

Letter from South

## An Unwanted Convention

WHAT was the purpose of the Convention of Legislators belonging to scheduled castes and tribes which met under the presidentship of Shri Jagjiwan Ham in Hyderabad recently? A statutory commission with Shri U N Dhebar as chairman is at present conducting a detailed enquiry into the implementation of the special measures taken during the last ten years to safeguard the interests of scheduled castes and tribes. Further, the Central Government has decided to extend reservation of seats for scheduled castes and tribes in the public services and legislatures for another ten years. Finally, the legislators who attended the Special Convention belong to different political parties and, surely, they could have used their party forums to ventilate any grievances they might have. The Convention of legislators' was, therefore, unnecessary. More, it was unwanted.

Pandit Nehru, who inaugurated the Convention, made all this clear to the delegates. He disapproved of such conventions, he said, because they tended to perpetuate the very differences—caste and sectional—which they aimed to remove. Far from helping to promote self-reliance among backward sections of the community, they served merely as forums for grievance-mongering. The Prime Minister also expressed himself strongly against the practice of reserving seats for scheduled castes and backward classes in the public services and legislatures, because if backwardness and caste were the sole criteria for such reservation, it would in effect serve to put a premium on inefficiency and "an end to progress".

Pandit Nehru's criticism is especially pertinent in the context of the present disruptive trends in the country though one feels that he could have conveyed his disapproval more effectively by refusing to associate himself with the Convention. Nevertheless, his deprecatory remarks apparently went home and Shri Jagjiwan Ram was mostly on the defensive in his presidential address. The Railway Minister pointed out self-consciously that what the scheduled castes and tribes wanted was not special treatment or even reservation but a 'change of heart' on the part of the other communities. He con-

ceded that reservation of seats in particular and special treatment in general made *harijans* "lame and dependent". He wanted equal opportunities for backward classes and elimination of their social disabilities.

### False Persecution Complex

One can readily agree with much of what Shri Jagjiwan Ram said at Hyderabad. Nonetheless, the *harijan* community must not labour under a persecution complex which is now largely baseless. The attitude of caste Hindus towards *harijans* has changed remarkably in recent years. The 'change of heart' for which Gandhiji pleaded in his lifetime and which Shri Jagjiwan Ram wants now is taking place much more rapidly than many realise and the movement for social equality is fast progressing. In Andhra Pradesh, for instance, social barriers that divided caste Hindus from *harijans* are breaking down under the impact of panchayati raj. At the same time *harijans* are being trained in a number of crafts and this helps them to secure gainful employment and better themselves economically.

Social equality, insofar as that term is taken to mean the complete

elimination of caste, is, of course, far from achieved yet. In fact, it is doubtful if legislation will ever succeed in abolishing caste distinctions in this country, as Shri Jagjiwan Ram appears to believe. If the caste system disappears, it will do so with the efflux of time, imperceptibly, as economic differences between different sections of population are eliminated through land reform and development programmes.

Shri Jagjiwan Ram's sense of realism was, unfortunately, negated by the resolutions adopted at the Convention. The principal resolution called for the appointment of a "high powered" commission to investigate into the working of the safeguards and concessions afforded to the scheduled castes and to suggest ways for their effective implementation. Surely, the Convention could not have been unaware that a "high powered" commission is already assessing the manner in which the Constitutional provisions for the welfare of backward castes and classes have been implemented during the last ten years. To ask for another commission to perform the same task is absurd.



