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THIS UNEASY LAND

"THE country is uneasy, it is very uneasy," said an old friend of an authoritarian frame of mind. "It is as uneasy as a mettlesome thoroughbred that senses his rider has lost confidence in himself, that the fingers that hold his reins have become nerveless. This is a very serious business, so serious that if it goes on for some time, disaster may follow. My poor, dear Indira, what has happened to her? You meet her, she exudes confidence. You read her statements, nothing could be better. But action? Nothing happens. Her Ministers talk all the time about pie in the sky. But bread today? 'Ah yes, we must see to that, of course, the Janata government you know, over three years they messed everything up so badly; it takes time, yes it takes time. And we shall do this, that and the other to hoarders and black-marketeers, if and when we catch them.' And the same lethargy and lack of decision in every direction.

"Take you for instance, you know I have always meant you well, so I am sure you won't mind my taking you as an example. You make a very apt one. You are a powerful centre of disaffection, you will not deny? Yes, yes, I know, I know, you stand for all the freedoms, for clean and efficient government, for commonsense in domestic and foreign policy, against corruption, nepotism and hanky-panky of every kind. Your pages are sufficient testimony to all that. None the less, nay rather perhaps because of all that, you are a strong centre of disaffection towards Indira and her government. And what has she done about it? Why, nothing for over seven months. Perhaps she has become converted to freedom of the Press, sees great advantages to herself in it? Nothing of the kind. Don't make me laugh. She would crush your little rag like a cockroach under foot so far as inclination goes. Only unfortunately the determination is somehow lacking. That's the sad difference between Indira today and Indira as she was when last in power. And don't think it is due to losing Sanjay. It was very perceptible even when he was here. She will have to get that determination back, if the country is to cease to be uneasy. I am sorry for you, but you will have to be crushed in a greater cause. And don't think the fact that we don't have all the old Emergency laws in force at present can save you. A simple ordinance from the President will more than make up for them all, and we all know how easily ordinances come these days.

"Oh, don't talk to me of justice and fair play, the constitution and the preservation of democracy and all your other blahs. Here we are

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dealing with realities. The country doesn't care a damn about any of them or about good government in your sense. What it wants is firm government, and how can it have it, with this lacuna in Indira's determination? This crise de nerf of hers must be cured. You know at the present time, you are being positively unpatriotic. You should in the country's interest be helping to build up her self-confidence, telling her what a fine person she is, how much the country needs her, urging her to firm action, encouraging her to be her real self. No don't laugh. In the national interest, it would be worthwhile, even if you personally got crushed like a cockroach. You won't do it? Well, may you not repent your refusal in the end."

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"The country is uneasy, of course it is very uneasy. It is bound to be, having given up all its old values in the past thirty-two years, having adopted in practice their opposites, while still paying lip-homage to the old ones. Hence, of course, the tremendous hypocrisy of our lives today," said the long-retired judicial personage, who after retirement had for many years practised again and then finally retired. "At its simplest it comes to this. You enunciate high ethical principles to your son or nephew, and then when he joins your business or practise, introduce him to all the most unethical acts, saying but this of course is real business, your bread and butter and jam and later on, your trips to America and Poland and Japan depend on it. Now, when you in every walk of life, with the encouragement and example of your rulers, have been doing this, for over three decades, at some time or other the mass of you are bound to feel uneasy and with the Mistress of Chicane in charge of our affairs, the feeling is emphasised, all the more so as she for the first time does not seem to take her usual brazen-faced overriding line and point out to the rascals (a large part of the population) their overwhelming opportunities by her own example. A temporary aberration, no doubt, from which she seems already making great efforts to recover. No Indians all, do not be depressed; the good among you will soon be feeling the rods and axes of her lictors again."

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"The country is uneasy, of course it is," said the honest expert in foreign affairs. "It has a right to be, since in the seven months of Mrs. Gandhi's government, Indian foreign policy has taken a definitely pro-Kremlin line. Indira has in effect converted the Russian gun in Afghanistan into a helpful agricultural instrument, the Russian invasion of that country into a necessary move against encirclement, and knowing fully well that the Russians will not leave and that she does not intend that they should, has deceived the world into thinking that in her view they will. She has in the interest of the Kremlin, trampled upon the freedom of a friendly neighbour who had done India no harm at all. Whatever she says, the truth is that the Russian invasion of Afghanistan is unwarranted and naked aggression, and certainly deserved to be condemned severely by India.

