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PEASANTS AND POTATOES

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PEASANTS AND POTATOES

It was only just a year ago that leaders of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha joined the Prime Minister in felicitating Sri Balram Jakhar on his election as the new Speaker. Sri Balram, said the Prime Minister on that occasion, was not only a son of the soil devoted to land (referring to his background as a farmer) but combined a sense of culture and courtesy. Reminded by the Opposition leaders that he had succeeded "to a line which is the life-line of any parliamentary democracy", Sri Balram himself affirmed that the Speaker should not only be impartial but should be seen to be so by the whole House and the country, and that he would speak "only one language, the language of the House".^{1/}

Of course no one in this country expects such sentiments and assurances to be scrupulously followed. A modicum of decorum and sense of responsibility have to be maintained however by anyone who, barring the President of the Republic, occupies the most exalted chair in the political domain. Culture and courtesy are perhaps dispensable now and then, perhaps even impartiality when other interests place too severe a strain on it, but not under any circumstances the basic codes and conventions essential for a functioning democracy. One of them is that the Speaker of the Lok Sabha should not himself commit acts that amount to contempt of democratic institutions and procedures at even the highest levels of government, and do so with impunity.

Yet that was precisely what Sri Balram has been guilty of in his recent observations (rather his outbursts) on the Tenth Coromandel Lecture^{2/} delivered a month ago by Dr. I. G. Patel, Governor of the Reserve

^{1/} "Balram, A Combination of Farmer and Scholar", The Hindu, January 23, 1980.

^{2/} I. G. Patel, "On a Policy Framework for Indian Agriculture" (mimeographed), December 18, 1980 at Delhi, reproduced in Mainstream, December 27, 1980.

Bank of India. The subject of the lecture was "Policy Framework for Indian Agriculture". Sri Balram, like any other citizen of the country, could have expressed his views on the issues raised in the lecture. But that was not what he chose to do. What he questioned was Dr. Patel's personal competence and right to speak on this subject of wide public interest. "What does Mr. Patel, sitting in air-conditioned rooms, know about a farmer and the conditions under which he toils day and night?", asked Sri Balram presiding over a two-day session of the Bharat Krishak Samaj at Kolhapur at the end of December.^{3/} And rather like Pontius Pilate, without waiting for a reply, he went on to demand that he be removed from the position of the Governor of the Reserve Bank.

That was not all. Just in case anyone dismissed it as a minor indiscretion by a "peasant" Speaker on vacation, Sri Balram returned to the charge a fortnight later, this time under the auspices of the Karnataka Pradesh Krishik Samaj at Bangalore. This time he not only wanted to know what right Dr. Patel had "to criticize the farmers and say that they were being pampered" but accused the Reserve Bank as a whole of thinking that it was the "custodian of all wisdom". He also proposed the reconstitution of the boards of directors of all nationalized banks (including obviously the Reserve Bank), as also of the Agricultural Prices Commission, so that at least 50 per cent of the members would be farmers.^{4/}

The suggestion for reconstitution of the boards, and of the APC, reflects no doubt a point of view that needs to be considered on its own merits. But one would have thought that, since the Speaker of the Lok Sabha is expected to show some wisdom and impartiality in matters of this nature, Sri Balram could have made this point more effectively within the

^{3/} "Speaker wants RBI Governor Sacked", The Hindu, December 26, 1980.

^{4/} "Speaker wants RBI Board, APC Reconstituted", The Hindu, January 17, 1981.

House itself in the course of a discussion ~~on the subject, instead of~~ in a transparently partisan manner.

Suppose we overlook even that, since few political leaders in the country seem to be concerned ~~now with such norms of public behaviour.~~ There is a more basic issue involved. On what basis, and on what authority, can Sri Balram demand the removal of the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India for expressing his views on agricultural policy in a public lecture? The Reserve Bank of India is an autonomous institution working within the framework of the country's parliamentary democracy, and it is in the public interest that occasionally the person who presides over it expresses his views on economic problems for more widespread discussion. If he should in the process commit a serious offence there are well-known procedures and channels through which the charges may be raised and action taken. The Speaker of the Lok Sabha has certainly no extra-constitutional rights in the matter; on the other hand, he has constitutional responsibilities which he is expected to carry out with awareness and concern for the rights of others, so that the system as a whole functions freely and more democratically.

