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OPINION

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THE ELECTRIC MUDDLE

JAI NIMBKAR

FROM almost the beginning of October, electricity in these parts has gone temperamental. There is no discernible pattern to the way it goes off and on. If it goes off, it may stay off from a few seconds to several hours. The duration of a blackout could form the basis for a game of chance of the sort played on shipboard to guess the exact number of knots traversed by the ship each day. Electric power might be available for anywhere from six to sixteen hours in a twenty-four-hour period but when the 'on' period falls is beyond anybody's guessing. The results are obvious. Farmers cannot irrigate their crops. They have to stand by and watch especially sensitive crops like vegetables drying up even when water is available, because there is no power for pumping. Small-scale industries cannot meet their production schedules and have to have labour sitting idle, incurring losses which they are ill-equipped to absorb.

Quite apart from the actual inconvenience caused by the power failures, the maddening thing is that the government does not think it necessary to take the people it serves into its confidence. The erratic behaviour of the electric power had been going on for a week before there was a cautious official announcement that, as sudden repairs had to be carried out to some generating sets at Nasik, Koradi, etc., less power than necessary was going to be available, and load-shedding would have to be done all over the State. The situation was expected to return to normal in about a week. Everything about the announcement seemed calculated to add insult to injury—its timing, its brazenly playing down the disaster, and its stressing the fact that the government chose to treat the people like stupid children who could be kept quiet by telling them half-truths and giving them only a partial idea of what they were in for.

The affected people say that, granted the situation exists when load-shedding has to be done, they would not mind having power for only five or six hours a day provided they know which six hours it was and could count on an uninterrupted supply during that period. The arbitrary manner in which the power goes off and on now, and the wild fluctuation of voltage which causes valuable equipment to burn out, shows utter callousness. The Electricity Board apparently does not feel that it needs to tailor the supply of power to the needs of the users. Or perhaps, since

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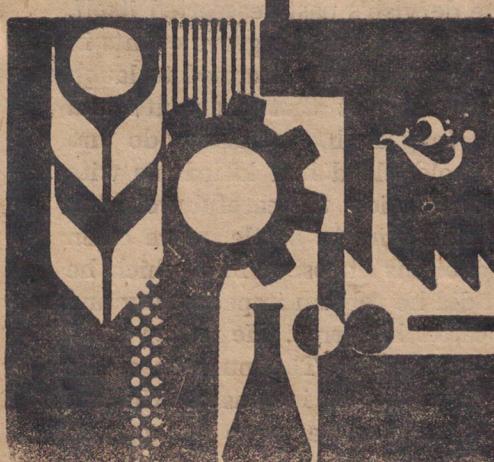
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all our governments take the stand that they consider the poorest and most underprivileged people as the focal point of the economy, they may argue that by definition, no user of electric power qualifies for their sympathetic consideration. Then they should go the whole way and announce that they are not interested in the over-privileged electricity users producing or manufacturing anything or creating employment. But they do not quite want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

Erratic supply of power is nothing new in this country. Whether because of faulty equipment or too rapid expansion of electrification or just plain apathy, it has always been erratic. This time, however, the officials concerned have been clever in one respect. They have kept Pune and Bombay supplied with steady power, as that is where the organized voices live. If the rural people take out a few morchas and hold a few protest meetings, it does not seem to affect anyone. The news media have also cooperated with the government by giving only scattered reports from widely spaced areas and not putting them together to give the public an overall picture of the extent of the disaster. In fact, everyone seems to have conspired to hide the fact that there is a disaster at all. Perhaps the bitterest pill for a martyr is that nobody is even aware of his martyrdom!

Jai Nimbkar

THE DERVISH ALWAROG

(Continued from 21st October 1980)

FOR many days after the dervish had been harrowed by remembrance of things past, the work was heavy. From morning to noon, from noon to dewy eve, the cave-entrance was hardly ever free of visitors, all seeking advice, most following it. The dervish fully occupied was contented and slept soundly. Then came a day of over-exhaustion, followed by a night of fitful, dream-filled sleep. The dervish's past reasserted itself.

