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## THE PUBLIC VOICE

THE gray-haired, luxuriously-moustached, khadi-clad old gentleman, leaning upon his battered umbrella, watched the bus-queue at the terminus with some surprise, then said, "Why this complete silence? Surely the Republic Day revels haven't left you drained of all energy and liveliness? Come, come, speak up, let us hear your views on some of our pressing problems; no lack of them, I presume." "You forget, sir, that we are well into the Indira regime by now, over two weeks I think, and it may be as well to be cautious. Who may be listening, one doesn't know, and who reporting," said a thin, middle-aged man in a long black coat with a black cap. "Our open wide-ranging discussions had better become a thing of the past until the position becomes clearer." "Good Lord," exclaimed the old gentleman, "that had never even occurred to me. No, I don't think that will happen again, not so quickly anyhow. Have you any special knowledge or indications?" "Knowledge, none; but indications in plenty I think. Take the massive majority for one thing and the large number of what one may call the Mafia in it, goondas and semi-goondas in our terms; for another the passing in quick time against the entire Opposition's view of the Preventive Detention Act. True, the objects and reasons talk of it being used against profiteers, black-marketeers and hoarders only. But if I am persona non grata, what is there to prevent four bags of wheat being found in my out-house in the compound or in my room at the chawl, and my being booked as a hoarder? No, I don't think the haste in passing that Act was just accidental; so I suggest discretion, friends. There's little point in airing your views to find yourself in the calaboose."

"Be that as it may," said the middle-aged, pleasant-faced lady political scientist, "I do not believe in being scared before the danger is upon you,

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nor indeed does it serve any to be scared when it is. We are all prisoners under sentence of death with an indefinite reprieve. At any moment the reprieve may end. So why be frightened of smaller dangers? That's how I reassure myself philosophically. In fact, of course, I am scared of many things, from cockroaches and mice in my shoes to loud-tongued, foul-mouthed loafers on the street. However, this morning after looking at the papers, I felt properly worked up and so wrote this letter to Indira. I'd like to read it to you and hear your views. May I begin?" "No, no, please think again," said a young man in jeans and blue shirt, "I mean about the reading and even about the writing, the reading because this is an open place and you never know etc., the writing because why provoke her? She is now a quiescent volcano at least, throw powerful fire-crackers down her crater and who can tell the force of the explosion that may follow." Several voices murmured assent and a fat merchant-type in spotless white muslin intoned in a sacramental voice, "Peace in our time, O Lord!" The political scientist looked up somewhat puzzled and said, "If you think mere listening to it will bring you within the ambit of danger too, of course, I won't read it. But realise, this is the person to whom we, the people, have given such a massive mandate. Surely you wouldn't have done that if you were so frightened of her!" "Ah," said the man in the jeans, "but that's exactly why many of us did. We wanted a real ruler, strong even if autocratic, and so we plumped for her." "Look," said the smart young secretary in the high-heeled shoes, with a very impressive brief-case dangling from her left hand. "All this nonsense is very well, but I want to hear this letter. Let those who don't, being full of apprehension, move twenty feet away, and I undertake to call them in good time when the bus comes up and see them safely into it before I get in."

Nobody moved and after waiting a few moments, the political scientist began: 'Dear Mrs. Gandhi, I admire your resourcefulness, your indomitability, your boundless energy. I detest your mendacity, your extreme love of power, your utter unscrupulousness. Let me tell you that despite your most skilful use of the first and third of these evil qualities in your search for absolute power, you will not be able to fool some of the people even some of the time, let alone fooling all the people all the time. You will not be able to do this because most of the people who suffered as a result of your arbitrary measures and acts, the source and origin of the arbitrary and tyrannical acts of your subordinates, have not short memories and besotted minds. They and their friends know from personal experience what you and your people did during the Emergency and it is no use your telling them 'Oh, no, it wasn't so.' Some of them may for reasons of profit or expediency even be prepared to work with you, but deep in their memories are embodied the basic facts of your tyranny. And what a tyranny it was! You jailed without charge or trial at your will and pleasure more than a hundred and ten thousand of your fellow-citizens. You altered the Constitution to suit your own purpose and save you from the consequences of judicial pronouncement. You trod under foot every fundamental right and human freedom. You muzzled

