

Weekly Copy Ps. 5

Annual Subscription Rs. 2

OPINION

Vol. XXII

October 6, 1981

No. 22

HYPOCRISY OR NAIVETY ?

B. V. NIMBKAR

RECENTLY the press reported our Prime Minister as saying that she did not agree with the view that industry was the standard yardstick of progress. She went on to say that she did not want the rural population to go into jobs which are just mechanical; she wanted them to stay on the land and increase their earnings in order to achieve a higher standard of living. Assuming that she was not misquoted, the P.M. must be naive or misinformed, or else she wishes to deliberately mislead the people.

If a shift to industry is not a yardstick to measure progress, why, one may ask, does her own government measure the backwardness of a region according to how few industries it contains? The average farm labourer toils from dawn to dusk seven days a week at jobs which are almost as mechanical and repetitive as factory jobs, and earns but a fraction of what the factory worker gets. In an industry, even an agro-based industry like the tea industry, an unskilled labourer gets a paid weekly holiday, free quarters, free education and medical service for his family, and free fuel, in addition to his wage which is four to five times that of an ordinary agricultural labourer.

In the sugar industry the disparity between industrial and farm labour becomes glaring because they work side by side. The factory labour gets the wages and benefits which industrial labour everywhere gets, while the harvesting and transport labour lives in abject poverty. Would it be greatly surprising if the latter aspires to become industrial labour and be willing to put up with the awful living conditions in city hutments in order to achieve a better standard of living? A higher living standard is only available in urban areas for industrial workers as industries are run for profit and are liable to close down if they are not showing any profit. State governments too, spend twice as much per capita as they do on rural areas, to provide various amenities to urban people.

Agriculture, on which most of the rural population depends for its livelihood, is in a different position altogether. No matter how low agricultural prices are, farms cannot close down, as the people who own them have no alternative employment available in the rural areas. Also, farmers and agricultural labourers are not organized, so they cannot decide to stop growing a crop which does not pay. These factors

contribute to the continued exploitation of the rural areas by the urban areas or, to use newly coined words, of Bharat by India.

If Mrs. Gandhi is seriously interested in keeping the rural people on their land, she will have to change the bias towards cities in policy-making which has been adopted by all our governments. The bias will not be corrected by writing off farmers' loans or making laws about minimum wages without paying the farmer enough for his produce to make it possible for him to pay the minimum wage to labour.

Agricultural prices will have to be related to the cost of production, or at least to the final selling prices. Along with this will have to come equal wages for equal work. There is no reason why, even in the rural areas, a factory worker is paid several times as much as the agricultural worker, although they work equally hard and for the same number of hours. There will also have to be an equitable distribution of power between cities and rural areas, and provision of better communication facilities in the rural areas. Unless policies are changed to bring about these changes, the people dependent on agriculture will never get a fair deal, and we shall never be able to stop them from going to the cities for a better chance at life.

THE MANNERLESS INDIAN

M. K. RATHISH

THE British Press went into Rapsodies over Vijay Amritraj's elegant court manners at Wimbledon. He was called the 'Indian gentleman'. We patted ourselves on our backs on reading those reports. We conveniently forgot that Indian men are anything but well-mannered. We are crude, boorish and the very antithesis of polished and sophisticated gentlemen.

I work in a commercial bank. In a department that has nothing to do with customers. But I get a perfect view of our Savings Bank department, and I often watch with amused detachment the dramas that are enacted there.

The other day, a returned-from-the-States-type came to open a Savings Bank account. Lizzy Joseph, now our Savings Bank supervisor —bless his soul—is the friendly type. (His critics call him 'nosey Parker'. But then critics are, you know what.) He asked this girl about her, about her parents, about her family history. She didn't like it one bit. And she gave him—left, right and centre. Our poor fellow winced under the attack. He quivered. His clerks tried to smother their smiles in their handkerchieves.

He came to me and told me conspirationally: "She is not a Roman Catholic!" As if that proves anything. And I do not know how he came to such an interesting conclusion.

He is the typical Indian. I had thought that this one experience would cure him of his inquisitiveness. But no deal. He still merrily goes on

questioning his customers about their 'pedigree' and most intimate details concerning their personal lives.

