

Capital View

Moment of Truth

Romesh Thapar

PARLIAMENT has yet to meet.

A tarnished Congress Party is in the throes of a stormy eve-of-session meeting with a signature campaign mounted against the attempt to keep V K Krishna Menon associated with the Defence Ministry. Our communists are making history by their denunciation of China as an aggressor and their revolt against the earlier Soviet position on the border problem. Former critics of India and Indian policy are to the fore in offering military supplies. Trusted friends are silent or reluctant to take a position. The whole spectrum of political activity in the country is blurred, and changing from day to day. Stock markets, for no known reason, are on the blink. But outwardly, life goes on much the same. The unreality is shot through with a multitude of realities.

So many are the ramifications of the situation now unfolding, and so conspiratorial the atmosphere which envelops the situation, that it is beyond the capacity of a single observer to view or analyse this monstrous confusion. Each considers that he has the facts and is the repository of truth. Each believes it his duty to enter the fray. And, in the confusion, a leaderless people do not quite know what is expected of them in the emergency. Only the armed forces, outnumbered and out-gunned, go about the business of facing the challenge on the frontiers with unflinching discipline and with a courage that has yet to be fully acknowledged and recorded.

Collective Responsibility

As a starting point, let it be stated that in any other democratic or semi-democratic country a government presiding over or facing a crisis such as the one which surrounds us would have accepted collective responsibility and fallen. This could not be, for no alternative exists. But we should not forget that all the major political figureheads were involved in the

crucial policy decision which refused to accept the possibility of a massive Chinese offensive along the entire length of the Himalayan front. This decision, repeatedly reaffirmed at Cabinet level, hamstrung defence policy and throttled the demand that the armed forces be expanded and equipped to meet a Chinese assault through the Himalayas. Professional opinion, too, made no impact on men obsessed with the logic of their own political pragmatism.

When the gulf between myth and reality was brought into sharp focus on the morning of October 20, a scapegoat had to be found. Scheming politicians, looking to the future, dared not question the Prime Minister. They turned on his lieutenant—and he provided the perfect target. As news poured in of the sorry supply position and the total failure of the intelligence services, it was clear that V K Krishna Menon's head was on the block. From all quarters the demand mounted that the Defence Minister must be removed. He was soon isolated, and made the symbol of India's shame. A revolt within the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Cabinet and among the Chief Ministers forced the Prime Minister's hand. Once again, it was Nehru alone who could see the irony of it all. But the compromise he has offered is not the last word that he so fondly believes it to be—for, as one prominent critic put it, our army was defeated, not on the frontier, but in the ordnance factories. A simplification, yes — but a view widely held.

If we are to be rational in these emotion-charged days, we must go much deeper. The Defence Ministry is guilty of keeping us in the dark about our archaic ordnance factories and their incapacity to meet the needs of a modern army despite the strenuous efforts of the General Staff to change this state of affairs. The Finance Ministry is guilty of blocking even the few attempts that were made to get the funds to purchase equip-

ment. The Home Ministry is guilty of maintaining a thoroughly inadequate, and presumably inefficient, intelligence service. And the members of the Defence Committee of the Cabinet are guilty of inactivity; apparently, no meetings were held. But rational thinking is at a discount, for even the national press, so vocal today, has no desire to recall its past apathy, its conspiracy of silence. Only V K Krishna Menon is seen as the guilty man. That he continues in the Cabinet despite what has happened is only another dimension to the unhealthy state of our polity. *

The immediate bye-product of this explosive political debate is the concerted assault now developing on the concept of non-alignment within the Congress Party and warmly supported by the theoreticians of the Swatantra Party, the Jan Sangh and the Praja Socialists. It would be a grave error to minimise this attack. Uninformed, hysterical people, who are attempting to take control of our thinking, seem convinced that the only possible way of meeting the Chinese challenge is to work out a military alliance with the USA. They are looking for someone to lead them. We need to inform people of the implications of such a policy change. Such an alliance would make a battleground of our country, a battleground which would be possessed by the opposed power blocs. The war would spread for certain, to the air. The latest weapons would be tested out. We would become a second Spain, although the parallel is not exact.

The Prime Minister is conscious of these grave implications but he has done nothing, in private or public, to counter the arguments of his opponents. He has merely asserted that the policy of non-align-

* Pandit Nehru, told the meeting of the Congress Parliamentary Party on November 7 that he had decided to accept "with great reluctance and sorrow" Menon's offer to resign, made in a letter to him on October 30.—Ed*

ment must be preserved. His inhibitions arise probably from his desire to obtain a clearer idea of the extent of support that India enjoys among the nations of the world. He has also to draw a distinction between the support which he is getting 'spontaneously' from the 'committed' and the 'solidarity' being expressed by those States which are 'non-aligned' and have close links with China. To win support from the non-aligned nations is a major facet of the effort to isolate China and to compel the USSR to act for peace on the Himalayan front—for, as Peking's theoreticians see it, the destruction of non-alignment marks the destruction of Khrushchov.