the Press and made it the instrument of your own propaganda. You emasculated the judiciary, driving even the ostensibly independent Supreme Court to what was rightly termed 'judical suicide'. You sterilised by force and compulsion thousands of citizens against their will. You had the residences of citizens bulldozed, often even without giving them warning. You encouraged your son to become without holding any position in government a law unto himself and a power in the land on whom Cabinet Ministers and Chief Ministers fawned. In brief you took to yourself the reality of absolute power. Think you your propaganda, public relations and frequent assertions of total ignorance and innocence will obliterate all this from the minds of all the people, especially of those who or whose relations and close friends suffered personally. No, think further, platinum lady.

Again, you talk continuously of being persecuted, of the successor Governments having run a vendetta against you and your son. Now you know well and we know well that it was not so. Had you had to deal with less kindly, considerate, extremely legal-minded and inept people than Morarji Desai or Charan Singh, Chandrasekhar or Vajpayee, within six months after your defeat in 1977, you would have been undergoing a ten-year jail sentence, and the story of India would have been to-day very different and much happier. Not only did the Governments you moan about all the time treat you with great leniency. They even enabled you to retain your hidden hoards, which you presumably used to very good account during the election. You make a great show of magnanimity now that you are in power. You say though they persecuted me, I will not persecute them. But they have not contemplated even one per cent of the evil you actually wrought. Of course you can always lock them up under Preventive Detention without reason as you did in the past, and if you are claiming credit for not doing that for the time being, the satisfaction the exercise of that amount of self-restraint or even virtue, may be conceded to you.

Remember then, powerful potentate as you have become again, though a sucker is born every minute, all the people in this land are not suckers, nor will you be able to get rid of all the non-suckers, however many and repressive the instruments you use, however attractive and persuasive your public relation gimmicks. And though prophecy is not my profession or even forte, let me say that I see nothing but frustration for you even if you attain absolute power. Your real and deadly enemies are not far from your person, over-weaning ambition, constant duplicity. Be satisfied with them if you can. Your well-wisher P.S. Well, what do you say ?

"As a letter, quite good and very true, though I'm not sure about the last point. She might well be quite satisfied with absolute power and die happy after a life-time of constant duplicity. Is there anything in history to show that Catherine the Great or the first Elizabeth had unhappy ends ? However, that is only incidental. My main question is, why this letter ? Tired of freedom and routine ? Just cussedness or what ?" asked the thin-faced, bespectacled, tall economic journalist. "A sense of public spirit, if you ask me," said a handsome lady in a

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kaftan and embroidered slippers. "Look at it this way, here's this at heart rather vulgar person, rolling along in her vulgar Cadillac, pouring out lies ad nauseam, believing she is getting away with them, and preening herself all over. It becomes a public duty, doesn't it almost, to burst the balloon, bring her down to solid earth. And she being in the position she is in, it might well be to the weal of the people that she should not deceive herself. Yes, I'd let it go forward, though I'm too cognisant of my own responsibilities to even think of signing it. In other words, I admit it I'd be scared." "Well," said the young Secretary "you can have my signature on it if you want to add another. I think it's right that woman was warned. She's far too smug and complacent. If we all work together, she'll have neither absolute power nor absolute consensus, and that's what we must aim for." The old man, who had been frowning, said suddenly "Yes I'll sign it, if you'll let me. You see, we and she are not on opposite sides. She is our properly-elected Prime Minister, and is entitled to general support on national issues so long as she is loyal to, and works within, the Constitution. There are signs beginning to be apparent that she may not; her past record is of course most unsatisfactory. Well we warn her in time, as we've a right to. The rest is up to her. It may redound to the public benefit. She might cut down on the lying and misrepresentation though of course it would be too much to expect her to give it up. It might redound to the signatories' disadvantage. Out of their jobs, a term of Preventive Detention perhaps. I'm old and have no job, so it doesn't much matter anyway, but you two are young, so take a day or two to think it over, and if you're still of the same mind, I'll be happy to add my mark, that is of course, if you want me. Ah, here comes our bus." And they all climbed in, the Political Scientist and the Secretary sharing the same seat and talking together earnestly in low voices.

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