

The Pathology of a Myth

THE usual place for our fixed images of the dead, is the refrigerator we call our memory; thick blocks of ice, recollections of carefully chosen aspects and moments which are happy in retrospect, see to it that the image does not decompose. A nation's way is different; it plants the dead in a hot-house of political enthusiasm, and the result is *rich foliage*: rendering it irrelevant whether the primary seed had ever bargained for this kind of growth. Those who were present at the funeral, and watched the burial, saw the end of a man; the beginning of the myth is what they are later called upon to witness.

The post-mortem life of a leader can take one of two shapes: he can be kept alive as a man, as an undying father-figure about whom no questions are asked, or the body may be thrown into the incinerator and a book placed in the vacuum. In India, for instance, the philosophy of Gandhi has been found easily expendable, whilst the present leadership still worships, externally but sincerely, the man. The Soviet Union may be said to provide an example of the other possible use of a dead leader: the personality is denounced but Stalin's policies are altered but slightly even if the philosophy is now re-named Marxism-Leninism. It may be that in the choice a leadership makes between the dead man and his philosophy is to be found a clue to the nature and strength of his successors, it may be I have not examined enough evidence to put it more strongly—that a people which is still creative, and growing has less need for an embalmed corpse, for its belief is tangible enough; a people with less vitality will cling pathetically to the man, his photograph on every wall, his statue at every street corner.

It is quite irrelevant for the purpose of this disquisition whether Subhas Chandra Bose, that gallant patriot of Bengal, is alive or dead. A committee recently collected some evidence and may be expected early to submit its report to the Government of India. It will not be surprising if the committee's verdict is equivocal; it would have been easier for the leader concerned to prove that he is alive than it ever can be

for a committee to prove that he is dead. In any case, it is certain that West Bengal will reject the report and continue to believe what she likes to believe. She has certain fixed notions of what attributes and qualities should be found in Subhas Bose, and Bengali ingenuity can be trusted to interpret all evidence to the contrary as just so much more confirmation of what she has always known. A typical example of this was when, at the end of a meeting of the Congress Working Committee, the late Sardar Patel announced that some financial assistance would be offered to Subhas Bose's widow and child in Austria. Nearly ten Bengali politicians promptly came out with a statement that the whole story was a canard, invented to discredit the Bengali leader.

It was more than the puritanic streak in the Bengali character which spoke in that statement, although even that is interesting enough; it was held to be incredible that so great a man should get married and raise a family. Whilst this innate respect for asceticism was responsible for the people's rejection of Patel's story, it is possible that the second rank leaders, who rushed with the statement did so for an additional reason. They might have seen in the story a threat to the myth they had built up around

personality, easily enlarged by his absence. Soon there were photographs of Mrs Bose and Miss Bose, there were facsimile letters from Bose to his elder brother (whose own silence seems, in retrospect, indicative of the possibility that he shared the politicians' fear and the whole network of evidence caught up with, and closed in on, the agreeable illusion. To this day, however, it is not considered polite to mention the matter of Bose's marriage. It is quite usual to meet people in Calcutta who still do not believe that their idol, a considerable leader by any standards could ever have got married.

Talk to the average Bengali in Calcutta, read any of the nationalist dailies, and you will immediately see the very important position Subhas Bose still occupies in the Bengali mind. Let me repeat it, the Bengali has very good reasons to be proud of so courageous a fighter. What is being examined here, with some cau-

tion I am sure I have not been able to conceal, is that extra zeal of which there is not an immediate explanation in available data. Beneath the wholly justified pride over Subhas Bose there is something akin to the desperate possessiveness of a widow to her son, the son who has gone abroad and has not been heard of for a long time. However excessive the display of emotion may seem to the outside observer, it should also be appreciated that grief in a situation small as this can hardly be too much. It is not surprising that the widow has come to develop a resistance to harbingers of what may be bad news. She awaits the postman as intensely as she dreads his approach; she questions his identity when he looks like producing a letter with a black border.

The analyst and I hope I have kept my judgments to the absolute minimum is not debarred from being sympathetic, which I claim to be; but he cannot stop there. The widow, when she has other young ones to look after, should be told that her waiting for the son "missing, believed dead" is an act of cruelty to her other children. It is a pity that the Shah Nawaz Committee is unlikely to establish Subhas Bose's death or continued existence; either might, have put an end to the uncertainty. It seems certain that Bengal's own leaders and newspapers will never do much either to interpret Bose's absence as death or to forget the whole story as an unsolved mystery. They have a vested interest in the story now; they eagerly publish every idle rumour about "Netaji a Member of Mongolian Trade Delegation" or "I Phoned Netaji Last Night." All this would be perfectly understandable in a tabloid Press, which Calcutta has not got; the newspapers are serious to the point of being dull. Only in the case of the Netaji myth is sensationalism indulged in—with the result that West Bengal has the afflictions of Wordsworth's Margaret. Not a bad subject for sentimental verse, this, but no people in the world today, not even the Bengalis, can live on sentiment and poetry. The problem is not made easier by the fact that there is not, today, an excess of poetry and sentiment either in West Bengal.

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