

THE JUGGERNAUT OF AVADI

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Year after year, in season and out of season, India's socialistic Juggernaut grinds and thunders by. Bedecked and caparisoned, its gigantic bulk towers high over the heads of the common men by whose million hands it is pulled and powered. From all the corners of this ancient land, a vast concourse of people pay homage and obeisance to it and seek its blessings to attain the objects of their desires—not all of which are related only to the next world. Thousands of coconuts are broken; garlands piled upon garlands. There are clouds of incense and the smoke of camphor. The air is filled with the din of drums, and the clanging of cymbals. Trumpets and wind-instruments vie with the full-throated incantations and paens of the faithful, sometimes frenzied devotees.

Being ideological and sacrosanct, the Avadi Juggernaut is supremely scornful of such earthly things as brakes and steering, with the result that a few individuals are maimed or crushed under its huge, wobbling wheels. But the agonised cries and laments of victims and survivors are unheard and drowned in the festive din and bullabalo.

In the temples of the Juggernaut are many ikons at whose shrines masses of men and women are exhorted by high-priests to offer fresh sacrifice and oblation. These high priests are numerous. They are also powerful for, unlike the idols, they are alive and kicking; and through them are transmitted the blessings, by them invoked the curses of mighty Gods of the socialistic pantheon. As these blessings take immediate effect in this world, and not in the next, the high priests are held in awe and veneration and are able to sway large masses of the people.

One of the biggest and most widely worshipped of the ikons is an image with two faces and a thousand hands. One face is that of a kindly Mahatma, of a seeker after Truth, who is said not only to have renounced power for himself but to have taught that "the concentration of power in the hands of the State would cause the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress". The other face is that of a sanctimonious, voluble seeker of votes, hungering for power for the State and for himself.

Currently very popular is

the big-bellied Nationalisation ikon. Seated on a high pedestal of office files, with its cavernous mouth wide open, it exacts a blind adoration and constant propitiation — which it gets, for to it is attributed the power to confer the three-fold blessing of Utopia, Panacea, and the Midas touch. Disenchantment among its devotees in other lands has not diminished the faith and fervour of its worshippers in this land. Its appetite is as voracious as its tastes are indiscriminate and unpredictable — except that it is known to have a special fondness for the well-developed and the prosperous. In its belly are the uneasy and still undigested remains of Banks and Insurance Companies. The Kolar Gold Mines are its latest morsel.

“The impression that nationalisation is an element in socialism,” said Dr. John Matthai in a speech at Bombay in May last, “is not supported either by socialist thinking or socialist practice”. Dr. Matthai is one of India’s most distinguished and experienced authorities in economics and political science. He was also India’s Finance Minister and the first Chairman of the State Bank of India after it was nationalised. Dr. Matthai referred, among other things, to the Mysore Government’s declared intention to nationalise the Kolar Gold Mining Companies, and said, “it is difficult to imagine a “case less suitable for nationalisation”.

No truer words were spoken, nor more quickly lost in the hubbub of political squabble.

The nationalisation of the Kolar Gold Mines was unnecessary and unjustified. It is now widely known that the idea was conceived in the cockpit of local politics and pursued for the purpose of face-saving. It was contrary to the proclaimed policy of the Government of India that the nation’s resources in money and in trained technical and administrative personnel should be employed in new industries designed to produce more wealth and to provide more employment. For this reason, and for the reason that they had been worked for over 75 years and included one of the deepest in the world, the acquisition of these Mines found no place in any Plan. Moreover, as the leases had less than 14 years to run, all the Mines would in any case have reverted to the Mysore State in 1970.

The lack of reason and justification, however, was amply made up by appeals to the emotions.

The compensation the State Government proposed to pay for the vast undertaking was so illusory as to make the acquisition indistinguishable from confiscation. The nationalisation, under those terms, would have been not only unwise but also immoral. The Government of India’s far-seeing and timely intervention saved the transaction from the taint of immora-

lity. Its unwisdom has also been considerably mended by the State Government's sober decision — to continue to employ the Company's experienced Managers as Consulting Engineers, and all the existing staff on the same terms as before.

Excuses and accusations that heralded the nationalisation of the Life Insurance Companies followed the same technique told in Aesop's story of the wolf and the lamb. When the view was expressed in Parliament that the alleged misdeeds of a few Insurance Companies, even if true, did not justify a measure so sweeping and drastic, the Finance Minister told the House more or less to the effect that it was unnecessary for the Government to offer any reasons for the action as it was based on ideological concepts.

It is the opinion of experienced and impartial observers that the nationalisation of Insurance — which in the Mysore State, took the form of cannibalisation of the State's life insurance organisation. — has done far more to shake confidence and to discourage the flow of investment, Indian and foreign, than the spokesmen of the Government of India are prepared to admit.

The Government's recent moves in the direction of State Trading, the steps taken to control the appointment of top managements of Banks, and to

compel industrial and commercial enterprises to invest their funds where they are told by the Government to,—emerge one by one, as part of one Plan.

Attrition, Accusation, Encroachment, Annexation—these stand out as the sign posts on the highway to authoritarianism.

Of grave portent is the increasing intolerance of criticism displayed by those in charge of the economic destiny of the nation and the people. The vehement rejection, often accompanied by sweeping invective, with which complaints of hardship and warnings of apprehended dangers voiced by responsible citizens and public bodies are dismissed, is a bad sign.

