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OPINION

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COMMENT

A. G. Noorani: Amnesty International's Report on Afghanistan, published on September 19, is far too damning and far too documented an exposure of the systematic violations of human rights in that country to be ignored. Especially since its impartiality and detachment are so manifest and the organisation's credentials, so impeccable.

The Report is based on the findings of an Amnesty mission to Afghanistan last October led by Prof. Mumtaz Soysal, a Turkish Constitutional lawyer from Ankara and recipient of the first UNESCO prize for the teaching of human rights. It must be said to the credit of the Afghan Government that it did receive an AI mission, something which Smt. Indira Gandhi refused categorically in 1975.

In the circumstances prevailing there, the Report cannot provide a complete picture of the situation. It was "inhibited by frequent expressions of Afghan citizens that they fear reprisals in submitting information about human rights to international organizations such as Amnesty International. In Kabul, the Amnesty International delegates encountered during their October visit a real and widespread fear of reprisals, reinforced by many reports that political arrests continue to be made during the night when a curfew is still in force from 11 p.m. onwards. They were told on two occasions in Kabul by family members of political prisoners that they had been warned by officials not to disclose to foreigners any information concerning the imprisonment of family members, on pain of repercussions."

But the pronouncements of the leaders of the regime themselves are revealing enough as to their attitude towards basic human rights. When the Amnesty delegates expressed to the Foreign Minister their concern about a former minister who had been arrested in 1957 for political reasons but for whose trial or release the government had no plans, he bluntly told them, "If we had to try this prisoner we would have to kill him."

President Taraki has been no less candid. *Kabul Times* of May 3, 1979

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Afghanistan, the official figure of 100 given to Amnesty International at the time apparently not including political prisoners arrested by previous governments, and remaining in detention. Amnesty International estimates that the number of political prisoners held has gone up by several thousand since then.... This assessment is made bearing in mind the government's own statistics, which indicate a sharp increase in the number of political arrests, and also considering the many details of further political arrests received by Amnesty International since its mission visited Afghanistan.... Reliable international observers estimate there are at least 12,000 political prisoners in Kabul's Pule Charchi prison alone."

Thousands of soldiers and officers are reported to have been arrested on suspicion of not being loyal to the government. Students, businessmen, artists, political party workers, civil servants and journalists are also currently imprisoned without trial, in many cases the reason for their imprisonment is not known. "The names of these political prisoners cannot be disclosed for fear of reprisals," the Report says. What is particularly deplorable is that "political arrests have, in some cases, been accompanied by the imprisonment of the wives and children—in some cases less than one year old—of political prisoners, such as, for example, the arrest of family members of the Kabul religious leader Mohammed Ibrahim Mogaddeddi on January 18, 1979. Amnesty International has a list of 42 women and children, currently held in Pule Charchi prison in Kabul, some of them reportedly ill, arrested merely for belonging to the family of a political prisoner. In many cases political prisoners are held without any contact with the outside world, and there is fear that some political prisoners have been killed after arrest."

They have no prospect of a fair trial before an independent judiciary. Decree No. 3 of the Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan transferred the powers of the Supreme Court to a Supreme Judicial Council which is not only responsible to the Revolutionary Council itself but has the Minister of Justice and two of his deputies among its members. There is a "Military Revolutionary Court" whose Judges are also "responsible" to the Revolutionary Council.

Arbitrary arrests in large numbers bring in train other outrages, torture of the prisoners being foremost among them. "Amnesty International has received several specific allegations that political prisoners have died as a result of torture." A foreign anthropologist who was himself detained for a week by Kabul police in November 1978 claimed to have seen electric torture equipment and political prisoners subjected to torture. His account was published in *Athens News* on December 1978. Similar allegations have been made in other

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On May 4, 1979 an incident was reported in the International press to have taken place in front of Pule Charchi prison, Kabul. Women and children, relatives of political prisoners, had gathered at the jail gate and protested to the prison authorities about being denied visits to their imprisoned relatives and about not receiving any news from the prisoners since their arrest. (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* May 23, 1979.) According to reports which remain unconfirmed, several women died in the incident."

It would be singularly unfortunate if Amnesty's is allowed to remain a lone voice. In the true spirit of the Amnesty movement individuals can express their concern in a variety of ways, from public meetings to letters to Afghan authorities including the Afghan Embassies in their country. Centuries ago, Solon, asked how a people could preserve their liberties, said, "Those who are uninjured by an arbitrary act must be taught to feel as much indignation at it as those who are injured." Having experienced how others acted on this principle when our liberties were snatched away by Smt. Indira Gandhi, we must not be grudging in our concern when we find violations of human rights in a country not far from ours whose independence is threatened by increasing Soviet intervention in its internal affairs.

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R. P. Patwardhan: In giving my view of the R.S.S. in the 4-9-1979 issue of 'Opinion' I had stated that the R.S.S. made an appeal to the 'rich heritage' left us by our ancestors, but had also mentioned that our ancient civilization was not without dark spots and had said that the R.S.S. was well aware of them and was trying to remove them. Now, Smt. Deshpande, in her eloquent comments on my views published in 'Opinion' of 25th September, pays no heed to the admission about the blemishes and argues as if to the R.S.S. and to myself our ancient past was nothing but one blaze of glory. Moreover, because we think that we have good reason to feel proud of our past, she draws the conclusion that our objective is to revive the institutions of the past like, e.g. *Chaturvarnya*. This is a truly astonishing argument. I may have profound reverence for my grandfather, but does it follow from this that I should dress as he dresses or dressed, eat what he eats or ate, read what he reads or read etc.? Surely Smt. Deshpande might have credited us with sense enough to know that the conditions of the 20th Century A.D. are not the same as those of 1000 B.C., and that the manners and institutions appropriate to 1000 B.C. cannot, and should not, be attempted to be introduced in the

Our admiration for our past means nothing more than the fact that in our part that our ancestors have done something in their time, that they have left us literal

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ashamed of it, "What is there to be proud of in grinding fifty per cent of our brothers into the dust ? Or in burning widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands ? Or in destroying ruthlessly other cultures like those of *Harappa* and *Mohen-jo-Daro* ?" she asks.

Now, if any one insists on feeling ashamed of his or her ancestors because they did some things which to the modern mind seem abominable, there is nothing that one can do about it. One may only urge that just as he or she has the right to look at the dark side of the picture and feel ashamed, others should be free to look at the bright side and feel proud.

Of one thing, however, I feel fairly certain. Although we of the present day may consider ourselves to be enlightened and progressive and superior in every way to our forefathers, when our descendants say, of 25000 A.D. come to assess the achievements of our time, some of them will, no doubt say that the achievements of their ancestors of the 20th Century were such that people of their own time should feel proud of those ancestors. They liberated the country from an exploiting foreign power, produced some very great thinkers and teachers, developed the country's economic resources, etc. A few others, however, (including the Smt. Deshpandes of the time) will say "Fie ! What is there to be proud of in the work of the people of the 20th Century ? Rather we should be ashamed of these people—people who, when one section among them wanted to separate and form another State, cut one another's throats with a ferocity exceeding the fabled one of ancient *Harappa* and *Mohen-jo-Daro* ; who, while professing sympathy with the poor and the down-trodden, were content to live in ease and comfort while 60% of their compatriots were living in poverty ; who suffered an ignominious defeat at the hands of their northern neighbour and weakly allowed that neighbour to swallow a large chunk of their territory," etc., etc ?

(To be continued)

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