

PUZZLES AND CLUES

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1957 has truly been a year of hardship and disenchantment. It has belied even the modest and legitimate expectations of the people in the tenth year of independence.

None can deny or belittle the impressive achievements of recent years—mighty dams and hydro-electric installations, big Government factories and workshops, imposing research laboratories—forgetting costly new capital cities and extravagant office buildings. Nevertheless, the end of the decade witnesses a conspicuous lack of happiness among the people. Poverty—real poverty, as distinguished from graphs and tables purveyed by official statisticians—remains undiminished. The curse of unemployment remains unlifted. A continuous and, of late, serious rise in the cost of living has made a mockery of the Government's **measures**—often draconian—to improve the living conditions of the millions who have not enough to eat or to wear and are homeless or hopelessly ill-housed. The plight of the middle class, now down-graded by the socialist pattern of society, beggars description. Even if one does not notice an undercurrent of despondency, one cannot fail to observe a widespread uncertainty, anxiety and a **demoralising** sense of bewilderment and confusion.

"People must come to accept private enterprise **not** as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good."

—Eugene Black

President, World Bank

This confusion is almost entirely Government-made. It is the product of copious and often contradictory ministerial utterances that fill and overflow long columns and wide pages of the daily newspapers—some of which are becoming inclined to attitudes of adulation, if not subservience.

Today, if the common man were to seek enlightenment and guidance from the pronouncements of those in charge of the country's affairs, he would be at a loss to make out whether, for example, food control is a curse, as was declared some time ago, or a blessing, as it is suggested now; whether there is an abundance of rice, with a surplus to export, as the Food Ministry once assured him, or there is too little, as he is now told, and we should import heavily; whether it is good to disarm or further to arm; whether there is inflation or not; whether deficit financing is a sheet-anchor or a straw; whether politics is or should be above or below economics; whether the State should exist for the citizen or the citizen for the State, whether taxation in the country is about the highest or the lowest in the world—and so on—and one can sympathise with him if he puts his head in his hands and cries, like the King of Siam in the famous picture, "O, it is a puzzlement!"

This state of puzzlement does no good to the Government or the people. It is said that one of the techniques used by Communism to soften and prepare a country before consuming it is the technique of confusion.

The trouble is that, in its understandable eagerness to maintain its leadership, and to steal the

thunder of its even more leftist rivals, the ruling party is itself edging further and further towards the brink, and doing the very things that the Communists would do—reminding one of the village headman who, seeing a cobra in the backyard of his house, promptly amputated the limbs of all the villagers to save them from death by snake-bite.

This unhappy condition of affairs is partly the result of the fanciful thinking and ostrich-like self-deception resorted to by the majority of the men in charge of the country's destiny. Self-deception, devotedly practised over a period of years, works like a potent type of Coueism or auto-suggestion and converts even sane and normal persons into firm believers in the delusion. And the fanaticism and fierce proselytising zeal of the convert is well known.

Confusion gets worse confounded when the nation's leaders indulge in loud thinking, made louder by microphones and amplifiers, before vast and unlearned audiences. On the one side, the leaders are frightfully hard-pressed, and called upon to make public appearances and speeches almost every day, with little time to ponder calmly and deeply the many intricate practical questions they touch upon; on the other side, most of the listeners are unable to follow and appreciate the exact implications of what is said.

When, for example, the Prime Minister tells a vast crowd that he admires or is fascinated by the Communist ideology but disapproves the Communist method, not many who hear or read the speech realise that far from advocating Communism, he is only being generous to the creed of an Opposition party.

The very few who happen to have learnt that the Communist ideology is inseparable from the Communist technique and that they both are parts of the same gospel are left to wonder whether it was not like someone saying that he admired the tiger for his beautiful striped coat but objected to his non-vegetarian habits.

Another potent cause of confusion and uncertainty is the trigger-happy haste of inexperienced men who suddenly find themselves elevated to high office.

Even more potent is the intoxication of power, which can be worse than alcohol, and against which there is no Prohibition.

I have lived and served in the regimes of autocratic maharajas and viceroys and known at close range the exercise of power by white and brown bureaucrats. I think it is true to say that no viceroy or maharaja had such unbridled power as the heads of the Central and State Governments hold in their hands today.

