



INDIANS, SPEAK UP!

By M. R. MASANI

If we are to continue to have a responsive, democratic government, we must all voice our legitimate criticisms, advises a distinguished author and former Parliamentarian

NOW THAT the honeymoon is over for the Janata Government, there is a wide measure of agreement on two things. The first is a sense of satisfaction and relief at the change from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. The second is a growing feeling of disappointment and concern over the performance of the new administration.

The two areas over which concern is building are economics and public morality. Prices keep rising, and no amount of threatening businessmen and traders—not even, perish the thought, threats of the use of Misa or violence in

the streets—will bring prices down. A spate of strikes and lockouts, had resulted in the loss of 4.2 million man days during the first few months after the Janata Government came to power. We seem to be back again to the sterile clichés of the Nehru period, and demagogic leftist “lung power” seems to be prevailing over Gandhian principles. The Janata Party appears to be developing a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality.

Even more disturbing is the moral let-down. The country has been treated to a spate of broken promises and pledges, such as those against defections and those for the selection of men of known

integrity as candidates for election.

There is also the spectacle of chronic infighting among the groups who came together to form the Janata Party. Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram has confessed to "deep anguish" at this phenomenon and quipped that "only the CFD seems to have merged in the Janata Party." Even the Prime Minister has referred to complaints he received from the voters that the Janata Party was not working as they hoped it would.

What can the ordinary citizen do about all this? One school of thought looks upon these unfortunate developments as "teething troubles" and argues that it is too soon to pass judgement. Proponents of this view also believe that criticizing the new administration at this stage may help its enemies to come back.

But neither the reversion to the political standards of those chaotic days from 1967 to 1970, nor the reversion to the Statism and Leftism of the Nehru period, appear to me to be passing phases. Mr Jagjivan Ram, who ought to know, expressed the fear last July that "these groups will continue to think only of their narrow interests."

The origins of the Declaration of Emergency in June 1975 are not to be found in the wickedness of a particular person. They lie in 28 years of politicking by those in office and in opposition, and in

a neglect of the people's basic problems. If the Indian people watched silently and sullenly while their freedom was being destroyed, it is because they were in the mood to throw the baby of democracy out with the bathwater of party politicians who had played the fool. We all learnt better during those 21 months. But public memory is short and, if the present drift continues, a backlash towards strongman government is only too likely to develop.

Already, there has been marked erosion in Janata support. In less than four months—between the March and June elections—the Janata vote fell sharply in Haryana from 70 per cent to 47; in Uttar Pradesh from 60 per cent to 48; in Delhi from 68 per cent to 53; in Bihar from 69 per cent to 47; in Madhya Pradesh from 59 per cent to 47; in Himachal Pradesh from 67 per cent to 49; in Orissa from 52 per cent to 49. Indeed, except in Rajasthan and Delhi, nowhere did the Janata Party get a majority of votes cast last July—even though, thanks to the distortion caused by the archaic electoral system, it won 77 per cent of the seats.

In such a context, silence on the part of those of us who are friends of the Janata Government would mean that Mrs Indira Gandhi's Congress Party and the CPI would be the only critics, and that all the gains of that discontent would

flow into these channels. Such silence is also unfair to the Prime Minister and his colleagues. When he took office, Mr Morarji Desai invited the people to tweak his ears if they felt it was called for. Isn't it time gently to do so?

Constructive criticism of the new regime by its friends may help to avert the backlash. Perhaps this is the time for Jayaprakash Narayan* to speak up. During the Parliamentary election campaign, JP repeatedly assured the people that the Janata Party would keep its election promises. In view of the limitations imposed on him by his physical condition, nobody expects him to join in any denunciation of whatever may be happening. What is called for, however, is an expression of dissociation from what he considers not to be right in the government's actions.

In a democracy, public opinion in the long run decides the actions of government, and we now have a responsive, democratic administration. There are many ways open for the citizen to do his bit. It is time for the middle classes—including professional men, whose interests are being sacrificed for those of the vocal and privileged trade union elements—to organize for their own survival. There are certain categorical imperatives dictated by the public interest on which most of us can combine and

ask that action, which would be in pursuance of the Janata Party's own manifesto, be taken without delay:

- The repeal of the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution which, by removing many checks on the Executive, makes our political system extremely authoritarian.

- The repeal of Misa, under which the government can jail a person for up to 12 months without levelling charges.

- The restructuring of mass media, particularly radio and television, to make them independent of government control.

- The adoption of a modified proportional system of representation as proposed by Mr Jayaprakash Narayan's Committee on Electoral Reform in February 1975. It was recommended that only half the legislators be elected directly, each with the provision that he get a majority of the votes polled. The other half would then be chosen (from lists of candidates submitted by each political party before polling) in proportion to the voting strength the party demonstrates in that election.

- A high priority for population control without coercion.

- Implementation of the basic tenet: "That government is best which governs the least," and a consequent devolution and decentralization of power, from Delhi to the States, and down to the

*See "He Speaks for India's Conscience," RD, March 1974.

citizens.

Throughout the Emergency, there were too many examples in India of behaviour which painfully recalled the adage: "To sin by silence when they should

protest makes cowards of men." Today, when there is not even the excuse for silence, can there be any possible reason for allowing this reproach to be laid at our door?

Hindsight

A 1913 car-owner's manual states: "The automobile has now developed to the point where it is not anticipated there will be further developments or changes, and this manual should be a reliable guide for the motorist of the future."

—S.M.I.

Ben Franklin, Swimmer

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN was the famous kite flyer who dared lightning and helped to harness electricity. He was a great wit, a noted historian and the first US postmaster general. Few people know, however, that he was also America's first great swimmer and an advocate of aquatic sports.

One afternoon while flying a kite near a pond, Franklin was seized by a great notion. If a man were to hold one end of a rope, with the other attached to a kite, he could be pulled across the surface by the wind. He experimented, and the idea worked. Franklin's mind delved even further. He drew designs and wrote a short essay on the possibility of water skiing but, apparently, more important matters came up, preventing him from becoming history's original water skier.

Franklin was America's first swimming master. When he was 18 he travelled to London and while there swam a five-and-a-half kilometre course in the Thames. Few Europeans had much interest in swimming, since bathing was infrequent and swimming through the deep was considered as activity only for fish. There also was a great fear of drowning. Sir William Wyndham, the ex-chancellor of the exchequer, was so impressed with Franklin's swimming style and his ability to coach that he asked the young American to teach his sons to swim. For several weeks, right up to the day his boat was due to sail, Franklin pondered remaining in London to open a swimming school but finally decided against the idea. He admitted later that if he had had more time to consider, he would have given it a try.

Had it not been for poor timing, English swimming might have flourished.

—Wells Twombly, *200 Years of Sport in America*