

A Profession Under Fire

WE are too often praised on the score that our Press gives a fuller coverage of foreign news than that of almost any other country. It may well mean that we are more internationally minded than some other people, but this may not be the only, or the most comprehensive, explanation of the phenomenon that other people's affairs receive greater attention than our own. It may be that this preference is only another manifestation of what might be called our national inferiority complex: what happens in Europe is news, what happens next door is not. It may be that our journalists have not the eye to see news in their own environment. It may be they are too lazy to look for it anyway; it is easier to put a comma in and take a full stop out of the agency stuff and then to push it out to the printer. It may also be that something deeper is at work. Can it be that we do not deal with our national affairs too closely because, however remotely, we are somehow involved, because to each of us attaches a degree of responsibility for what has gone wrong? To say that the British are wicked in Kenya and the French are brutal in Algeria is to pass judgements on distant, events of other people's doing. To say that the streets in Calcutta are filthy, that the affairs in the University have room for improvement, that Writers' Building is now the seat of a not always benevolent despotism, is to accuse, first, one's friends, and then, oneself. This is never a pleasant process, and to invite the unpleasant when it can be avoided is the occupation of only a few. The popular Press has nothing to do with that intellectual minority, anywhere.

The Calcutta Press conforms to the Indian pattern in this indifference to local news. Occasionally it has fits of a sense of guilt, and then local news makes its appearance in a big way. Too big, in fact. Like a husband who knows he has neglected his wife too long, and must make amends and then takes her to two pictures in a day and offers her two dinners out the same evening, the Calcutta Press then goes to town in more senses than one. One newspaper, usually the Statesman, covers, in fact uncovers, some governmental or municipal wrong, and in a matter of two or three days you have

the whole *elaque*, not applauding but, denouncing that, particular institution. From this chorus you would never suspect that the deficiency in Calcutta's civic life which has just been discovered had been in existence for some decades past, that an alerter Press would have noticed it many years ago, that if attention had been drawn to it earlier there might well have been an end to the defect. The fact is— and the reasons have been hinted at earlier—that the sustained interest a lively Press takes in the city or State of its publication has never been bestowed on unhappy Calcutta. So we have hysterical campaigns now and then, of one of which I will soon speak. The only thing to be said in their favour is that, the remedies effected in consequence are as short-lived.

A startled Calcutta was recently told that a Mr Braja Hari Pal, a patient in the Sir Nil Kotan Siren Hospital, had been missing from his bed*. The report in the Statesman added that, when on the following day Mrs Pal wanted to know something about her husband's whereabouts, the doctors and the nurses had been rude to her. Indeed, she was said to have been asked to look for her husband in the tank close by. There was a search later and, as it happened, the body of Mr Pal was found in the tank. There has been an enquiry into the "incident" since, which has established just about nothing. It is not known that the hospital staff was rude to Mrs. Pal for you have only one woman's deposition against another's; it is not known how Mr Pal made his way to the tank, for the nurses cannot possibly know where every patient is at a given moment and in any event there were more urgent cases to attend to; and finally the Government is sorry that they had happened. That is that *or soon* appears from the communique issued by the Government of West Bengal, although the latter has not published the text of the report.

The fact is that the hospitals in Calcutta are badly equipped. In part, for this very reason, aided by our national character which is kind without being mindful of service, the hospitals are also badly run. Hundreds are humiliated everyday because thousands go for treatment

where facilities are not enough for five hundred. This is the usual state of affairs. We know nothing about it until we ourselves, or our friends, or some individual with a newspaper at his disposal, is the victim of this, combination of material and human inadequacy in the Calcutta hospitals. An alert and honest Press would have exposed the deficiency long ago; it would have enquired how this deplorable condition came about; and in what proportions the doctors and their insufficient resources were responsible for Braja Hari Pal's missing. It may be that the rarity of the tragedy that befell Pal would have been found to be a tribute to the doctors and the nurses.

The point of the whole discourse, however, is that the darker corners of life in West Bengal, which are many in number, are seen only in lightning, mostly in distorted forms—a couple of raised fingers looking like a live rabbit, a curled up lion looking like a sleeping mouse. It is quite impossible to know from this shadow play whether a new evil has appeared on the scene or whether an old curse has just, come up to the surface. The difference is important. To take a medical analogy relevant to the subject, a chronic disease does not respond to the same course of treatment as an acute, one. Here in West Bengal every disease is made to appear as acute, whilst the truth is that the majority are very chronic in character. Point that out, and you will at once be accused of generalising from an isolated instance, of lacking in an acquaintance with the historical perspective, of not knowing the series of misfortunes which have been befalling Bengal since the Delhi Durbar (as though that itself does not make Bengal's troubles chronic), and finally, of being unsympathetic towards the Bengalis. I can put no other meaning on some of the things recently written in the correspondence columns of this weekly.

It does the outsiders (of which, mark you, I am not one) no great harm that so many of the facets of Bengali life have to be seen in the fitful light of Press publicity. It is conceivable, however, that the Bengali, without, a steady view of his environment in its entirety, is under a real difficulty in the matter of finding solutions to his problems. At

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at this moment he is con-
fident that the doctors in Bengal are either
callous or congenitally sadistic. At
most other times, when the Press is
busy with the wrongs in Reykjavik,
he thinks everything is lovely and
the doctors and nurses are angels.

it is difficult to say which is farther
from the truth. It is necessary to
assert that this obvious imbalance
in vision, this alternate jump from
one extreme to the other, is not con-
ducive to that steady application to
West Bengal's many problems with-

out which their solutions will conti-
nue to elude the Bengali for many a
day to come. The price of good civic
administration is not inconstant
vigilance.

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