody on the ground that the consignment had not been marked as "gold" but only as "metal", which is the normal international aviation practice in every country except India. The last report appearing in the Daily Telegraph of September 25 was to the effect that India had decided to confiscate the £500,000 worth of gold, even though the Indian authorities were satisfied that BOAC were not involved in smuggling. According to the Telegraph, the confiscation will be based on the violation of a new decree banning the passage through India of any goods to Portugal or its overseas territories. This was sprung on BOAC officials after days of argument over the incorrect manifests. The impression left on the reader was that the Indian authorities, having failed to establish a claim based on the incorrect manifest, suddenly developed an afterthought and shifted their ground and turned to rely on a new argument which they had not thought of during the intervening week that had elapsed between the discovery of the consignment and the confiscation.

Anyone read the report of the confiscation, one wondered whether, even if a technical breach of rules had been committed, this could not and should not have been overlooked in the case of a bona fide error where there was no guilty intent. This feeling was intensified when, on turning to another page of the same paper, one came across an advertisement by Oxfam making a touching appeal for funds for the relief of starvation and distress in Bihar. The action of the Indian officials would appear to the reader to be a very peculiar way of showing appreciation of the fact that thousands of men and women in England are giving their time to collect funds for the relief of distress among those most hard hit in our country.

From what little has been said about how developments in India look to the reader abroad, it would seem that to blame Indian diplomats and officials abroad for poor public relations, as is often done in Parliament and outside, would be to mark up the wrong tree. Public relations can only deliver the goods where they have a good story to tell or a good product to sell. It is possible, of course, that some of these reports might not have been altogether accurate and that corrections could be issued in such cases, but no amount of public relations or smart publicity

can undo the effect of actions lacking in generosity and fairplay, like the expulsion of British voluntary workers helping the unfortunate Tibetans in India or the use of a technicality to penalise the airline of a friendly country ~~in the manner that was reported~~. Nor can any amount of explanation undo the damage done by reports of rioting in Kashmir or Ranchi in what is proudly claimed to be a 'secular' state.

There is no short cut to remedy these ills. Sound policies and decisions on the part of our Government, constructive debate and criticism in our Parliament, a vigilant defence of the individual's rights in the columns of the Press - these are among the ways in which, in course of time, the image of the country abroad can change. In our own times, two countries widely reviled for their war-time activities, namely, Japan and Germany, have been rehabilitated in the eyes of the community of nations by their behaviour in the years since the war -- their turning away from the mistakes of the past, their hard work, their miraculous recovery from destruction, and their readiness to help others in greater need.

The common people of India deserve a better image abroad than those who have hitherto led them have earned for the country. Each of us can help in our own little way in mending things so that we may regain the great prestige that Mahatma Gandhi had won for us by a life-time of service and sacrifice and adherence to high moral standards.