Taken by itself, there is nothing wrong in this. What is disturbing and of grave portent is the effect this power has produced on the rulers, on one side, and the ruled, on the other. There is, among those now in authority, a cocksureness, a frowning impatience and intolerance, and an unhealthy superiority complex that seeks release, erupts and spouts in long sanctimonious, platitudinous sermonising on all occasions and at all places uninhibited by consideration of propriety and relevance. Under the sway of such power, people are led to habits of idolatry and kowtowing and the

number of men and women that dare, or even feel inclined to oppose or to criticise, rapidly diminishes.

Perhaps it is also true to say that at no time has there been so wide a distance—not gulf, not cleavage, but distance—between the Government and the governed. With rare and cherished exceptions, ministers, and even many of the ruling politicians have tended to be a race apart, smug, and self-convinced, tailored and clad to catch the vote of the unthinking masses and, by and large, isolated from and impervious to the ideas, aspirations and protestations of the country's intelligentsia.

One reason for this is that the Government has taken too much upon itself, and is further taking on more and more each day, and ministers, many of whom are new to the job, are not only hard-pressed and overworked but are also insecure, worried and distracted by the wrangling, manoeuvring and undermining that incessantly goes on.

What I have said about the distance that now divides the people and the rulers may sound strange, and one may ask "Look at the resounding victory of the ruling party and its leaders in the elections. How do you explain that?"

The answer is twofold. First, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru are names to conjure with, names that attract crores of votes. Secondly, many hundreds and thousands that voted for Congress did so, not because of their love of the Congress but because of their dislike of the other parties that range.

in varying shades of pink, from the Congress to the Communists.

Indeed it is the opinion of many competent observers that the people of Kerala decided to gulp the aforesaid dislike and take a chance.

Now, if there is one thing upon which people of all sections of our vast country, poor and rich, workers and employers, consumers, traders, politicians, professional men, are united, it is in the wish and the resolve that the appallingly low standard of living of the masses of our people should be urgently improved and their real income increased. All are agreed on that. But it is as to the way and the pace in which this result should be achieved that there is honest and wide divergence of opinion.

Many men and women are puzzled as to why, when we have before our eyes the shining examples of free and friendly democratic countries like the U.S.A.—which the Prime Minister recently described as being largely socialist—and the U.K., and Canada and Sweden and West Germany who have all attained conspicuous success in raising the standard of living of their people, we seem to seek inspiration and guidance on this subject from places like Belgrade and Peking. The arguments made in support of this new trend have seemed less logical than pathological—rather like the present-day taste for cubist paintings, and the meaningless shapes called sculpture.

Soon after the second Five-Year Plan was made public, many eminent men of knowledge and experience in matters of finance and economics warned that

the devices thought of for financing the Plan were impracticable, and that the large volume of deficit financing and spending proposed would generate inflationary pressures that may prove dangerous and difficult to control. This warning fell on deaf ears. It is now well known, if not fully admitted, that the Plan is unrealistic and needs to be modified. Interesting expressions such as "the core of the Plan", and "the hard core of the Plan," serve to veil an ugly shape which nobody, not even the Government, seems able to identify.

Meanwhile, prices have gone up and up, and the rise in the cost of living has given birth to crying demands for more wages and ugly strike threats.

Creeping inflation and the decline in the purchasing power of the rupee do not affect the rich to the extent they hurt the poor from whom they invisibly filch, like a thief in the night, the real content not only of their earnings but of their hard-earned savings as well.

In heroic efforts to check inflation and to restore stability to the economy, the country has been led from crisis to crisis, and the people have been asked to subject themselves to new restrictions and oppressive tax burdens.

A measure of comic relief in this tense situation was afforded by the austerity drive, and the gestures of maharajas and governors, ministers and speakers in imposing upon themselves voluntary cuts in their salaries or allowances—which reminds one of a story

told of Lord Buddha whose two thousand five hundredth anniversary we celebrated not long ago.

The Lord Buddha was journeying on foot with his favourite disciples. They came to the bank of a river. The river was in flood, and the Master and his disciples were halted on the river bank. As they waited, they saw a frail, bearded ascetic coming towards the river. His head was bent in meditation and his emaciated body was covered with ashes. Without pausing he walked straight into the swollen waters, and safely reached the other side. Struck with wonder, a disciple asked the Buddha, "Did you see, O Master, and yet you tell us that austerity is of little value?" Smiling, the Buddha asked the disciple. "What do you think it is worth?" The disciple said, "I ask you, Master." The Buddha replied, "I shall tell you presently." As they spoke, they saw a boatman approaching the river bank where they stood. The Buddha and his disciples got into the boat and were rowed across the river. Asked what the fare was, the boatman said, "Four coppers, sire." Turning to the questioning disciple, Lord Buddha said, "That is what it is worth."

