

Weekly Copy Ps. 5

Annual Subscription Rs. 2

OPINION

Vol. XXII

September 29, 1981

No. 21

[In today's revivalist atmosphere, 'The Burden of the Past,' written many years ago, would seem to have special relevance.]

THE BURDEN OF THE PAST

HAPPY the country that has no history is an observation repeated through the ages. If history is really what the greatest of historians held it to be, a record of the crimes, follies and errors of mankind, the general acceptance of the saying can be easily understood. But if history is much more, if in addition to recording crimes, follies and errors, it sheds light upon the courage, magnanimity and wisdom that have formed no small part of man's great adventure on this planet, even then the observation may well be held true, especially by those who are the heirs to fallen greatness. Crushing is the weight of history on such nations. They are weak and poor. Their ancestors were powerful and rich. Their minds turn again and again to the glory of past times, but in modern conditions they see no way of bringing the past to essential life again. They eat the bread of nostalgia and drink the wine of frustration. They realise to the full the deep truth that remembering happier things is indeed sorrow's crown of sorrow. Often then must the thoughtful among them be wishing that they had no remarkable past to plague their present, so that their present could look forward to such a future as they themselves could build, free from the dead hand of regret, the oppressive weight of unapproachable greatness.

These reflections come naturally to the visitor to Athens as he moves among its ancient monuments and modern buildings. The blue of the sky is deeper and more beautiful than any he has seen elsewhere. There is a freshness in the air that makes him draw it into his lungs in great breaths, almost savouring, so to speak, its tang. Modern Athens itself seems a bright, bustling town, its streets full, its people busy. Yet, above everything, broods the Acropolis, showing signs of perfection even in its ruins. The sadness that emanates from the comparison of what this city was with what it is, what it has meant to mankind and what it means now, darkens like a pall the minds of those who have grown up and are now living within it. The mental adjustment is difficult in the extreme and the effects of the difficulty are to be found in not a few spheres of national life, from the confused politics which have often made it impossible to obtain a stable government to the occasional supra-nationalism that relates claims to the long-dead past rather than the present position of the country.

Venice furnishes another example of the same phenomenon, though not of course at the same level, for Venice, while magnificent in its own way, taught mankind no high lessons of universal value. The Venetian empire spread as far as the Levant, and the Venetian fleets kept the Turks out of Europe. Venetian diplomacy was as celebrated as Venetian arms and the Doges of Venice were among the most powerful potentates of their time. Thus did a small city-state rise to fame, and in the period of its sway, it patronised art and fortified culture. The evidences of its sensitivity to beauty remain, though its greatness of soul has passed. And the present Venice lives largely on the visitors the beautiful accomplishments of its past bring to it. It has become a tourist-centre and is little more. The effect on its inhabitants is obvious. Their minds work simultaneously at different levels. They are Venetians, and therefore heirs to a great tradition; but to live, they must attract tourists and therefore, must resort to the wiles that please and draw crowds, not always discriminating, hardly ever wise. In the result, character suffers, inventiveness is depressed, and life on the whole is less estimable than if the past of the city had been obscure.

For us in India these instances have lessons. The glories of our past are by and large so distant that unless we invite them to, they need not burden our spirits. No evidence of them is to be found daily pressing upon our great centres of population. Venice and Athens must live with their dead. We, more fortunate, need care for only our living. This is not to say that we need forget our origins. The healthy tree does not forget its roots. Only it spends its time growing stronger and greener, not considering continuously, or even equally, the magnificence of its roots. Our task, like its, is before us. We can concentrate on it, without carrying the load of any complexes from the past in our subconscious. If despite this happy heritage, we insist on letting the dead past affect our thinking and our policies, making important again old, forgotten, far-off things and battles long ago, let us blame only ourselves for the lack of adequate accomplishment that will follow. We have a history, but it is not such that it can prevent us from having all the advantages conveyed in the saying about the happiness of the nation that has no history. The overcoming of us by history, sectional or national, is not likely unless we lose our sense of proportion and sacrifice the wisdom of our times at the altar of antiquity. That is a danger the present must avoid, if it wishes the country to have the future to which it is entitled by reason of its character, intellect and strength.

