

Weekly Notes

All for a Quartet Anna ?

TO those who have unshaken and rock-like faith in the justice and excellence of a government, all public acts of resistance to authority, defiance, or lawlessness take on a particular colour. The good man that he was, John Stuart Mill, the author of Representative Government and the greatest liberal of all times, true to his salt to the East India Company whom he served, was shocked and aghast that the people of India should be so far lacking in moral sense, and so depraved as not to co-operate with the police of the then government of the country! He ascribed this strange behaviour to a streak of criminality in the Indian people. But when one is open to doubt that the government may be wrong or may mishandle a situation, one begins to take a different view of public resentment, even when it breaks out in violence and takes the undesirable forms of rowdyism, senseless destruction or worse. If resentment is so widespread and the popular feeling against the Government of West Bengal so strong, why should it take this sterile path and exhaust itself in this deplorable manner, instead of finding an outlet through more effective means of changing that government? This is a question that goes to the root of the working of popular government in this country. If the people who swept the polls really represented and effectively expressed the popular feelings entertained by the vast majority, how can the government formed by them be so unpopular? How is it that public opinion is not shocked and stirred into action by the continued manifestation of lawlessness that has gone on in Calcutta, starting from the relatively minor issue of a quarter-anna increase in second class tram fares?

The tram service in Calcutta will bear comparison with the best in the world. It has been steadily improved and its efficiency, comfort and frequency have tried to keep pace, in spite of enormous odds, with the growing pressure of the population of Calcutta which has taxed its resources to the utmost. Costs have gone up of everything and the meanest intelligence will need little persuasion to be convinced that the same standard of service cannot be

maintained, far less improved upon, unless the Tramways are allowed to charge a little more. Judged by any criterion, the increase is more than fair. And the people of Calcutta, not even the poorest, are not that much lacking in intelligence that they should fail to appreciate the reason for the slightly higher fares.

There is resentment that the tram service should be run by an English company, even though it be run much better than what could be expected, had it been taken over by the Calcutta Corporation. Certain statements made by West Bengal's Chief Minister have been cited as misleading the public and thereby adding to the provocation, such that the improvements effected by the Tramway Company from the higher fare would eventually become people's property when the tramways are acquired at a later date; Surely the agreement with the company cannot be so one-sided and when it is taken over, it would be according to a valuation of the assets which is clearly laid down in the terms of the contract. This is simple enough and no one can be fooled about it. The Corporation had the right of purchasing the undertaking on 1st January 1938; it can still exercise that right at the end of a specified period against a purchase price of 25 times the net annual earnings of the company calculated on the basis of an average for seven years immediately preceding the purchase. Since this right was not exercised, it will be some years before the chance comes again. If its earnings during these years are low, the purchase price will also be correspondingly low. But the people who have been burning the tram-cars could not have been projecting their mind so far into the future or thinking seriously of saving on the purchase price for the Calcutta Corporation.

That's not it. There is much more behind it. And it cannot be blamed on the usual trouble-makers for the simple reason that they had been at it continuously all this time and have not succeeded in getting the public to support them and come out on the streets to risk bullets and police arrest. Discontentment must be deep and very widely spread indeed for anybody to be able to engineer the mass demonstrations

that Calcutta has witnessed, or to stage a general strike. The closest study of the agreement with the Tramway Company can throw no light on the dispute about fares. Perhaps an assessment of the unemployment situation, indicated by such chance findings as 50,000 people applying for 300 vacancies advertised by the State Transport Corporation can tell more. There must be something also in the rankling resentment that Syama Prasad should die in detention or that the head of the Government of the State should be so casual, if not callous, about an enquiry 'to ascertain the facts behind his death.

Workers to Share Reserves

THE dispute between the Madras Electric Tramways and their employees over the indefinite closure of the business has resulted in favour of the company in so far as the Industrial Court has ruled that closure does not amount to a lock-out and that the company cannot be compelled to reopen its uneconomic business. The Award, however, gives a generous gift to the workers. Apart from gratuity and provident fund, usual in the event of winding up, the workers have been given a 50 per cent share in the accumulated reserves of the company.

In respect of workers' share in the reserves of a closing business there are two important precedents: the case of the Cawnpore Electric Supply Corporation Ltd, in 1947 and later, that of the BEST in Bombay. The dispute first arose out of the impending transfer of the ownership of the undertaking to the State Government. The workers claimed a share in the reserves on the ground that the reserves were built up out of profits only a part of which had been distributed to them as bonus while the rest was utilised partly for distributing dividends and partly for building up reserves. The undistributed profits in the form of reserves must be shared by the workers. Such in brief, was the employees' case for a share in the reserves. The employers resisted the claim. Their main argument was that bonus being an ex-gratia payment, could not be claimed as of right. The Adjudicator dismissed this argument and awarded that 50 per cent of the reserves, after meeting liabilities