

Letter from Punjab

## The Battle Unroyal

NOT surprisingly, the battle of succession in Punjab has ended with the emergence of a dark horse, Shri Ram Kishen, as the Chief Minister. He was a Deputy Minister for about six months way back in 1956-37, and, again, a Minister of State for a brief while in 1962. It is too early to say exactly what brought about his selection by the High Command as its nominee. But there are indications enough to show that factional considerations were not very far in the background, both in Delhi and Chandigarh.

At the Centre, the choice probably marks yet another 'victory' for the Prime Minister, though a partial one this time. But Shri Shastri is not a man to be dissatisfied with partial victories. His present triumph, if that is the right word, lies in the fact that Ram Kishen is a close associate of Sardar Darbara Singh who, in turn, is known to be on intimate terms with the Prime Minister, and was, therefore, his first choice.

### Humility and Threats

But the very fact of a second choice being finally adopted might itself be interpreted as a major concession to the redoubtable Mr Kairon, who is still alive and kicking. His game after having failed to get a Kaironite elected was simply to keep Darbara Singh out and for this purpose he kept projecting one candidate after another with a degree of impudence that could hardly be expected of a politician in such obvious disgrace. His last nominee was Giani Zail Singh who said, "We shall humbly follow the High Command, But my fight is with Mr Darbara Singh—and I wish to make it clear that it is a quarrel within the legislature party and not with the High Command". This was so clearly his master's voice, starting with a note of humility and passing onto threats, barely concealed.

The outcome is necessarily a patchwork arrangement which both the factions can claim as victory, the best that could be expected under the circumstances. How long it will endure is anybody's guess, though there do not seem to be many forces working in its favour. The legislative timber in Punjab is not of the very highest order from the point of view of political integrity, even in the very limit-

ed sense of personal loyalty. Kairon was able to create 'stability' out of such foot-loose law makers simply because he was prepared to go to any lengths in restoring 'order'. For instance, it was alleged by the dissidents sometime ago that he had 'won back' one of them simply by getting the latter's wife evicted out of a T B sanatorium. The new incumbent may not be so bold or even devoted to the goddess of stability to be able to adopt such effective methods. But keeping the Congress M L As together was sufficiently hard going even for Kairon. It may be far more difficult for a relative novice like Ram Kishen. This is plainly indicated by the goings on of the last two weeks or so. According to the Press reports, legislators were in great demand in Chandigarh. They kept visiting both camps and were entertained to lavish dinners and lunches. Cabinet posts and other favours were liberally promised but, of course, not indiscriminately. For, the 'rank' of the legislator was kept strictly in view! This being so, the members kept changing camps with remarkable agility as the bidding kept going up. Indeed, few members of the Congress Assembly Party would satisfy Cameron's test of political honesty that if you are bought, you should slay bought.

### Shifting Loyalties

So it is difficult to share Kamaraj's optimism that Ram Kishen will be able to impart an element of 'stability' to Punjab politics. The reasoning is that since his nomination to the post is likely to give a sense of victory to both the factions, he is likely to command wide support. Darbara Singh may be satisfied at getting a man belonging to his group selected as Chief Minister and Kairon may be happy at having successfully frustrated Darbara Singh's plans! So, while the latter proposed Ram Kishen's name at the Congress Party meeting on Tuesday, and was lustily cheered when he did so, Kairon was no less enthusiastic about it. Said he at the meeting, "I am one of those who do more and talk less. I assure you that I shall not submit to anyone, however high and mighty, if he tries to weaken your position as the leader of the party". The threat was so obviously meant

for the consumption of Sardar Darbara Singh.

Yet this display of loyalty to the unstated Congress principles and the Party's High Command can fool none but the political innocents into believing that all will be well now. True, every Congress M L A has signed an unconditional undertaking that he will abide by the Centre's decision in the matter. But to accept this undertaking as the last word in the matter would be political naivete. On his way to Chandigarh, Sardar Swaran Singh, the High Command's emissary, is reported to have wondered if the Congress M L As would be able to "extricate themselves from the past". And, yet, everyone seems to have started believing that the extrication has already taken place, suddenly and completely!

### A Deal — and No More

The present arrangement is a deal, pure and simple, between the rival factions, the details of which can be known only after some time. The all too familiar pattern, in the matter of distribution of Cabinet posts and other favours, will have to be repeated. No doubt, Ram Kishen will enjoy at least temporary protection of the Centre. But as the challenges to his position grow and as Shastri gets busy with more pressing problems in other States and at the Centre, he will have to fight his own battles. Possibly, he may have to fight Darbara Singh himself. Alignments and realignments keep taking place here on purely personal grounds.

