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THE PRESIDENTS EVE OF INDEPENDENCE DAY ADDRESS

HAD our President been a man of integrity (he has, alas, shown himself not to be one) his speech to the nation on the night before Independence Day, would, instead of being replete with general platitudes, have read thus :

"My fellow-citizens, neither you nor I have any cause to congratulate ourselves on the year that ends to-night. Deeper and deeper have we sunk into the mire during it. 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 heinous and blatant a crime as the invasion of independent, non-aligned Afghanistan, 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.

"Another great error of our government has been its seeming inability to understand the Russian view that 'All is politics.' Sport, art, culture, commerce, medicine etc. are to them all basically political. They consider any and every proposition, whatever the field, from the point of view of the political advantage they will derive from it. To let, nay to encourage such a nation enter intimately into every field of our activity, as we have been doing particularly in the last year, is highly

dangerous.

"I must confess I have been feeling somewhat doubtful about the democratic bona fides of our Prime Minister. She constantly talks about democracy as the only system for this country, but I think the inclination of her mind is strongly towards authoritarianism. She must have all the power, the final say must always be hers. In her party, is there any democracy? She decides and the rest say yes. States, which in many respects under our federal system had limited independent powers, she has made, wherever there is a majority of her party, mere appanages of her own. She thus not only rules India, but actually governs in detail, much the larger part of it. Talking often of decentralisation, she is the great centraliser, seeking and holding all power herself. A sad augury is this for the future of a real democracy.

"This year has shown that while in the gathering of power, she is most enthusiastic and ardent, in the use of it for the benefit of the ordinary people she is both lackadasical and ineffective. Law and order was never at such a low ebb as it is to-day throughout the country. The capital city, with her right there, is no exception. Why is this so, I have often wondered. My conclusion is that she is just not interested; there is no political dividend to be got from it. Also it would involve too much trouble and disturbance, in view of the politician—police—gang leader complex. So leave well alone, even if the 'well' has deteriorated into very bad. To keep the regulatory instruments satisfied is from her point of view good policy and she does it by not looking carefully into their performance. A perfunctory speech now and then full of the most praise-worthy sentiments to an audience of senior officers is the extent of her interest. The Chief Ministers, mostly her nominees, follow her example.

"Another area in which she does not seem seriously concerned is that of prices. Pie, pie, there's plenty of pie, cry her economic ministers in chorus, but it's not pie to-day, nor pie to-morrow, nor at any stated date in the next few weeks. No it's pie in the sky, which later or sooner will fill the empty or half-filled bowls of the poor and the middle-classes. To deal with prices vigorously, she feels too, will bring little political dividend. On the other hand it might affect her adversely. She talks eloquently of punishing severely hoarders, black-marketeers, profiteers and smugglers. But nothing happens. Doesn't she know them? Many are round about her, contributors to her and her party's funds. Rather than dealing with them severely as ought to have been done in the Punjab-Haryana—wheat case and making the hoarders and smugglers disgorge a part of their ample production and purchases, she prefers to take the easier course of importing wheat. So too with sugar. With her it may be said 'of slogans there is no end, of proper action there is no sign.' Her aim being full and supreme power for herself she wants to keep well in with all those who will smooth or not obstruct her path to that goal. Hence many of the aberrations in her economic, law and order and other policies. About corruption, she does

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not trouble at all. She speaks against it sometimes, but having never known true honesty, there is no earnestness in her opposition to it. Her speech is merely the formal tribute vice pays to virtue, and having paid it she forgets all about it. Almost like lying in which she is remarkably proficient and bare-faced, she seems to regard it as a natural phenomenon.

"One other matter has been troubling me greatly, the suggested conversion en masse of the Harijans to Islam. This too it seems to me has not been taken enough notice of by the Central Government. That the Harijans have serious and genuine grievances against the caste Hindus among whom they live, especially in the countryside, no one would deny. That every effort should be made to remove them once and for all by the people and the government, is elementary. That this has not been done after thirty-four years of independence is a matter of disgrace to us all. But admitting all this, is not the remedy contemplated at least as bad as the present state? To become a member of a community which, on the basis of its general practice—not on that of the lofty tenets of its founder—in all the countries where it is dominant, is quite illiberal and often regressive, as in its treatment of women, is that what the Harijan really wants? He seeks equality with the caste Hindu, but at the same time puts half his number, the female sex, in permanent inequality. Let the Harijan think again. Let him look at Iran and Pakistan, where according to the rulers and many of the people the pure spirit of Islam is being re-established, and think again. Let the governments also take the condition of the Harijans into serious daily consideration, find practical methods to remedy their genuine grievances and see that they are in fact remedied.

"Fellow-citizens, I end with a prayer. During the next year, may Providence shed its choicest blessings on our lovely and much-loved land; may its Grace enfold you all, making you better human beings; may it reduce all the pests that infest the country, making them beneficial if possible. May it not leave out from its consideration in this regard, the high in office and position, including the Prime Minister."

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