

GROW MORE VOTES

By

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A quaint and hoary ritual is performed in some of our rural areas as a cure for calamities. Whenever cholera or famine strikes a village, the inhabitants go to the temple, lift the image of the village goddess off its pedestal, carry it, with beat of tom-tom and blare of trumpet, to a lonely spot outside the village limits and leave it there—for a few nights. The ceremony over, the simple folk return to their homes, feeling satisfied that all is well.

The resignation of the Union Minister for Food in August last, like the resignations of Finance and Food Ministers before him, is reminiscent of that village ceremony. Judged by results, it would seem that the recurring ritual in New Delhi is as effective as the one performed in the village. Nevertheless, the faith persists that dislodgement of the Food or Finance Minister will rid the country of famine or financial bungling; and so long as it persists, one may expect more scapegoats to be found, whenever signs of misery or restlessness among the people get too dangerous to be ignored.

The debate in the Lok Sabha that culminated in Mr. A.P. Jain's resignation served to focus public attention on a paradoxical situation that has caused grave concern. The paradox is that even after a bumper harvest in this vast agricul-

tural country, foodgrains are scarce as ever and prices continue to soar. "How can this happen", people anxiously ask, "when we have a Government of our own, that came to power on the pledge that it would bring relief to the impoverished and semi-starved millions — a Government that has ruled with unbridled power continuously for twelve years?" Did not our beloved Prime Minister, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, point, over seven years ago, to the shame of our importing hundreds of crores of rupees worth of foodgrains from foreign lands? Did he not declare his Government's determination to see that India becomes self-sufficient in food and that not a grain of food would be imported 'even if we starve'? Why is it then that the Nehru Government has spent over a thousand and one hundred crores of rupees of precious foreign exchange on food imports since we became an independent nation, and is still importing a hundred fifty crores of rupees worth of foodgrains yearly?

The answer, simply, is — Politics.

Invoking an outdated, undefined and almost mystic concept of their own which they have named the Socialist Pattern of Society—which I call the Juggernaut of Avadi—our ruling politicians have bestowed upon themselves a degree of power unknown to Moghul Emperors and Maharajas. Politics fills the air, and overflows the newspapers. Poli-

tics overshadows administration, economics, industry, agriculture, education, and haunts the daily lives and pursuits of the people—who see the rise of a New Class of political panjandrums, engaged in throwing their weight about.

This unhealthy domination of politics is a relic of our nation's successful struggle for independence—which was a political struggle waged mainly by politicians. Had it been an armed fight there would have been a preponderance—as in certain countries now—of military men. It is like the stones and sheds and odd debris that one sees cluttering up the sites of newly-built dams and bridges—till some observant and pains-taking administrator removes them and tidies up the place.

There are sober intervals, now and then, when even politicians, elevated to Ministerships and in trouble with their portfolios, say that this or that subject should be kept out of politics. But such intervals are brief. The thirst for power returns, and the force of habit takes charge.

Now, if there is one subject that, far from being kept out of politics, has been bedevilled by it in recent years, it is land. Knowing that eighty per cent of the votes that keep them in power come from the villages, the ruling politicians have sought to lure the rural votes with seductive claptrap and hollow promises such as "Land belongs to the People", "Land to the Landless". Land has been made an election battleground with the result that, instead of being the bountiful mother that gives food, security and contentment, it has been turned in-

to a desolate minefield that people are scared to approach.

From time immemorial, land has been held as *sthira*—stable, permanent, immoveable property, real estate. Documents of transfer of land in our country recite in solemn and sonorous terms the eight happinesses (*Ashta bhoga thejas swamyum*) that an owner of land is entitled to enjoy so long as the sun and the moon last (*Achandrarka*.)

How *sthira* is land now? How real is real estate?

The wheels of the Avadi Juggernaut have rolled on. Ideological and sacrosanct, disdainful of such earthly things as brakes and steering, this Socialistic Juggernaut contrived by the ruling party has exacted much sacrifice in its thundering course from Avadi to Nagpur. As its pace onwards from Nagpur is set faster, the toll will be more grievous. The *mantras* and incantations of its high-priests suggest that among the coming casualties will be the sanctity of contract, and the right to property. Land has already become the least *sthira*, the least secure of properties. Title to land is being reduced to a scrap of paper that flutters about in each political breeze.

It is well-known that over seventy per cent of our people live by agriculture; that agriculture accounts for the bulk of our national income. It is the country's biggest industry and occupation. Is it treated and allowed to be run as a great vital industry should be?

It is common knowledge, too, that finance is the lifestream of industry—like Ganga and Kaveri that en-

rich and make fertile the region they flow on. If the stream dries up or is blocked, crops wither away and the land is bleak and famine-stricken. Have the policies and measures of our present rulers promoted the flow of finance to the great and vital industry called agriculture?

Take one example. For centuries, and even till a decade or two ago, investment in land was recognised as the traditional and safe form of investment. A lawyer in Madras, a merchant in Bombay, or a doctor in Delhi inherited or invested his savings in land. In return for the investment, and the added rupees he gave from his earnings for a new well, or a pair of bullocks, he got a share of the produce raised on his land. Today, he is called an absentee landlord—an expression that Congress oratory and electioneering eloquence have equated to a term of abuse. A man may—still, thank Heaven!—hold shares in Steel Works in Bihar or a Sugar Company in Uttar Pradesh or a Chemical factory in Calcutta and receive a dividend on his investment without being castigated as an absentee steel-owner or an absentee sugar-or chemical-lord. He may own houses in Agra or Allahabad and let them to tenants and not be arraigned an absentee house-owner. But the hapless owner of land finds the scales weighed increasingly against him, and his return getting more and more precarious. He has no heart to spend more on his land. On the contrary, he is driven to get rid of it, in a market that is shrinking—with the result that land values have declined and are, in many cases, farcical. Meanwhile, the tiller on the field does not get the money he used to be given for his farming and family needs. The

land is neglected. Production goes down, and there is shortage of food.