In neglecting these responsibilities Sri Balram has brought into contempt not only the office of the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India but his own as well. One must therefore hope that Sri Balram will take an early opportunity to tender an apology gracefully to the Reserve Bank of India and its Governor; otherwise he will have forfeited, in the eyes of many, his moral authority as Speaker of the Lok Sabha.

Suppose, however, we set aside this aspect of the matter also. Do the aspersions and charges raised against Dr. Patel stand when examined in the light of available facts? This is important because, if there is

no prima facie evidence that they are substantially correct, Sri Balram would be guilty of not only constitutional impropriety but defamation (whether or not Dr. Patel is concerned about it).

First, what could Dr. Patel sitting in "air-conditioned rooms" know about farmers? One might suppose that it could not be air-conditioning that comes in the way since, for all we know, Sri Balram's office room is also air-conditioned. So the question is whether Dr. Patel has had opportunities to know about the conditions in which farmers toil day and night (say, as Sri Balram could have known)?

Those who have known Dr. Patel in his younger days would have of course no difficulty in answering the question. What must strike as ironic to them — and in a sense well-deserved irony — is that someone who once prided himself so much for being of mere peasant ('patidar') origin should now be subject to this accusation. But it is not really necessary to be that familiar with all the biographical details of Dr. Patel's personal history. If Sri Balram had cared to read another public address delivered by Dr. Patel a few days earlier, at the 30th Annual Convocation of the M.S. University of Baroda,^{5/} he would have come across the following rather sentimental observations on his past:

"One of my earliest memories is that of suddenly leaving Baroda with my parents and going to my native village Karamsad as soon as Gandhiji announced one of his Satyagraha movements. At times of civil disobedience, Karamsad, being the village of Sardar Patel and being in British India, was always in danger of attachment of property and the like. All our belongings in the ancestral home were loaded on to carts and we set out at night for my mother's village, Dharmaj, which provided a safe haven and protection as it belonged to Baroda State. What impressed me then, of course, was the journey itself, sitting on top of a loaded cart under the canopy of a starlit sky and being lulled to sleep by the ringing necklace of bells around the bullocks' necks..."

^{5/} Convocation Address by Dr. I. S. Patel at the Thirtieth Annual Convocation of the M.S. University of Baroda, December 6, 1960.

Dr. Patel went on to remind the new graduates of their obligations to the millions of poor people who subsidise university education in India. Though much of what he said in this context is commonplace and not relevant to our present concern, his concluding observations have now a kind of relevance which he could not have intended.

"So the crucial question before all of us is: how shall we create the India of our dreams? I have no precise and full answer to this question. But I know part of the answer, a vital part of the answer, and that is: by learning to work better together, by trusting and respecting each other, by mutually supporting each other rather than tearing each other down. It has often been said that an individual Indian is second to none in any field of endeavour. But together, we do not add up; we subtract from each other.... This has been our historic curse; and if the behaviour of our politicians, scientists, intellectuals, businessmen and artists is any guide, it is agonisingly still our curse".

A more concrete charge against Dr. Patel, than the one about insulating himself from farmers through air-conditioning, is that he "criticised" farmers and favoured an "anti-farmer attitude and policy". How far is this allegation sustainable?

Anyone who reads the published text of the Tenth Coromandel Lecture will see that it is no less and no more than what it was intended to be, namely reflections on "some aspects of the evolution of Indian economic policy in relation to agriculture". When this series of lectures was inaugurated a decade ago, Sir Joseph Hutchinson of the University of Cambridge had observed that "this is something which, as time goes on, will gain in reputation as a forum where men can put forward their views on agricultural development". This is precisely what Dr. Patel did, taking the opportunity "to set out a few questions that troubled him" about the future of Indian agriculture", reflections based on his association "with the making of economic policy in general over the past twenty-five years or so". The questions he raises are

in fact extremely important; and his observations deserve serious attention even if one might not agree with all of them.