Changing Soviet attitudes are a pointer to the struggle behind the scenes. The *Pravda* editorial of October 25 more or less abandoned support to India, accepted the Chinese position on the 'notorious' McMahon Line and even went to the extent of calling on 'progressive-minded people' not to succumb to nationalism. Officially, this provocative editorial was seen as something dictated by the Cuban events. Then came the disentanglement in the Caribbean. The world marvelled at the ability of Khrushchov to salvage a near victory from the jaws of defeat. Now, on November 5, another editorial appears in *Pravda* which repudiates the earlier support given to the Chinese aggressors.

Experts who unravel the meanings hidden in such communist documents claim that this editorial will spark anger in Peking. India is described as 'a great force in a large group of young sovereign States actively participating in the struggle against colonialism, for peace and international security'—literally, a slap in the face for Mao Tse-tung. The editorial goes on to state categorically that 'the desire for war is alien to the very nature of a Socialist State' and that the expansion of the scale of hostilities on the Indo-Chinese border can profit only the imperialist camp, the forces of world reaction which never miss a chance to set friendly peoples at loggerheads, to sow dissension in the ranks of the fighters for peace, democracy and progress, to contrapose the socialist countries to

young sovereign states which have achieved national independence.' True, the call for a cease-fire and round table talks is absurd so long as the Chinese refuse to withdraw to their original lines; but if this Soviet initiative strengthens, this is precisely what might happen. Even the editorial takes a special note of the appeals to end hostilities by 'many outstanding political leaders of the Afro-Asian countries', appeals which broadly subscribe to India's standpoint.

Defeat for China Wing ?

The public repudiation of the earlier Soviet attitude soon after the Cuba disengagement suggests that the Chinese wing within the Soviet Government has again been defeated. One of the theories current is that this adventurist group forced Khrushchov to establish missile bases in Cuba and argued that the USA would accept the *fait accompli*. When the contrary happened, and a nuclear conflict was on the agenda, Khrushchov was again able to prove his point that Maoism means war. The correction of the Soviet position on the India-China border, it is argued, was a natural outcome of the defeat of the Chinese wing. There is more evidence to support this thesis. For example, Peking's attack on the 'betrayers' of Cuba and the ousting of the pro-Chinese Bulgarian government group. Several students of communist affairs are now pointing to the militaristic posturings of China's government elite and consider that this manifestation may well mark the final exposure of the real motivations of Maoism.

It would be disastrous for us to rely on the mercurial changes in the balance of power within the communist world, but at the same time we have to make intelligent use of every opportunity to isolate the adventurists who are parading as communists in Peking. The latest *Pravda* editorial will not only strengthen those Indian communists who have successfully fought the China wing within their own party, but will also provide second thoughts for foreign communists conditioned by long years of mechanical discipline to support a communist against a non-communist, right or wrong. The

fatuous stand of the British communists looks even more ridiculous today. And, now, the sizeable French and Italian communist parties, whose influence is considerable in North Africa, can speak more independently. This is true also of Marshal Tito whose silence has disturbed many of his friends in India.

It is becoming increasingly clear, at least to knowledgeable circles in the Capital, that we will have to tread most carefully if we wish to avoid involvement in an armed conflict over which we have little control. The hysteria let loose by opportunist political elements, and which publicises itself as pure patriotism, is as dangerous as the stand of moronic communists who imagine that the Peking militarists are on some liberation mission. Sanity and rationality have to prevail—and they can only prevail if those who control opinion in this country emerge from their silence and start the painful process of re-forging the shattered structure of our foreign and domestic policies.

In this connection, the Government of India has to learn that the emergency declared is designed to provide the powers for a rapid mobilisation of men and resources, to awaken the world to the threat facing us, to dissolve the barriers to unity in this hour of crisis. It is not a measure to make the bureaucrat more bureaucratic, the Congress more powerful, or to perpetuate the careers of men who should have been pensioned off long ago. This realisation obviously does not exist. The composition of the National Defence Council is not calculated to inspire; the inclusion of Asoka Mehta and a few retired civilians and generals in a Council consisting entirely of the old, decrepit establishment will be scoffed at throughout the country. In practical terms, the National Defence Council is not important, but as a symbol of national unity and resurgence it is. Presumably, the citizens' committee, to be headed by Indira Gandhi, will also smell of moth balls. What prevents the Prime Minister from acting boldly to associate more dynamic elements with these bodies? Is it the spectacle of the unseemly struggle of the fixers, confidence men and social climbers to get on to these committees or the fact that he knows *no*

one else, can think of no one else? It is not an exaggeration to say that these committees are repeating like bad eggs!

