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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

by

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Repeatedly the question is being anxiously put to me these days as to the direction in which the country is moving. "What are we heading for?" is the question on every lip. This concern is to be welcomed. It is indeed high time we started worrying about our country's future.

Before we guess where we are going, it is necessary to consider where we are today. "We are in deep waters", said Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the Red Fort on Independence Day. That is an under-statement.

Whichever way we turn, the picture is grim. Economically, we are heading for total collapse. Industrial and agricultural production is stagnant. Shortages of food and other articles are becoming worse. Prices show no signs of stabilising. According to Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, of the Atomic Energy Commission, "the failure on the economic plane is attributable to ideological bias, bureaucratic procedures and the pseudo-scientific approach to planning which takes the trappings of science without understanding it."

It all started with Jawaharlal Nehru, who was a kind of half-baked Marxist with a bias against "capitalism." To adapt the phrase of Ray Gunter, the present Minister for Labour in England, Nehru was one of those who "equated profits with incest or lechery." Never an economist, Prime Minister Nehru set the inflationary spiral in motion with the classic remark that "a little inflation" would do no harm in a developing country. I had occasion, in the course of a debate in the Lok Sabha, to quote to him the remark of a war-time price administrator that "a little inflation is like a little pregnancy. It keeps growing." We see the results today.

On the political and moral plane, while the results of the General Election raised some hopes of a change for the better, these have been dashed. Outside of Orissa and Madras, non-Congress Governments have not proved a success. There is widespread cynicism about the sincerity and honesty of all politicians. "Never in my thirty-five years of public life have I known the atmosphere to be so murky or stifling."

The effect of watching Parliament function from day to day is a

depressing one. There is ample evidence of a desire to take Party or personal advantage of every situation. There is noise and vulgarity and in this respect there is little to choose between the ruling party and those in Opposition. "Turncoatism" is becoming a phenomenon in our public life. Above all, there is no sense of national purpose to be detected. Government and Parliament, most people feel, are failing the country and there is facile talk of military dictatorship as a solution. Mr. Gulzarilal Banda said the other day: "I am not an alarmist. You would not require Pakistan or China to attack you. You would be destroyed from within." Having been Planning Minister and Home Minister for nearly two decades, he ought to know! Increasingly, politicians are behaving like locusts who live off the land. They are part of the Indian equivalent of the ruling class in communist countries whom the Yugoslav Communist, Milovan Djilas, has described so well in his book, The New Class.

Internationally, we face two unfriendly neighbours. Our northern borders are ablaze with discontent on the part of hill and tribal peoples all the way from Kashmir to Nagaland. Our policy of non-alignment has resulted in our isolation, with the result that expenditure on Defence in the Fourth Plan is estimated to exceed that on the development of Agriculture, our basic industry. Our International prestige has touched a new low after the way we suffered the humiliation of our diplomats in Peking without breaking off diplomatic relations and our unfair, loaded and tendentious attitude in the West Asian dispute.

Meanwhile, a new threat has arisen. Naxalbari, which for some time was "a free zone" of 20 square miles under Peking communist control, is like a dagger pointed at the heart of India. It is located on a narrow neck which links the North East frontiers of India with the rest of the country. Supplies to a third of the Indian Army can be cut off if it is in the hands of guerillas. The lull in Naxalbari is temporary and Peking has already described it as its "front paw." If this cancer is not eliminated, it will not be long before India becomes another Vietnam. Peking obviously wants many Vietnams all along its frontiers.

How have we managed to get into this mess? The answer is simple — through wrong policies of Socialism at home and Non-alignment abroad for twenty years. Compare the happy lot of non-Marxist countries in Asia which are enjoying peace, prosperity and progress. Look at Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia. We could have been in that happy company but, thanks to the fact that our first Prime Minister was Jawaharlal Nehru rather than Vallabhbhai Patel, we took the wrong turn and we find ourselves instead in the company of the countries of Sukarno, Nkrumah and Nasser.

But can it all be blamed on one man? Why did we allow him to

mislead us? Why did we not correct him, as he could have been corrected, since he was a democrat? Is there a more fundamental crisis of character which lies behind our plight?

We have some strong points as a people. Love of religion, love of the family, love of the land, patience and contentment with our lot, intelligence and individualism. On the other hand, we have several weaknesses which are contributing to our fate. I will select just two.