"Again, in the interest of Russian policy, she has recognised the Vietnam-backed and Vietnam-imposed government at Pnom-Penh, when India's interests, if anything, were served better by taking no sides. The Pol-Pot government was in any case Kampuchean, however cruel and vicious, the Hing-sin-Ri is really Vietnamese. In the result we have managed to antagonise both the ASEAN countries and China, good relations with both of whom are of great importance to us, and all for no purpose of our own, only to please the Kremlin. Is it any wonder that more and more under Indira, India is regarded as the stooge of the Soviet Union? Non-alignment? ha, ha, ha. That went out when Indira came in. Pray God, a heavy price may not have to be paid by the country for this predilection of Indira's."

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"Of course the country is uneasy, very uneasy, and of course it has a right to be. With inflation approaching thirty per cent, after all the promises made during the two elections, to hold prices, to bring prices down, what can the people be but uneasy?" said an informed consumer. "Will all our assets be wiped away in the mere buying of essential foods for the family is often the working man's question, and even the good citizens, few as they are, are inclined to doubt their wisdom in honestly paying their taxes. To talk so much and do so little, bah, it is inexcusable. I hope Indira realises she has blotted her copy-book irretrievably. I understood of course that all she promised could not be done. To keep prices steady for two years with heavy deficit financing was a miracle which could come perhaps only once, and at least an H. M. Patel would be needed to do it. But the present mess, utterly disappointing!"

"I am inclined to believe that at least some of it is due to the understanding with industrialists, who gave large sums for the elections to the ruling party, that they would be able to make that and much more out of the public once the elections were over, a quid pro quo, what? The people pay, but what does it matter to the Malika-e-Muazzam and her Viziers and Nawabs of Delhi, new and old. And even to the MPs most of whom live on their large emoluments, far better than they ever did before. Domani," say Indira and her myrmidons, production will go up, life will be fine, 'you will see,' but in the words of the song, the wiser thing would be to 'let's forget domani (tomorrow) ., for domani never comes'. Of course, Indira is no economist, but she surely has sense enough to know that price control is bound to fail, whatever Shukla may say, without control over stocks and a properly worked out distribution scheme, and that in this matter above all others, implementation is the essence of policy. I sometimes wonder nowadays whether something has gone very wrong with my charming dear Indira, physically or mentally, since she came to power in January. I say my charming, dear Indira, because I have been her most loyal supporter over many, many years. The amount of time I spent during and after the emergency in defending her was enormous, and I was certain her performance in this field would have been infinitely better. If of course she is handicapped by health reasons,

that would account for her non-performance. In which case, all I say is God preserve her, protect her and restore her!"

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"The country uneasy? Why, how else do you expect to find it, when there's no security in any street of a city, a district or taluka town, and as to the countryside, the less said the better? You see, the awe of Government, the certainty that that impartial institution would not let any crime or breach of the peace go unpunished, so carefully nurtured under the old British dispensation, has by now been utterly dissipated by the governments, affected by personal pulls and influences, at the centre and the states. So, often, the worst criminals can escape, if they have sufficient political pull, and law-enforcement becomes a gamble. Your most carefully prepared, perfectly-investigated criminal case may have to be dropped, or the evidence against some of the accused weakened even when the hearing is on, all on political instructions, conveyed almost invariably orally. And then you expect order to be preserved, and the republic's peace to be maintained? Come think again. The result of the appeal in the Sanjay-Shukla case, for instance, did it contribute to peace and order?

"Ours is a government not of laws but of men, say some with pride. Agreed, but of what quality of men? Disinterested, public-spirited citizens who feel an injury to any other citizen as an injury to themselves? Would it were so, but alas! And could there be anything more foolish than the threat to transfer the Collector and District Superintendent, if a riot takes place in their jurisdiction? A riot springs not often out of the most insignificant causes. A boy of one community abusing or fighting with a boy of another community, a shriek, a call 'help, help, they are killing us' and you can have a first-rate riot, to stop which firing will have to be restored to? How could any official, however Argus-eyed, anticipate such a riot? The only thing that would have been helpful would have been the awe of government, the certainty that punishment would follow inevitably and swiftly. That could be the only hope, and that our politicians with Indira at their head, have rendered totally ineffective. Aye certainly, the country has good reason to be very uneasy." Thus a very old man, who had seen much, experienced much, and thought much.

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