Reappraisal, or Else...

Yet it is the Prime Minister who is urging that, in this new and critical situation, India must work out a viable independent ideology of non-alignment and socialism. This will be based on the building up of an economy which can sustain a regular army of at least a million men, an economy which can resist pressures from both power blocs, an economy which unites the nation today and in perspective. These fundamentals will remain

even if the Chinese pull back to agreed lines. Too long have we allowed the dichotomy to exist between an independent foreign policy and a dependent economy. This is not exactly the ideal moment to re-think our policies, but there is no alternative except total commitment to one of the power blocs and all the disastrous consequences of such an involvement.

During these anxious days I had been too much in the company of men worried by Pakistani moves to profit from our embarrassments, of security men disturbed by the unnecessary publicity being given to the arrival of arms from the USA,

of petty politicians turned head-hunters, of demoralised bureaucrats who can only see a secure future for themselves in India becoming a 'glorified' Pakistan, of the hysterical, the apathetic, the cynical. I was myself beginning to submit to this mood. Then came the news of the recruitment drive in the north, long queues of men fighting to join the army. That is the spirit of the people at every level, but how long will this spirit last without bold leadership. Will it be possible for younger, responsible leaders to break the grip of a senile elite? The moment of truth has certainly arrived for one and all

Early Indian Imprints

(From Our Calcutta Correspondent)

A TAMIL Bible, printed in Tramebar in 1714; Halhed's "A Grammar of the Bengali Language", printed in Hooghly in 1774, from the first ever Bengali punches cut by Charles Wilkins; rare, fugitive volumes issued by the representative Indian presses during the days of the Honourable John Company; over 60 books in principal Indian and in foreign languages like Hebrew and Chinese, on a wide variety of subjects, from the Serampore Mission Press—these were among the 330 Indian imprints, issued up to the end of 1850, displayed at an exhibition recently in Serampore. They were selected from over 8,000 volumes in the William Carey Historical Library of the Serampore College.

The exhibition demonstrated, despite primitive equipment, what excellence was achieved in book production by men who worked with love and devotion, and whose knowledge was combined with taste. Almost all volumes, some involving extremely difficult problems, were well printed. Almost every volume had a quiet refinement, beauty and dignity that one associates with books. Some books were, of course, outstanding. A sumptuous Serampore Chinese Bible (1822) had a title page that would have done credit to the Foulis Brothers of Edinburgh or such great early 19th century printers as Pickering and Buhner. There were quite a few more striking title pages that showed a consummate mastery in the choice of

typesets, spacing and in the judicious use of press rules and flowers. The stress on the title page is advised because in the majority of the books printed in India today there seems to be a complete lack of awareness about the functions and importance of the title page in the designing of a book.

Some Omissions

The printing and production of the books in Indian languages, on which the Serampore missionaries laid particular accent, were uniformly good. Space does not permit us to cite examples but we would like to mention one—Ram comul Sen's "English to Bengali Dictionary", printed, in two portly volumes, at the Serampore Press in 1834-. The vicissitudes that this book had to undergo in printing are perhaps unequalled in the history of Indian book production. The Bengali typeface used in these volumes was the handiwork of Panchanan Karmakar and his nephew Manohar and still remain unsurpassed for clean, sparkling beauty and superb legibility. Panchanan, incidentally, was taught his craft by Charles Wilkins. It is a pity that the exhibition did not contain any examples of books printed under the superintendence of Wilkins at Calcutta, e.g. a specimen like "A Narrative of the Insurrection which Happened in Benares, 1781", printed in Calcutta in 1782—a tall quarto of uncommon beauty. Nor were there any books of lithographic plates such as Alev Hunter's "Indian Sketches", printed by P S

D'Rozario in Calcutta in 1842—an interesting though not a meritorious example. Were these lacunae due to the absence of such books from the Library from which the exhibits were selected?

Nevertheless, the books displayed covered a wide field: economics and education; history and politics; travel diaries and handbooks; linguistics and literature; science and religion; and a separate section devoted to Bibles in various languages including Hebrew and Chinese.

While the exhibition provided a microcosmic picture of Indian printers up to the year 1850, it was in particular a tribute to the great trio of missionaries—William Carey, Josuah Marshman and William Ward. In the early decades of the last century, at the quiet Danish settlement of Serampore, these good men, among their other activities, toiled ceaselessly, writing books, printing them often with the punches they cut and on the paper they themselves made, until death removed them, one by one, from the scene. The contribution of these three men to the education and culture of Bengal is one that we can hardly over-emphasize.

The present exhibition, which recalled the one at the National Library, Calcutta, in 1955, was organised mainly through the efforts of Miss Katharine Smith Diehl, an American seller, who is working on the cataloguing of all the early Indian printed books in The William Carey Historical Library, under a grant