One of these concerns the likelihood of the supply of agricultural products increasing at a faster rate than demand if agricultural support prices are fixed too high, citing in this context the famous Engels' Law that a progressively smaller proportion of additional income tends to be spent on food and similar items as per capita income raises. Non-economists should perhaps have been warned however that this Engels was neither the same person, nor even a blood relation of another man carrying the same name who was Karl Marx's closest collaborator and friend! [Ernst Engel was a statistician by training, though primarily an administrator — Director of the Prussian Bureau of Statistics — whose "active mind set itself..... unconventional tasks that led to publications of great importance" (as Professor Schumpeter was later to describe his contributions, including the Engel's Law first published in 1857). So a dispassionate consideration of the implications of this Law is possible without being caught up in any ideological considerations.]⁷

After indicating the possibility of unsaleable surpluses developing in some agricultural products on account of high support prices, Dr. Patel has highlighted an important policy question that is generally dodged by many who, while advocating "higher priority to agriculture", "higher prices for farmers", wholesale "writing off" of farmers' overdues to cooperative societies, etc., claim to be promoting the cause of the poor.

"It can, of course, be argued that the income-elasticity of aggregate demand for agricultural products will rise — and with that the relative need for investment in agriculture — if there is a reduction in the existing rather glaring inequalities in incomes and wealth in the country. Nor can there be two opinions on the paramount need for reducing inequalities. But as long as income-distribution remains what it is, there is no sense in piling up waste on top of inequality by unrealistic notions about the importance of agriculture. The same reminder is, I think, necessary also in relation to the argument that we should give the highest priority to agricultural production since the highest priority should be given to the satisfaction of the basic needs of the poorest people and since food and clothing form the bulk of these basic needs. An actual transfer of relative incomes in favour of the poor should precede — or at least accompany — any such priority. A mere shift in the nature of goods produced does nothing to alter the distribution of incomes in the desired direction".

If one were concerned enough about the very poor farmers and agricultural labourers (who constitute the hard core of the mass poverty in the country) as to want to do something for them immediately, the only way of bringing about the necessary redistribution of incomes is by enforcing a rather severe redistribution of land holdings. But everyone knows what the record in this matter has been over the last quarter of a century, and where most of the great advocates of "farmers" stand on this question even now.

The relative magnitudes involved here need to be noted. It will be seen from Table 1, which shows the percentage distribution of operational (agricultural) holdings/ that households with no land or with holdings of less than 1 acre form well over two-fifth of the total rural population; and that, despite all the land reforms implemented in the first 25 years after Independence, their share of the total operated area is less than 2 per cent. On the other hand, even after the extensive partitions of property among the larger holders of land during this period (partly on account of demographic factors but encouraged also by the desire to evade ceilings on large-sized ownership

holdings), about 5 per cent of all rural households had under their control nearly two-fifth of the total operated area in agriculture in 1971-72.

Table 1: Rural Operational (Agricultural) Holdings^{6/}

<u>Size of holdings (in acres)</u>	<u>1954-55</u>		<u>1971-72</u>	
	<u>Number of households (million)</u>	<u>Area operated (million acres)</u>	<u>Number of households (million)</u>	<u>Area operated (million acres)</u>
0.00	17.2(28.2%)	-	21.9(27.4)	..
0.01- 0.99	8.6(14.2%)	3.6(1.1%)	11.9(14.9%)	6.2(1.7%)
1.00- 2.49	8.5(14.1%)	14.6(4.3%)	14.4(18.0%)	27.7(7.6%)
2.50- 4.99	9.1(15.0%)	33.6(10.0%)	13.2(16.4%)	54.5(14.9%)
5.00- 7.49	5.3(8.7%)	55.2(9.9%)	6.9(8.7%)	48.7(13.3%)
7.50- 9.99	3.3(5.4%)	29.3(8.7%)	3.4(4.3%)	35.0 (9.3%)
10.00-14.99	3.4(5.6%)	42.1(12.5%)	3.8(4.7%)	52.0(14.2%)
15.00 and over	5.5(9.0%)	179.3(43.4%)	4.5(5.6%)	142.7(39.0%)
<u>Total</u>	<u>61.0(100.0%)</u>	<u>335.7(100.0%)</u>	<u>80.0(100.0%)</u>	<u>365.7(100.0%)</u> 310.4