No one knows whether the new taxes will really bring in the money needed for even the hard core of the Plan in terms of additional purchasing power, and whether the pile of controls, bans and squeezes will hold inflation in check. What everyone knows, and keenly feels, is the magnitude of avoidable privation and hardship and the abridgement of personal liberty that all these measures impose on the citizens of a free nation proudly celebrating its newly gained **freedom**.

It is no good saying that an underdeveloped nation must make up for lost years, and cannot afford the time to grow as others did; and that the pace should therefore be forced. That is like trying to make Derek Ibbotsons of all citizens and forcing them all to run the famous four-minute mile. It is the surest way of having the entire track littered with **heart-cases** and cripples.

Now, one may well ask, "What can be done?" Here are a few suggestions I would respectfully urge the Government to consider.

1. Give up the thirst for more and more power and authority, and resist the temptation to encroach farther and farther into the liberties and rights and the legitimate field of activities and responsibilities of the citizens **and** of the courts.

Decentralise, and adopt policies that hearten the people to work, and stimulate and harness their individual initiatives, talents and energies to raise their own and the nation's income and standard of living, under strict and helpful controls and regulations—like the control and regulation of traffic in cities and on highways that do not block or impede free movement but actually help to make the traffic flow more smoothly, safely and speedily.

There is nothing original in this suggestion. It is the advice of the greatest political thinkers and sages including Mahatma Gandhi.

Increasing State control and State interference in activities and responsibilities that belong to the people

plant thorny restrictions and entanglements that create, not a Welfare State, but a State Forest, in which the scared citizen confusedly stumbles along and is lost, or withers away.

2. Stop talking and telling the world how to behave and let us mind our own business for a while.

It is time to consider the virtues of a vow of silence. There is really far too much speech-making. A substantial reduction of the quantity should make for an improvement in quality and value.

Let us stop bothering our and other people's heads about Korea and Syria and Viet Nam—or even about Egypt or China.....or wherever-on-earth else.

There is still a great deal of goodwill in the world for India; and there is a danger that, in trying to please everybody, we may win less friends than we lose.

People in many lands are impressed by the vast resources and potential of our country and the intelligence of our people. If we develop these resources and this potential by following sober, realistic policies and well-proved methods and build up our economic strength, the countries of the world will come to our doorstep to seek our advice if we wish to offer it, and to invest in our country, if we welcome it.

Utopias happen to be oversold in our market.

End the present domination of politics over economics, administration, and all else, in the country. It was fully justified during the years of the political

struggle for independence. Today, it is an anachronism, a too-protracted hangover. Let this domination cease; and let qualified, trained and experienced men be given the opportunity and the freedom to attend seriously to the serious business of administering the country, for the job of government is also in the nature of a technical job that demands long and intensive study, years of training and practical experience.

3. Slash the colossal defence budget. It does seem odd that our nation that is the proud architect of Panch Shila and exhorts the world to shed the fear complex and stop the mad armament race, should spend disproportionately huge and increasing sums on military expenditure, especially at a time when it is itself so hard-pressed for funds for plans to abolish poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and ill-health.
4. Scrap Prohibition and stop chasing ideological will-o'-the-wisps, till the nation can afford the pastime. After all, India's citizens, too, are growing up men and women. There are worse things one can do, within the pale of the law. than drink.

Prohibition is a failure anyhow, and an extravagant failure. The nation can ill-afford, particularly at this juncture, to neglect the hundreds of crores lost every year in revenue, and in expenditure on enforcement.

Consider also the corruption and the evasion, the indiscipline and disrespect for law that excessive

taxation, on the one hand, and Prohibition, on the other, have bred and continue to breed all over the land. We have barely got over the indiscipline and disrespect for authority that was the inevitable hangover of Civil Disobedience and the nation's struggle for freedom. Taboos like Prohibition do not help to inculcate habits of obedience and discipline or to restore the people's respect for the law. On the contrary, they tend to make a grotesque "scare-crow of the law."

5. Lastly, don't overdo it. It is said that "Too little and too late" led to the undoing of the British Empire. Let it not be said that "Too much and too soon" came in the way of Independent India's progress and happiness.

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The views expressed in this booklet do not necessarily represent the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise.

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Free Enterprise was born with man and shall survive as long as man survives.

—A. D. Shroff

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