The conclusion is inescapable, therefore, that the Congress High Command has once again treated the issue as a purely party affair and has tried to resolve it as such. The outcome might be regarded as unexceptionable by the party managers and bosses. But is it morally so? Here we come to the inherent limitations of contemporary politics not only in Punjab but in the country as a whole. What the Das Enquiry exposed was certainly not a situation that required mere palliatives. The least that one could expect was that Kairon and his principal deputies would be expelled from the Congress Party and prosecuted in a court of law. What has been done

instead is that the same old people have been given a voice in the making of the new government and differ-

ences patched up. This might be an exercise in political stability, all right, but whether it is also an exer-

cise in political morality is quite another matter.

—Narindar Singh

### Letter from South

## *The Vijayawada Blaze*

A RSON began in Vijayawada on June 10 and erupted in different localities on the five following days. It was one of the most shameful happenings in Andhra in recent years and could be a menacing pointer,

Vijayawada is not some small town in the large rural State of Andhra. It is the second city and the political centre, apart from being an important railway junction, on the way from being a trading area to an industrial one. All the important Telugu dailies and weeklies are published from Vijayawada, which also saw the birth decades ago of the Congress in Andhra and, later, of the Communist Party as well

All cities and towns in the process of metropolitan transformation in India have, one supposes, a large complement of the lumpen proletariat. Vijayawada appears to have more than its fair share and the spreading illicit liquor trade has contributed to a big jump in their numbers. *Gurumba* (a particularly potent form of toddy) goondas have emerged as the leaders of the underworld and as a formidable force in the life of the city.

### **Hooligans Subdued**

Many years ago the Communists became a powerful factor in Vijayawada politics through the organisation of volunteer squads to counter the hooligans, engaging them in physical combat. In many areas of the city the Communists won through and, as a result, are roughly equal in strength to the Congress. The hooligans were not routed, but they were distinctly subdued.

The Communist influence in Vijayawada, both in its old and new parts, is strikingly evident. Quite a few squares are named — officially and unofficially — after the leaders and martyrs of the CPI and every few hundred yards, one can see a low-lying monument topped by a Red Flag. The split in the CPI naturally had significant political repercussions. The official CPI and the Leftists had roughly equal strength. The official organ of the CPI, the daily *Visatardhra*, is brought out from Vijayawada

and the headquarters of the Leftists is also situated in the city. The debate and the break roused high passions on both sides. Matters were not improved by a singularly provocative speech by Basavapunniah, one of the leading Leftists, some six weeks ago.

Krishna Lanka, where the first blaze occurred, is an islet where workers, the lower middle class and the lumpen proletariat live in palmyra-leaf thatched huts. There occur some fires here every summer and some floods every monsoon. The Communists are powerfully entrenched in Krishna Lanka and have been the bane of the hooligans who found them a severe check on their depredations. It has also become the scene of passionate controversy between the two groups among the Communists, leading to scuffles and parades, gladly watched by their common foe. The people in general were not much bothered about the rights or wrongs of the dispute among the Communists. They were confused and more than a little demoralised to find the Communists so bitter against each other. Above all, at this particular point of time, they were deprived of effective leadership should any crisis develop.

### **The First Fire**

How the fires started in Krishna Lanka is still a mystery. Some claim that one of the Left Communists left her house — she made her living selling snacks — with a stove burning after having removed all her belongings. Others claim that one of the supporters of the official party set fire to his own house, after clearing his goods, to put the blame on rival group. Yet others are of the opinion that the rowdy elements in Krishna Lanka felt that this was their opportunity to push out both groups of Communists.

It is significant, however, that the first official investigation led to the conclusion that the fire was an accident and that the high wind and extreme heat spread the fire with devastating rapidity. Surprisingly, this report was swiftly withdrawn within

twenty-four hours and it was later put out that no investigation had been made at all. This was rather stupid as all the newspapers carried the report of the investigation, even on the very day that the Chief Minister was denying its existence.

Whatever the cause of the first blaze, there is absolutely no doubt in anybody's mind that the subsequent fires were clear cases of arson, cool-bloodedly planned and well organised. And they have taken place mainly in areas where the poor live and where the official Communists and the Leftists are both powerful. The havoc and the panic were not only heart-wrenching but enough to ignite the fury of anybody with any soul. It was just luck and the general apprehension that fires might break anywhere at any time — which made people wary — that prevented much loss of life. The arsonists were certainly quite prepared for the worst and ready to roast people alive. Again their job was made easy for them because of the heat, the wind and the palmyra leaf thatches.

One must add that it was strange that, following the first fire, the police did not round up the leaders of the rowdy elements. Instead, very prominent Leftists were picked up, whose reputation and very prominence ruled out the possibility of their complicity in the arson, and also a few other local Communist leaders. These arrests and the continuance at large of the hooligans as well as the open propaganda by a section of the Congress leaders that the Communists were going to burn down the city, completely confused the people and left them wondering who really the arsonists and their patrons were.

### **Congress Factions Active**

Their suspicions were strengthened when another section of the Congress in Vijayawada began open propaganda against the so-called Raju group in their own party. All manner of stories were put out by Congressmen themselves that Raju had powerful links with the anti-social elements. The arsonists, according to these