It can also be seen from Table 1 that, between 1954-55 and 1971-72, the absolute number of households with holdings of 7/2 acres and above, remained almost unchanged at around 12 million; and that the total area operated by them in 1971-72 (229 million acres) was only slightly lower than in 1954-55 (251 million acres), still accounting therefore for 62.5 per cent of the entire operated area in Indian agriculture. By 1981, the total number of rural households should have risen to about 94 million, but the number of households with holdings of 7/2 acres and above or the total area operated by them is unlikely to have changed very much; almost the entire increase in the total number of

^{6/} Source: National Sample Survey, Reports on Land Holdings; also see S. J. Nayal, "Trends in Rural Unemployment in India", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XII, No.5, January 29, 1977.

households will have been accommodated, in all probability, in holdings in the smaller size-range (particularly in those below 2½ acres).

We have independent information available (from the Rural Labour Enquiries conducted in 1964-65 and 1974-75) on the extent of increase in the number of wage-earners within these households over this decade. The relevant data are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Wage Earners among Rural Labour Households^{7/}

	<u>Number of wage earners</u> (in million)		
	<u>1964-65</u>	<u>1974-75</u>	<u>% increase</u>
Men	20.5	30.5	48.8
Women	12.8	20.6	60.5
Children	2.0	3.5	77.6
<u>Total</u>	<u>35.3</u>	<u>54.6</u>	<u>54.7</u>

The fact that the number of women wage-earners has increased more rapidly than men wage-earners, and that the number of child wage-earners has risen even more rapidly, is indicative of the extremely distressing condition to which this class in the countryside has been reduced. According to the findings of the Enquiry conducted in 1974-75, both the real wage rate and the average number of days of employment in a year had fallen over the previous decade in most parts of the country; there is no reason to assume that this trend has been reversed since then. By 1981 the total number of rural wage-earning labourers could be around 67 million, nearly twice as many as in 1964-69.

Here, then, is the heart and soul of the problem of rural unemployment and rural poverty, which has been growing despite all the development planning in the country over the last 30 years.

^{7/} Sources: Report on Rural Labour Enquiry, 1963-65 (Ministry of Labour, Government of India); and Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, for 1974-75 data.

Still another very relevant aspect of the questions relating to agriculture, which have to be faced in the context of rural poverty and unemployment, is the relationship between the size-distribution of land holdings and the pattern of distribution of rural credit, particularly cooperative credit which has expanded phenomenally over the past two decades as part of development planning. The data available from the All India Debt and Investment Survey conducted in 1971-72 by the Reserve Bank of India are summarised in Table 3 in a form in which this relationship can be readily seen.

Table 3: Rural Debt (Cash Loans) Outstanding in 1971-72^{8/}

Asset group (in Rs)	% of rural house- holds	% share of value		% share of each asset group in the total debt (under each cate- gory) of all rural households						
		land owned by rural households	livestock owned by rural households	Total	according to source of cred-					
					Co-op- erati- ves	Govt	Agri money lenders	Profe- ssional lo- money lenders	La- nd lo-	
Less than 10000	69.4	14.9	32.8	36.5	15.6	26.1	42.7	45.0	50.	
10000 - 20000	15.4	18.5	23.4	19.2	18.3	20.9	21.3	19.0	18.	
20000 - 50000	11.0	31.4	26.7	25.3	34.6	28.8	23.3	23.4	17.	
More than 50000	3.9	35.2	17.0	19.0	31.4	24.3	12.7	12.7	14.	
	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.</u>

^{8/} Compiled by the author for the Radhakrishnan Memorial Lectures delivered by him under the auspices of the University of Oxford in April, 1977. An up-dated and revised version of these lectures is expected to be ready for publication in the course of this year.