VIEWS

Adi Batha: With the media spotlight presently focussed on the Maharashtra Chief Minister's "unorthodox" manner of collecting funds, one is struck by a rather provocative coincidence in an article in the September issue of "Span" magazine.

The article contains the reminiscences of Robert Penn Warren, author

OPINION, September 29, 1981

5

of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "All the King's Men".

Huey Long, the real-life governor of Louisiana in the thirties, who inspired Warren's novel, displays some amazing similarities with Mr. Abdul Rehman Antulay.

Long is variously described as earthy, ruthless, dramatic, a master of vituperation and high rhetoric, and having total contempt for "legitimacy"—for him the ends justified the means. His nickname too, "Kingfish", (perhaps Warren's invention), resonates with that recently conferred on Mr. Antulay—"Sultan"!

Warren recollects a memorable piece of blunt prose by Long at the 75th anniversary luncheon of Louisiana State University (where the author then lectured). After the other worthies had finished speaking, Long nonchalantly got up and said: "People say I steal. Well, all politicians steal. But a lot of what I stole has spilled over in no-toll bridges, hospitals—and to build this university."

But—and it is almost regrettably that one must say this—the similarities seem to end there.

Long was also known as a wit, a comic, and a master story-teller, qualities which even Mr. Antulay's most ardent supporters would not honestly ascribe to him.

The similarities of style, in fact, only mask the vast differences in attitude of these two incumbents—separated by a continent and a span of nearly half-a-century—to the money each raised for his own purpose.

Warren writes of a "deduct box", presumably containing forced deductions from salaries of state employees, which was always in Long's personal possession. Although Huey Long was undeniably scrupulous with the money, he is said to have been openly cynical about the intentions of his political cronies.

For all his high living, there was nothing the tax men could do—egged on as they were by a hostile President Franklin Delano Roosevelt—to pin a charge on Long. As for his cronies, his scepticism was vindicated posthumously by the several jail terms handed out for embezzlement.

Finally, Huey Long was a national figure, a potential threat to FDR in the depression years. Long's end by an assassin's bullet in 1935 must indeed have been a relief to FDR, suggests Warren.

On that last count, Mr. Antulay can consider himself more fortunate. He's neither so dangerously important, nor is he anywhere near being a "threat" to his avowed leader!

"In foreign policy we have become almost camp-followers of the Soviet Union, the tyrannical and oppressive dictatorship, whose values are entirely opposed to those enshrined in our constitution, which we all revere and, claim proudly, attempt to follow. Our Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Ministry refuse to blame the Soviet Union for so henious and blatant a crime as the invasion of independent, non-aligned Afghani-

OPINION, September 29, 1981

stan, nay even refuse to admit that there has been aggression. And they become apologists for it. Even assuming there has been something minor of the nature, they say, it is because that worthy nation felt encircled. This super-power, spread over half Europe and a great part of Asia, encircled ! I will not dwell on its military strength, its nuclear armory, its enormous conventional forces, its missionary zeal in most parts of the world. Surely to talk of its feeling encircled is absurd. To put forward such an apology is to show oneself openly an ardent advocate, whose judgment has been completely warped and who, voluntarily will not see things as they are. Nor is this all. Under the pretext of promoting peace, wherever the Prime Minister goes, she tries to get heads of state to accept the Russian point of view, so that by now, most other governments have little doubt that we have become a Russian satellite, pretending to have an independent foreign policy, but essentially following closely the Russian line. If they ever had any doubts on the point, the doubts were resolved by our recognition of the Hing San Rin Government, just because the Russians wanted that to be done."

Western media being unkind to our poor dear Indira, as she usually alleges ! No, your own truly Indian Opinion, being just frank. Western media, as the recent BBC portrait showed, are usually to Indira's virtues very kind and to her faults almost blind.

* * * *

A. V.: In the state maintained through armed guards at the gates of Ministerial residences, the psychological vestiges of feudalism seem ever present. This is clear from the Soviet example. With equality and fraternity as declared goals, with the total abolition of class distinctions, the feeling of superiority in the mind of the rulers has brought about a condition in which there is no egalitarianism.

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

Posted at Central Packet Sorting Office, Bombay on 29-9-1981
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.