An English lady on a short visit to India was once asked in my presence by her blustering neighbour: "Where are you going?" She froze, and hissed at him: "Where I go is my business." At that time I had thought that she was being needlessly rude. But not any longer. I have seen too many insensitive people grilling perfect strangers about their family history stretching five generations behind.

I suggested to our Savings Bank supervisor that it was bad manners to ask personal questions to perfect strangers. And Hell broke lose. I was accused of being a brown sahib. Of being more western than most westerners. All our colleagues were on his side. They said it was perfectly 'Indian' to be friendly with strangers. To ask about their families and about their grandfathers. When I tried to protest I was shouted down with a vigour that was last seen when India won the last Cricket Test match against Pakistan.

I now realise: How silly of me. Gossip is the national pastime. 'Stardust' is our hottest selling magazine. Which Indian isn't eager to know whether sparks fly when Jaya and Rekha meet each other on the sets of 'Silsila'?

Three cheers to friendliness—We shall continue with our traditional hospitality. The first question we shall ask any stranger we are forced to talk to on the road is: "Where are you going?"

CONDEMNING DOWRY SOCIALLY

UMA JOSHI

THE Central Government is examining an amendment to the existing prohibition of dowry legislation so that a deterrent punishment may be awarded to those who give and accept dowry. A bill to amend the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 is being drafted and may be passed in the next session of Parliament. The bill will seek to make offences under the Act cognisable. This will enable the police to take effective action in dowry cases on its own. It is well-known that the demand for making dowry ban law more stringent has been made by several women's and social organisations. The need for such an amendment has been felt in the wake of the spate of cases of dowry deaths and the failure of the police to take any action. Under the existing Act the extent of punishment is Rs. 5,000 or 6 months' imprisonment or both.

There can be no two opinions on the need for emancipation of women from the curse of dowry. In India, marriage continues to remain potential death-trap for an increasing number of women, particularly in the northern parts of the country. In fact, it has always been a part of the feudal system. The roots of the dowry system lie in the prevalent Hindu culture. In the beginning, the practice of giving dowry in marriage was meant to assist the newly wed couple to set up an

OPINION, October 6, 1981

establishment with ease. However, with the passage of time, the practice of dowry instead of proving a boon to the newly-married couple, became a major cause of ruination of marriage and disruption of marital harmony. It took the shape of a business transaction in which the goods take priority over the merit of the bride. Even after marriage, the bride's parents are taxed with further demands on every occasion, whether it be a festival or some ceremony. If the demands are not acceded to, the girl's parents and the daughter-in-law are made to bear the brunt of the in-laws' anger in various ways.

In Delhi itself, over 200 suspected dowry deaths are witnessed every year. Most of these are generally dismissed as either suicides or accidental deaths by the police authorities. The concerned police officers are taken to task for any laxity on their part only when there is a public outcry which dies down as soon as the erring official is transferred. It is also true that the inherent difficulty in collecting evidence and the reluctance of neighbours in offering eye-witness corroboration come in the way of securing conviction against the accused. And with acquittal, the evil thrives. A woman is helpless if she is ill-treated, harassed and beaten by her husband and in-laws for not bringing enough dowry. Various ways of harassing wives and their parents for inadequate dowry is a common phenomenon in this country. Such a harassment has to be put up with and is not treated as an offence.

(To be continued)

COMMENT

In the hundreds of thousands of words poured out in India over the Melbourne conference, could no room be found for the remarks of Lee Kuan Yew over pro-Russian proclivities of Indira Gandhi? This writer caught a sentence or two over the B.B.C. and waited for the Indian—press and radio to amplify. But no, hush, hush, our most sacred cow, no eye shall look askance at her!

54. Shri B. Venkatappiah,
B3/59, Safdayang Endow,
New Delhi-110 016.

Posted at Central Packet Sorting Office, Bombay on 6-10-1981
Regd. No. BYW 69
Licence No. 14. Licensed to post without pre-payment

Edited and published by A. D. Gorwala at 40C Ridge Road, Bombay 400 006 and
printed by him at the Mouj Printing Bureau, Khatau Wadi, Bombay 400 004.
Proprietor: A. D. Gorwala.