He saw himself as he had been a few months after the grave events in which he had borne so unusual part, a soberer man, less inclined to laugh or take things lightly. He noted with some regret that his youth had ended. Not for him any longer the head long rush, the daring-do and leave the rest to fortune. A man who in cold blood had killed his wife and her lover was beyond that. For him calculation, the careful weighing of chances became habitual. Though he still sang in battle, more often than not, the battle took place on ground of his choosing into which he had manoeuvred the enemy. Not so much did he rely on impetuosity and the mad charge to break the enemy and scatter his army. He rather made the enemy realise its desperate position and yield. The number of his casualties went down, the number of his prisoners increased. He had always been known as foremost in valour, now he began to get a great name as foremost in military skills, a great strategist.

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One day in a fight which he would have avoided if he could have, he heard a young, clear voice singing his father's favourite battle-song. Turning, he found on low ground, a cadet officer of about fourteen encouraging his outnumbered platoon with the song, striking blow upon blow, seeking his opportunity to deliver a fatal blow, calm and contained as if practising at the school of arms. Quickly dashing down upon the group, he scattered the enemy, then said to the officer "if you live through the day, be at my tent tonight." The young cadet laughed and said, 'I'll be there, sir, we are not killed easily,' as the general rode up to the slight hill from which he had been directing the battle. By the evening the enemy withdrew, and he was content for he had been greatly outnumbered.

As the staff officers left the tent, after plans for the next day had been formulated, the guard at the tent-door said a young cadet officer was there who said the general had ordered his presence. He nodded and on the youth's coming in and saluting asked sternly 'who gave you permission to sing my father's special battle-song?' 'As to permission I do not know, but I learnt it from my grandmother', said the cadet. 'And who may your grandmother be?' he had asked to receive the astonishing answer, 'your father's wife.' He had sat back, considering. Slowly, the solution dawned on him. His father had married a second wife, fathered children upon her, and all unbeknownst to his first wife or to the court circles in which he usually moved. This was his father in a new light, and he had smiled to himself as he thought what a tactician he had been. 'Ah', he had said, 'then you are my step-brother's son. How many step-brothers and sisters have I by the way?' 'No sisters, two brothers' was the reply, 'my father is the principal physician of our second largest city N, and my uncle the Second Judge of the port-town B.'

'Ah, they did not take to our hereditary profession, I note', he had said. 'Yes, rather a shame, I thought. So I endeavoured to repair the omission, as soon as I was able to. You see I was brought up largely by grandmother, to whom the military tradition is quite alive. As a boy, I heard great tales of your father's prowess and also of your own, including your challenge to and despatching of your father's murderers.' 'So I am spoken of among you.' And on the boy's nodding emphatically 'Then why didn't you being my nephew apply to me for a cadetship when you had decided on your career two years ago?' 'Well', said the boy, 'Grandmother said grandfather had always denounced all use of influence. In his view the only influence a soldier needed was the way he handled his battle-axe and sword on the battlefield. There the good man stands out, and the door to promotion is soon opened. So I joined up as a soldier in the army of the East and in six months became anchor-man in my platoon, and am now commanding one here, having been transferred, because I sang too much in battle, and that reminded the officer commanding the division of my grandfather, whom he had disliked having been disciplined by him several times when he was a cadet. He told me he had nothing against me, but just did not wish to be disturbed at crucial

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moments of decision on the battlefield by my singing reminding him of humiliations in the past. So here I've been for two months now.' 'A good account, short and to the point, I see, he had said. 'Well, here the fact that you are my nephew will make no difference. Very sound view, my father's. When you next meet your grandmother, relate our conversation to her and tell her from me that if she permits, I would very much like to pay my respects at any time convenient to her, subject to the exigencies of duty, of course.' 'I am due six day off next week and I'll certainly do so, sir. Thank you very much', said the boy saluting. And with a heartfelt 'God protect you' from both sides, the boy left.

Two weeks later, the cadet returned and said his grandmother would be happy to receive her son, whenever he could come. She hoped he would stay for as long as he could, preferably at least a week. He had smiled and said to himself two days at most. A week later, he arrived unaccompanied and in plain clothes at his step-mother's mansion house upon an obviously well-looked after estate.

(To be continued)

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