

The four horse-traders of the Indian apocalypse

THE entire political scene in India today is a dreary disheartening one. Never has the disgust with politicians and parties been as widespread as it is now.

A poll taken towards the end of August by the Indian Institute of Public Opinion (the Gallup affiliate in India) showed that no less than 76 per cent. of those interviewed believe that "present day politicians by and large are guided by the exigencies of their own political careers." Some 59 per cent. expressed the view that this deterioration in political standards had been accentuated over the past two years of Janata party rule.

The sad thing is that it can reasonably be argued that there is nothing whatsoever to choose between the three parties contending for power. They have all been guilty of encouraging defections, of "toppling" Governments and of combining without the slightest scruple with the opponents of yesterday against their comrades.

It is, perhaps, inevitable that, in a country lacking the traditions of individual liberty and grassroots citizenship on which a free society can be based, there should be too much politics and too little citizenship. This natural handicap has, however, been greatly aggravated by the socio-economic pattern with which India's first Prime Minister, Mr Nehru, endowed the country, which he described as "the socialist pattern of society." In practice, this has meant an advanced and obsolete form of State capitalism with a big and burgeoning bureaucracy and administrative controls that invade every walk of life.

The combination of political and economic power in the hands of a few politicians has meant that the stakes of office have been raised altogether too high. This has resulted not only in corruption but also in an utter lack of scruple in the fight for political office. To the discerning observer, it is clear that India cannot have a clean and efficient Government unless it is also a limited Government and Gandhi—the Mahatma—was right when he reiterated that "That Government is best which governs the least."

What India needs on the socio-economic front is a "U-turn." Quite apart from the economic benefits of such a step, there can be no doubt that it would mean relieving the tender plant of Indian democracy of the excessive burdens it has been unable to bear without wilting. Such a turnabout has already been executed by President Jayawardene in Sri Lanka with success, but it would be too much to expect any of India's existing political parties to undertake it. In so far as economic policies are concerned, they are all wedded to the State capitalist pattern and are all part, to borrow Dilas's phrase, of the "new class" which thrives on it.

MINOO MASANI on how politicians brought democracy into disgrace

As the disintegration of the Janata Government set in, Mr D. V. Rao, president of the partially reunited Congress, broke with Mrs Gandhi in June because she was not prepared to keep her son Sanjay from the levers of power. Discontented members of the Janata party demanded separate seats in Parliament. Mr Charan Singh, one of the two Deputy Prime Ministers, followed the breakaway movement. The party lost its Parliamentary majority and Mr Desai resigned as Prime Minister.

President Reddy invited Mr Charan Singh to form a Government, but on Aug. 20, with insufficient support from Mrs Gandhi's Congress faction, he resigned without facing Parliament and advised the President to call an election. Mr Jagjivan Ram, new leader of Janata, asked the President to invite him to form a Government, but Parliament was dissolved on Aug. 22, leaving Mr Charan Singh as caretaker Prime Minister and with an election to be held before the end of the year.

Mr Urs, attempting to form a union of all old Congress members except Mrs Gandhi and Mr Desai, has probably not been granted sufficient time before the election is held. Mrs Gandhi, shown well ahead of her rivals in an opinion poll at the end of August, said on Sept. 10 that India needed stability before democracy.

Whichever way one looks at it, the outlook for the next few years is bleak. It is most unlikely that either that part of Congress led by Mrs Gandhi or the Janata party led by Mr Jagjivan Ram or the coalition of parties and groups which is taking shape under the leadership of Mr Charan Singh and Mr Urs will get a clear majority in the elections to the Lok Sabha (Lower House). In the light of what has been happening during the past few months and weeks, can there be any doubt that such a situation will mean instability, with constant efforts at horse-trading and further defections?

The issue in the coming election will not be democracy versus autocracy; it will be the record of the Janata Government and, above all, the level of prices. It is a matter of record that prices in India rose from 1960 continuously except during the emergency, when they registered an average fall equivalent to an annual rate of 5 per cent.

On present form, and before the election campaign has really got going, all one can say is that the tide of public opinion is flowing in Mrs Gandhi's favour. As the editor of a leading daily in the capital put it last month: "Mrs Gandhi is back at the centre of the stage." Both Mr Charan Singh and Mr Jagjivan Ram have made no bones about saying that they would be glad to accept her assistance, though to a dispassionate observer the support so given may recall Moscow's retort in the Twenties: "We shall support Ramsay MacDonald as the rope supports the hanged man."

The only public opinion poll available is the Indian Institute's, which gives Mrs Gandhi a combined urban and rural weightage of 110 as against only 65 for Mr Morarji Desai, 25 for Mr Charan Singh and 19 for Mr Jagjivan Ram.

Ironically enough, Mrs Gandhi's main attraction is precisely what liberals like me deplore, namely, her penchant for authoritarianism. Many years ago, Mr Walter Lippmann had pertinently observed that history shows that when forced to choose between a strong and authoritarian régime and an inept and incompetent democracy, nations invariably choose the former. Mrs Gandhi seems to have cottoned on to this fact because, speaking in Bombay on Sept. 10, she did not hesitate to say that "unity and stability are the first requirements of the country, democracy comes later."

It is true that today India suffers from indiscipline in every walk of life—labour, education and politics. What India really yearns for is democracy with discipline and discipline without dictatorship.

True, says the cynic, but if we cannot have both, should we not, for a limited period, put discipline first and let democracy follow? This is a meretricious plea which has been heard elsewhere. When the democrat gives expression to his fear of what Mrs Gandhi's return to power may do to the rule of law, civil liberties and the freedom of the Press, he is met these days with the plea that these values would not really be endangered because Mrs Gandhi will on this occasion have neither a clear majority in Parliament nor a rubber-stamp President at her beck and call.

The Indian electorate, though largely illiterate, has so far shown a certain measure of shrewdness and sagacity. It will need all its sapience to deal with this complicated and complex situation.

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HARVEST

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