We do not have to go so far, or send costly deputations to foreign lands to learn how bountiful and prosperous agriculture can be if only it is allowed to be handled as an industry. We have but to take a look at the achievement of the growers of coffee and tea in our own country. That the land is called a plantation does not alter the fact that it is land, and what is practised on it is agriculture,—which means, cultivation of land.

Over the last ten years production of coffee in our country has been increased by 110 per cent, and of tea by 77 per cent. Not only have the producers of these crops prospered; they have also provided housing, water supply, dispensaries, creches, canteens to the families employed on their fields. In addition, they have earned for the Government no small part of the foreign exchange that has been spent by it on imports of rice and wheat.

Is there no lesson to be learnt from this?

Gandhiji strove to teach his people to get rid of the curse of untouchability. Should the people await the advent of a new Mahatma to rid the present rulers of the curse of unteachability?

Each successive year in office and authority, far from teaching patience and humility, making them more mature and more understanding finds them more intolerant, less willing to learn, angrier in their "lecturing" and denunciation of any one that dares to question or criticise their ways—be he a senior rever-

ed leader of proved wisdom and experience or an eminent and honoured judge. The language of the "lecture" bears a strange resemblance to the vocabulary of the recent "liberators" of Tibet. Even the independent Press has not escaped cheap gibes and unworthy flings, despite the respectful—almost adulatory—support it has given, by and large, to Prime Minister Nehru and his Government.

And, at the crack of a whip in New Delhi, numerous imitation Mahatmas and marionette Nehrus—whose fear of losing their jobs grows as their vested interest in power deepens,—sally forth, east and west and south and north, at the taxpayers' expense, to repeat the "lecture" in voices often less coherent and more raucous. It is like the recorded music from loud-speakers that assaults our ears from tea-shops on the roadside as we go through a small-town bazaar. The volume is high, the sound is often cracked or tinny, but the music is the same, and the record—his master's voice.

It is not as if all the men in power today do not know or cannot understand the unreality and error of their party's plans and methods. It is evident, for instance, that the Union Food Minister, who lately resigned, did understand, and was honest enough to confess he could not do much about it. It is clear, too, that his bold and dynamic successor does know and proposes to do something about it, though some people feel that Mr. S. K. Patil's refreshing voice has already been subjected, perhaps, to a certain amount of jamming. Signs of restlessness, and even of rebellion, have been visible even among the serried ranks,—particularly since Nagpur.

One of the most prominent and dynamic Congress hierarchs, who was a Chief Minister, openly told his High Command that they were following Karl Marx instead of Karamchand Gandhi. It is well known that not a few of the most respected and far-seeing leaders in the Congress Party felt obliged to point to the folly and sophistry of many of the High Command's ways and dictates, and to warn the top brass of the dangers and disillusionments the country was being led to. It is known, too, that all the response they got was to be told to quit.

Many people consider this turn of events a blessing, and good omen, for had the advice and warnings been heeded, the new Opposition Party would not have been born nor so spontaneously and widely acclaimed.

Much protestation is now being heard from the Congress High Command and its propagandists that Joint Co-operative Farming will be voluntary. Assertions and reassertions are made that there will be no compulsion. All this is doubtless intended to allay the countrywide anxiety caused by the Nagpur resolution on this subject. For it did not take a long time for people to discover that the nice word 'co-operation' was only a smoke-screen, and to realise that the proposed step could only lead, as it had done in the countries from which the inspiration for it was drawn, to collective farms and collective dining halls. To many thinking men and women it seemed a strange irony that the very men that came to power by virtue of Gandhiji's weapon of non-violent non-co-operation should have forged a weapon that was literally the

reverse,—for Resolution launched at Nagpur could truly be described as violent co-operation.

“Where,” people ask, “is to be found the dividing line at which voluntariness ends and compulsion begins?” “Are not subscriptions to the loans frequently floated by the Central and State Governments, and to various Funds promoted with the blessing of Union Ministers, purely voluntary? And yet, have not those that have been recipients of demi-official letters or calls from Collectors or other officials in connection with the loans and appeals soon learnt the meaning of the word ‘voluntary’ according to the current official dictionary?”

Anatole France said at one time that the difference between justice and injustice was the thickness of a court-fee stamp. If he had lived here today he might have said that the difference between “voluntary” and “compulsory” in the present context is the thickness of a Minis-

ter’s letter head—or a bureaucrat’s visiting card.

The truth is that, since the untimely passing away of Gandhiji, the Congress Party has diverted its thinking and activity to an inglorious attempt to forestall its only serious political rival, and doing what the Communist Party would have done if it had come to power. The only difference is that the operation is painless and performed under the chloroform of mass hypnosis.

If the recent protestations and assertions as to the “purely voluntary” nature of Joint Co-operative Farms, and the clumsily-staged retreat from State Trading in Food-grains are meant to take the wind out of the sails of the newly-launched Swatantra Party, the entire nation has cause to offer prayer and thanksgiving that, at long last, wisdom has been vouchsafed to our rulers by the blessings of the One whom no less a person than the Prime Minister recognised as the Senior Partner of the new Party.

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