It is no healthy symptom that those who dare to point out that the Second Five Year Plan is unwieldy, and that the deficit financing envisaged is excessive or to utter a warning of the grave danger of inflation or to complain against the sudden imposition of new and heavy taxes should run the risk of being called anti-social reactionaries, tax-evaders, or entrenched vested interests. That no less than three Union Finance Ministers — including some whose knowledge of finance and economics was admittedly vast. — should have felt obliged to give up office within the past seven years is a fact the significance of which has not passed wholly unnoticed.

It is urgent, however, that the risk of being called names must be taken. Those that do so, uphold the cause of freedom and deserve well of the country. No democracy has been known to benefit by allowing power and pontification to become the monopoly of enthroned unvested self-interests. No nation is known to have retained its freedom that set out to achieve economic progress and prosperity by the substitution of directives in the place of incentives. No edicts or legislatures have yet succeeded in setting aside the law of supply and demand, or the law of diminishing returns. It is not established that, if it is true that the ostrich buries its head in the sand, prolonged indulgence in the habit does any good to the health of the bird.

There is mounting evidence on all sides of the mischief of reckless deficit financing. There are unmistakable signs, too, of inflation and of soaring prices.

It would seem that there are already three kinds of money which may, for convenience, be called A.M., B.M., and C.M. — A.M. for authentic money, the good old genuine cash; B.M. black money, the dark offspring of oppressive taxation, an elusive and mysterious monster that is said to roam only in the darkness, and to have the ability to grow taller and taller as Income-tax gets steeper and steeper; C.M. created money, the attrac-

tive and faithless ally of deficit financing. One fervently hopes that the Government's monetary wizardry and economic 'Brinkmanship' will succeed in holding the price level, and keeping inflationary pressures from exploding — for if they fail, we then will have disastrous D.M.—depreciated money — as happened in certain other countries.

A few weeks ago, the Finance Minister said that deficit financing was the sheet-anchor of the Second Five Year Plan. He added that deficit financing was like poison, to be administered only in small doses. It will tax all the ingenuity and gifts of the Finance Minister to make a sheet-anchor out of small doses of poison. The whole country will pray that the need to use the sheet-anchor may never arise.

Meanwhile, a great responsibility rests on the people, for it is they, the votaries and voters who, in the last analysis, make the rulers and the doctrines they get. History teaches, however, that people — even an intelligent and educated people, can be indoctrinated, thought-conditioned and swayed by their rulers; that men can be made brave or timid, diligent or indolent, orderly or rowdy by the Government they have; that, in other words, men are themselves guided by the idols they create and worship. The Press, and the Microphone, have immeasurably amplified the reach and the influence of

the rulers. This multiplies a thousandfold the responsibility of the people that fashion and choose them.

There is too much idolatry in the land today, too much kowtowing and singing of hall-elujahs before those in power. Idols and idolatry are excellent in the temples, but they are out of place in Legislatures and Cabinet rooms and in Town Halls, and Public Offices. Few are the persons — fewer still among those unaccustomed to graduated doses of obedience and authority — that can stand the heady effect of constant adulation.

It is, therefore, no wonder that so many among those in power today should feel inclined to accept all that is so pleasingly said to their faces. and — in the words of Dryden, — “assume the God, affect to nod, and seem to shake the spheres”. The wonder — and the pity of it — is the growing tendency among responsible individuals, industrial leaders and businessmen, spokesmen of Chambers of Commerce, who admittedly are unbelievers in the faith and its dogma, to join the chorus.

This is an unhealthy symptom. It indicates a loss of morale. It also reveals a growing feeling of defeatism and acquiescence. It can lead to grave danger for, as Montesquieu observed, “the tyranny of a prince in an oligarchy is not so dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy.”

Experience has repeatedly shown how fear and apathy have quickly led to loss of liberty. It would seem, however, that the lessons of past experience have been forgotten, for symptoms of a dangerous type of acquiescence are already seen in the manner in which large numbers of people react to measures that affect the life and liberty of the citizen. Drastic legislative enactments and levies that still further add to the cost of living, new and sudden, and almost penal tax burdens are too often received with a sense of numbness, almost of helplessness; and a slight consideration shown, or a small concession made is gratefully applauded.

Too often is one reminded of the case of the man, who, walking home one day, was stopped on the road by a big, tough-looking stranger armed with a sword, who caught hold of him and told him, “I will cut off your head”. The bewildered dumbfounded pedestrian could barely manage to ask the stranger for his reason, but the big man declined to answer and raised his blade. Moved to pity, however, by the prayers and entreaties of the terror-stricken and abject pedestrian, he cut off only the nose and ears of the victim, who ran for his life, hailing the concession with tears of joy and gratitude.

The story may or may not be wholly apocryphal, but it has a moral.

If eternal vigilance is the

price of liberty, it is necessary for those that love liberty to give up fear and adulation and not to acquiesce in, but to resist anything that destroys individuality or savours of what Gandhiji described as "the violence of the State".

Our nation won freedom nine years ago. Let that freedom be safeguarded from erosion, however, gradual and unnoticed. Our country gave hypnotism to the world. Let no part of our people ever become a casualty of mass-hypnosis.

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