There is first, lack of courage. I do not mean physical courage. Our Armed Forces have given evidence of that. What I refer to is intellectual and moral courage — willingness to be in a small and hopeless minority, readiness to become unpopular, to be "in the right with two or three" against the mass. Gandhiji used to say repeatedly that India had to learn to say 'no'. If he were alive today, he would regretfully repeat that comment. Members of Parliament say one thing on the floor and other thing in the lobby. "Leave me out; don't get me involved", are words we hear from businessmen, educationists and politicians. The result of this trait is what Lenin described as "tailism" in place of leadership. The bankruptcy of leadership in India today is due to this.

Another symptom of the lack of leadership is the desire to cling to office. Parliamentary democracy demands that at any given time some forty to fortyfive per cent of the country's politicians should be prepared to be in the Opposition, but in India eighty per cent of the country's politicians insist on being in office all the time! Hence our political imbalance.

The second major defect of character is lack of discipline. This stems from the failure in character building in our homes and in our schools. There are no playing fields of Eton where battles of Waterloo can be won. Indiscipline and lack of restraint are therefore endemic. Take, for instance, our irresponsible breeding — 1300 babies brought into a country short of food every hour. Consider our laziness and sloth at all levels. There is no danger whatsoever in the foreseeable future of any government in India having to issue a communique against "work fury" as in West Germany under Adenauer and Dr. Erhard. Consider our lack of consideration for others, our lack of punctuality and dependability in honouring our commitments.

Indiscipline has permeated even Parliament. There is constant defiance of the Chair. Outside there is abdication of law and order. No cause is so bad that it cannot triumph by a little violence! There is the Chargao. Its latest manifestation is the threat by all members of a State Government to surround the Prime Minister's House. This is described as "official business" which they would undertake at the taxpayers' cost. As it happens, the Prime Minister responded to the mood of the hour by succumbing to the threat and giving the necessary assurance to prevent her house being surrounded.

Indiscipline is also endemic in the field of education. It is not only the students who are undisciplined. The whole issue of language is being more or less decided on the basis of who can set off a bigger riot —

Madras or Delhi? In the process, a Tower of Babel will be erected and whatever national solidarity remains will be destroyed.

These are not handicaps that can be cured by legislation. We cannot make people courageous by legislation. We may induce a certain amount of discipline by coercion but, as Gandhiji often pointed out: The only really free man is he who disciplines himself from within.

These things can only be put right by home training and sound education, the latter of which our Governmental authorities are now busy in disrupting by their political interference and the destruction of academic freedom.

If this is the mess we are in, how do we get out of it? There can be no hope from the status quo. Governmental policies are likely to get worse, not better. There is a craven fear of being accused of "deviation" from the disastrous legacy of the past. Hence the cry for nationalisation of banks and general insurance and for the abolition of Privy Purses. Hence the waste of Rs. 18 crores which has been announced for translating books from English when the more essential functions of Government remain unfulfilled.

There is a lunatic fringe that dominates the ruling party. According to one of its members, Mr. Abid Ali Jafferbhui, twelve to fifteen communists in Congressmen's clothes are "pressurising" the Government.

For the democrats, there is a real dilemma in the present situation. The Democrats' Dilemma lies in this that, while every day the present regime lasts increases the drift to disaster, a purely non-Congress Government involving the participation of the Communists might be even worse.

What then is the way out? The answer is a Government of Democratic Unity which would involve the coming together to save the country of all democratic Opposition parties and about a hundred Congressmen who realise the need to free themselves from the policies of the past. But Congressmen today are the backward children in our political school. Where are these honourable hundred to be found and how long will it take them to see the writing on the wall? If such a Government of Democratic Unity cannot be brought into existence in the coming months, the alternative that will face the country will be a drift to chaos and perhaps military dictatorship. As a democrat, I would deplore this, but Nature abhors a vacuum.

President Zakir Hussain said on Independence Day that the country was "poised for a major breakthrough." Is he sure that it is not a breakdown or a breakup that we are poised for instead? There appears to be a race between the intelligence and patriotism of the Indian people on the one side and the onset of political and economic collapse on the other. I think we have an even chance of survival. But it is later than we think.

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