It will be seen that (a) the share of the top richest 15 per cent of the rural households in the credit obtained from cooperatives (at concessional rates of interest) was no less than 65 per cent of the total, nearly as high as their share in the total value of land owned by rural households; (b) the share of the top 4 per cent was well over 30 per cent of the credit obtained from cooperatives; and (c) the poorer households have still to depend mainly on the traditional sources (i.e. agricultural money-lenders, professional money-lenders, and landlords) at rates of interest generally much higher than those charged by cooperatives. (Even when rates of interest charged by traders and the like are reported as very low, much higher rates are usually collected indirectly through agreements on the prices of the produce to be made available to the creditors).

Those who propose various measures for the benefit of agriculture or of the rural poor should therefore be clear in their own mind, and make clear to others, how precisely they expect such measures to be beneficial and to whom. When they ask for higher priority for agriculture, is it merely for increasing the rate of growth of agricultural output, or are they also concerned with questions such as who produces this output, which strata in the rural areas would benefit, etc? Would they be prepared to countenance redistribution of land holdings on a more extensive scale than hitherto in order to promote greater equity in the distribution of benefits? If this is not practical politics, would they at least be willing to support a radical restructuring of the composition of and policies followed by cooperative societies which have clearly been used so far mainly by the richest farmers for serving their own interests? If neither of this is possible, could they indicate how, even if the richest farmers are the main direct beneficiaries.

something could be made to trickle some benefits down to the poorest, the measures they would actively support for this purpose, and on what scale they anticipate the indirect benefits to accrue to the lower strata of peasants and agricultural labourers? If they do not take the trouble to enlighten us on such questions — in case Sri Balram had done so already at the various forums where he has been speaking it has been unfortunately not reported — it would be legitimate to question at least their understanding of the problems of agriculture and of the rural poor, even if one is content to leave alone their motives and ideological predilections.

Dr. Patel has made his position on these issues fairly clear. He favours price supports for a few basic necessities like foodgrains; he visualises provision of "market assistance" to producers of milk, fruits, vegetables, fish and meat "so that they get a fair share in the final price paid by consumers"; he proposes that "there should be no limitation in general on producers earning higher prices and incomes through exports, except in the case of the most essential items of consumption which are considered suitable for price support as well as for most extensive public distribution"; but he stresses the need to be "there is an inherent danger of policies towards agriculture becoming extremely careful about offering support prices all round because an important engine of inflation and a major cause of economic weakness in India".

Dr. Patel does not express any views on problems of institutional credit for agriculture, presumably for the reason that it is a "subject of direct and primary concern to me in my present official capacity"; so he is not guilty of leaking out any official secrets in the course of the lecture. But he has a number of important observations to make on credit and related issues, as well as on land distribution, in the

context of a detailed reference to questions of equity and growth in agriculture. They need only to be quoted to indicate how absurd are Sri Balram's charges, and how in fact, by giving such an open exhibition of his anger against Dr. Patel, he has betrayed perhaps his own class interests.

Given below are some extracts:

"One cannot help feeling that given the diversity of conditions in the country -- and with our penchant for tolerance and coexistence in all matters -- we would perhaps have a combination of different situations in different parts of the country for many years to come. Thus, to some extent, small but relatively inefficient farms will continue if only because of inertia and lack of recognition of a clearly superior alternative. If farm incomes can be supplemented by other ancillary activities, the plight of the surviving small farmers may not be all that bad. But perhaps the more general pattern would be the emergence of a more or less middle-peasantry form of capitalist agriculture. Neither growth nor equity will hold a firm sway, and we will alternate from time to time between policies aimed at one or the other in response to conflicts and pressures from or as between different groups of producers".

"To some extent, of course, we can try and make this somewhat untidy and grim scenario a little less intolerable by appropriate policies. Thus small farmers who cling on can continue to be helped in regard to credit, water, extension facilities and support prices. The medium-farmers may be denied the benefit of subsidies of any kind and particularly those which encourage them to employ labour-saving methods of production such as the use of tractors and harvesters. They may even be made to shoulder an appropriate share of the burden of supporting public investment and social welfare schemes. But with all that, growth and equity will not be adequately harmonised, with the result that the prospects of overall growth and general well-being will be less satisfactory if only because conflicts within society will continue to fester at many points".

