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Emergency

40 C Ridge Road
Bombay 400006.
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Dear Friend:

A high Delhi dignitary recently added greatly to the gaiety of the nation. In all seriousness, he pronounced, that Now the Press in India reflects the dreams of the Indian people. The only appropriate comment on this egregious dream-reading can be "Really? Ha, ha, ha, ha! Wonderful! Ho, ho, ho!" Much more to the point, would it have been had he applied himself to the basic question: Does the Press in India Now fulfill its primary function of informing the people, of giving them the news? Consider this instance. Being in New Delhi last month I learnt one afternoon that the previous day the office of a leading political party, the Congress (Organisation) had been sealed by Authority, that some of the office equipment had been taken away and that the Office Secretary, an employee of the Congress of about thirty years' standing, had been arrested and detained. Now was this news? Undoubtedly, of the first order, meriting inclusion in the front page of any newspaper worth the name, under a banner headline. Was it difficult to get? Certainly not, the Congress (O) office at 7, Jantar Mantar Road, is in the heart of New Delhi and within a very short time the happenings there would be widely known! Yet not a single newspaper in Delhi carried a report next day or the day after or the day after that. Nor, to my knowledge, would any reference to the incident seem to have been made by any newspaper in India upto now. For the Press, it was a non-event. Clearly the Press did not serve its primary, its most essential, purpose of informing the people. This case came to notice. Hundreds of such cases of SUPPRESSIO VERI occur all over the country. Clearly, whatever the Press reflects now, whether peoples' dreams or Rulers' visions, it may safely be concluded that it does not reflect the truth about happenings and conditions in India.

And now let me give you a few impressions of Delhi. That Indira is India is certainly very false, but not so to the same extent that Indira is Delhi. Her brooding presence looms very large there and seems to fill the atmosphere. Very few the conversations that end without a reference to 'The Lady', a genuflection or a glance over the shoulder in her direction. And her presence attracts admiration even in unlikely quarters. Said a lady of about thirty, very business-like and commonsensical, "I was in the crowded corridor at the Ashoka and She passed by, so petite, so dignified, so lovely. We were all eyes, we couldn't help it. And at small conferences, the men just drool over her, and I myself can't help feeling 'Here's Somebody, quite Somebody, a real personage in fact.'" A true triumph, wouldn't you say, for a woman within a year of sixty, and an effortless one at that, since normal, routine occasions evoke the thought, not necessarily special ones.

Of her misdeeds men speak more in sorrow than in anger, and as I sat by the window in the Rajdhani on the way back, looking at the fast changing scene, the first thought that came to my mind about her was 'What an unfortunate woman! Surely, the most unfortunate of human beings!' And it is true, too, for what greater misfortune can befall any creature than to be responsible, knowingly and willingly, for the destruction of the liberties of all her fellow citizens? I felt sad for her, very sad, and indignant with myself, and to a lesser degree with other Indians, that we had not, somehow or other, prevented this disaster that she has brought on herself and us, saved her from the terrible tragedy into which her insensate love for total and supreme power has led her.

Nobody in Delhi holds that democracy in the real sense she will ever permit again. Her party chiefs and ministers may make statements, but they know very well the falsehood of what they say. Widespread is the impression "Liberal Democracy is dead. Indira has killed it and that is all there is to be said about it." Some talk there is of her being the Indian DeGaulle, of how, having absolute power, she will make young

technocrats, free of political affiliations, her confidants and private councillors, give them a free hand to make the country run with milk and honey, and then, in the distant, distant future, hand over to a new kind of suitable democracy. The comparison is obviously mistaken. DeGaulle had no love of power for its own sake; Indira loves it more than anything else. DeGaulle flung power away like a bagatelle, not once but twice; Indira clasps it tightly to her bosom all the time. DeGaulle took his young technocrats from men of high ability, distinguished attainments and impeccable character. The only approach Indira has made to a so-called technocrat is to her own son, of whom none of these three can be postulated, and any mention of whose name evokes in the place that knows him best, the epithet 'Goenda'. DeGaulle, even while making his changes, did not interfere with a free Press; Indira brought in censorship from the very beginning and tightly controls the Press. The idea is in fact a rationalisation, one of the many to which people of liberal education and tradition resort, to reconcile themselves to the authoritarian regime. Today, yes, it is bad, yes perhaps it is, but the future, ah the future, when who can say, will be bright, oh so bright!

In Delhi nobody, just nobody, believes a word Indira says. The credibility gap is quite amazing. If you say to a taximan 'The Prime Minister said so-and-so yesterday', his answer with a shy smile is 'Isn't she very chahalak?' And if you press further the reply will come 'You don't believe her really, do you? She says many things to many men. It's her habit.' A story is told about a dignitary who had the temerity to protest when she made a statement he felt to be incorrect. 'But Madame', the poor fellow said 'You told me the exact opposite three days ago. Did I?' said Indira with perfect composure. 'Well I may have, but that was three days ago. To-day, I say this. Any objection?' Perhaps those who are close to her have a special way of telling when it is the truth that is emerging and when the opposite. But who is close to her in public affairs? The answer would seem to be, no one for long, many by fits and starts. When X thinks he is getting on fine, he suddenly finds he is wanted no longer, Y has taken his place, and so forth and so on. The only one who is always there is the son and the extent of consultation with him is still a secret, though there is no doubt she is thinking in terms of leaving him the Empire after her. His influence with her is considerable, though not yet complete, for which as for other small and large mercies one must be suitably grateful.

Here then is a ruler who evokes no special loyalty, no warm, glowing service, and who in return recognizes no loyalty to any under her. Usefulness, as she sees it, is her only criterion, but usefulness for a tyrant means many things, and so she has some very odd characters working for her, characters whose deeds she disclaims loudly when inconvenient while quietly urging them on along the course they had taken. That at any rate is the impression among the Delhiwan and who should know better than they, who live right under her ever-advancing shadow-I say not, ever growing, for much to the disconcertment of the admirers of her recurring pictures in the papers, among whom I too am an humble one, she seems of late to be growing ever slighter.

What, you will ask, about the Cabinet? Well, Delhi considers the Cabinet a cypher. It is full of sycophants who wait to see what Indira wants and then speak accordingly. Ministers in their departments are ruthlessly interfered with and all the important decisions are Indira's.

Much else could I relate about Delhi and perhaps even draw some conclusions. But this will have to do for now. One thing more though. You will agree that a regime such as this cannot from its very nature be a monument of stability.

The roses in Delhi were in full bloom and the climate benign. These, thank God, are still beyond the power of authoritarianism. And so, Adieu. The greetings of the season to you, and a very interesting and fruitful 1977.

Yours sincerely,

Indira