

Consider surrender

Mr. K. C. Pant has sounded a note of caution against glamorizing the spectacle of surrender by dacoits. We think that Mr. Pant is right; it is easy to see why. This is a complex and ticklish issue. We remember that Mr. Sethi, the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, had doubts and hesitations about his being personally present at the surrender ceremony arranged by the Sarvodaya peace mission. He had also fears and objections about throwing the ceremony off to the public and the press. It is fair to assume that any Government would prefer its own security process to subdue the dacoits in a straightforward police action, thus establishing the fact of the physical superiority of the guardians of law over the breakers of law. This is right and desirable in the long-term interests of society which must have stable law and order foundations. Such a demonstration is also necessary from another point of view. In the popular imagination—this is traditional and universal, and we see it in song and story about dacoits in every land—the dacoits are endowed with mythical power, and there is a wide-spread belief that in any encounter it is the dacoits that will outwit the police rather than *vice versa*. Police reports that they have killed any dacoits are usually received with scepticism. If it is proved that a dacoit is really dead, the general disposition is to believe that he died a natural death. As a Corsican proverb wryly puts it, 'killed after death, like a bandit by the police'.

There would also be a certain natural resistance to intervention by a third party, for it could create the impression that the police were not able to get the better of the dacoits by their own strength. It is not merely the surrender; there is also the sequelae, the legal processes which must follow, and which bristle with difficulties and contradictions. The Government has to reckon with this too, and was, therefore, more than ever anxious to reduce its own association with the surrender ceremonies to the barest minimum. All this is demon-

strated to some extent by the fact that when the dacoits finally came into touch with the police, it was a matter of surrender without ceremony.

There is the other facet, the human, which was also demonstrated at the function. We have now come to believe that it is better to change a man's character than to punish him for his misdeeds, for the results of such conversion are likely to be more durable. Our ideas about crime and punishment have changed also because of a rise in humanitarian sentiment, with its open preference for reform over punitive measures. If a criminal is anxious to redeem himself, he must be given a chance. This is how a third party come into the picture in this particular operation which culminated at Jaura. It also accounts for the consciously elaborate intermediate ceremony at which Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan was the central figure. Everything that took place here was well calculated to impress the fact that while on the one hand the dacoits had repented, and were eager to return to peaceful and civilized ways, on the other the people were willing to receive them without embarrassment or hostility.

To the Sarvodaya peace mission all this represents a success story. And the leader, Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan, deserves high credit for the achievement. At the same time, there is no need to over-state the capabilities of Sarvodaya in general. For the very success of the peace mission also, it seems to us, serves to emphasize the limits within which an operation of this nature can yield results. Conditions have to be favourable, and this is rare. The point at issue must be a simple one affecting a well-defined area; the men concerned must be the right sort; and there must be a common desire on both sides, prompted, may be, by objective factors, for a *modus vivendi*. In most cases the men are already, for some reasons or other, open to conversion. In this situation the 'missionary' acts as a catalyst, and an agreed arrangement is worked out.