"In developing countries with a slow rate of growth and considerable unemployment, socialisation of the means of production and particularly of land may thus have its primary justification not so much in the interest of growth as in the interest of equity. This, I think, is the main reason why socialism makes better sense and has greater appeal at the early stages of development in poor countries with generally very modest prospects of delivering rapid growth. Even if socialisation does not necessarily initiate soon the process of rapid growth, it can serve a vital purpose in that it might make even slow growth less intolerable or unacceptable than would otherwise be the case. And in time, and given favourable

political and other factors, the growth process also could hopefully be accelerated along this road, at least till such time as considerations of individual motivation and initiative can once again no longer be neglected and dictate taking a somewhat more capitalist path. The trick or the luck lies in being able to alter this rhythm at the right time and in the right direction".

The case of Sri Balram offering a graceful apology to Dr. Patel, even if not to the Reserve Bank, is therefore indeed unanswerable. However, a Speaker is after all a Speaker and, even if he has spoken a little too much and unwisely, the people of India with their capacity for "tolerance and co-existence" will perhaps not want such an apology. We should be satisfied therefore if Sri Balram gives a detailed explanation of what precisely it is that he found offensive in Dr. Patel's lecture and, if possible, indicate what he would himself propose for promoting growth and equity in Indian agriculture. This is a modest enough demand to be regarded as a "basic need" of interested citizens in this country, and one hopes that Sri Balram will not fail in responding to it or in being articulate enough while doing so.

It was Karl Marx who spoke of the peasantry as a "simple addition of homologous magnitudes, such as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes", and of their political helplessness. The issue he was raising thereby (referring then to 19th century France) was much deeper — namely as to whether peasantry can at all be regarded as a "class" and what therefore tends to happen in a country with a large peasantry.

"The small-holding peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse.....In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class.

In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power subordinating society to itself."^{9/}

And this he linked with the re-emergence of monarchy after the French Revolution, first under Napoleon the Great and again later under his nephew, Louis Bonaparte (nicknamed 'Napoleon the Little' by Victor Hugo).

"Historical tradition gave rise to the belief of the French peasants in the miracle that a man named Napoleon would bring all the glory back to them. And an individual turned up who gives himself out as the man because he bears the name of Napoleon.....After a vagabondage of twenty years and after a series of grotesque adventures, the legend finds fulfilment and the man becomes Emperor of the French. The fixed idea of the Nephew was realised, because it coincided with the fixed idea of the most numerous class of the French people.....Since Louis XIV, France has experienced no similar persecution of the peasants 'on account of denogic practices'. But let there be no misunderstanding. The Bonaparte dynasty represents not the revolutionary, but the conservative peasant; not the peasant that strikes out beyond the condition of his social existence, the small holding, but rather the peasant who wants to consolidate this holding; not the country folk who, linked up with the towns, want to overthrow the old order through their own energies, but on the contrary those who, in stupefied seclusion within this old order, want to see themselves and their small holdings saved and favoured by the ghost of the empire. It represents not the enlightenment, but the superstition of the peasant; not his judgement, but his prejudice; not his future but his past...."

^{9/} "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852), in K.Marx and F.Engels, Selected Works (Progress Publishers, Moscow), Vol.I.

The relevance of Marx's analysis to the understanding of developments not only in India but in China over the last few years is too obvious to require elaboration. The small peasant was liberated from feudalistic exploitation by Napoleon the Great, as he was in India also in some areas under 'zanindari' tenure immediately after independence under Jawaharlal Nehru; but neither under the two Napoleons nor under Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, could the small peasants get much farther. Mao did more in China for the small peasantry than any of his liberal or Marxist predecessors elsewhere in the world. Yet the demographic pressure in China has been so severe that even he could not carry the process to a satisfactory conclusion (which required extensive industrialization); his successors are now engaged in a confused wild-goose chase the outcome of which is not certain yet, but has apparently led already to the emergence of three major "capitalist maladies" in China — namely inflation, speculation and smuggling.^{11/} This is not without its lessons for India: its population problem is even more explosive, it has relatively a much larger agricultural proletariat than China ever had, and it has yet not had the kind of social revolution that could bring at least some partial alleviation to the misery of the masses.

Nevertheless, instead of concentrating all thinking and effort on finding solutions to these massive and challenging problems — the like of which have not been faced by any country belonging to the West (either in the capitalist or in the socialist bloc) — we fritter away our limited energies tearing each other down ("our historic curse", as Dr. Patel has described it). There have also been, and continue to be, plenty of candidates seeking the role of "Napoleon the Little", without

^{11/} "Big Farmers reviving Feudalism: NGR", The Hindu, December 26, 1980.

realizing that, under the changed conditions of this century and in a large country of India's size, they are unlikely to have even as much luck as Louis Bonaparte.^{12/} Since there is no clear intellectual grasp of the nature and magnitude of the problems they are dealing with they do not even seem to know what they are saying and doing, so much so that, if Marx were still living, he would have wondered who were really the potatoes, the peasants or their present political spokesmen.

That what is required is more character than high intellectualism is evident from some earthy observations of a State Chief Minister whose earlier training for the job has been no more than as a film-star. Reacting to a threat by a Tamil farmer leader, who has been asking his followers not to repay loans to cooperatives (as part of a larger programme to highlight their grievances), the Chief Minister said that the affluent land-owning class was making a determined bid to bring back the "golden" days of feudal landlordism, and that the secret behind the call for non-repayment of the dues to the cooperatives was that the big landowners were themselves lending money to small farmers and farm labourers. Whether or not he was wholly correct in his statement of facts, it is noteworthy that his firm stand has paid some dividends already — not only in terms of economic policy but perhaps even in terms of politics. Of course not all Chief Ministers can afford to have the same degree of intellectual integrity, since they have generally no alternative sources of income of their own and are more dependent on the affluent classes or leaders above them in the political hierarchy.

^{12/} See K.N.Raj, "Towards Eradication of Poverty — An European Antecedent", in Society & Change: Essays in Honour of Sachin Chaudhuri, Oxford University Press (1977); and "Poverty, Politics and Development: Western Europe in First Half of 19th century and South Asia in Second Half of the 20th" (Zakir Hussain Memorial Lectures delivered at Viswabharati, Santiniketan, on January 28 and 29, 1977), Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XII, Nos.6,7, and 8, Annual Number, February 1977.

This does not mean of course that all the demands of farmers are to be rejected as incorrect. There is much substance in many of them, such as for instance the demand for higher procurement prices for rice in the southern States,^{13/} and generally the demand for securing a higher share of the price paid by the ultimate consumers. But they need to be examined carefully on the merits of the case, and the solutions found must be not only realistic but such that they are (as Dr. Patel indicated in his lecture) "in the right direction"; it is a disservice to farmers (particularly the small holders) to reduce such demands to populist slogans which can help only unscrupulous politicians.

Unfortunately such opportunism exists today in all camps, both within the parties in power and among the opposition, including the party headed by our ex-caretaker Prime Minister, and the parties of the Left (some of whom seem to be craving for joining in some 'Long March' or other irrespective of the direction!). They have to be therefore exposed mercilessly without any partiality based on actual or presumed ideological affinities. It is not personalities and what they say that matter any longer but their principles (if any) and what they do.

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^{13/} See C.E. Hanumantha Rao, Technological Change and Distribution of Gains in Agriculture (Macmillan, 1975), p.82; and J.P. Singh, "Price Policy and Rice Production in India", paper prepared for Agricultural Economics Workshop, University of Chicago, March 19, 1979.

ERRATA

1. Footnote 11 on page 16 should be re-numbered 10 and should read: "China Suffers from Capitalist Maladies", The Hindu, January 30, 1981.
2. Footnote 12 on page 17 should be re-numbered 11.
3. Add Footnote 12 on page 17, at the end of the sentence ending "...lending money to small farmers and farm labourers", and carry over from page 16 footnote 11 re-numbered now as 12.

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