

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 an other 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

stories, were well equipped and openly boasted that they had powerful patrons as well as instructions from high quarters. Coming from Congressmen this propaganda made quite an impact. Matters got more complicated when the Raju group of the Vijayawada Congress prevented a joint campaign to calm the people at a conference called by the I G of Police. Even a joint appeal asking the people not to panic but to remain vigilant was turned down by this section of the Congress.

It is reported that this group exerted pressure on the Chief Minister when both the official communists and the Leftists as well as many others urged that a public enquiry be held into the whole affair. The pressure seems to have paid off as till the time of writing no public enquiry has been instituted and a routine police case is being prepared. Not even all sections of the Congress are pleased at this anti-climactic action following events of such importance and arousing such passions.

The tragedy of the fire victims must, of course, take first priority and all

possible relief must be afforded them. Yet, certain deeper implications must be pondered upon if worse tragedy is not to follow.

There is no doubt that where the CPI is a powerful force and where the split has resulted in fairly even division, not only will anti-social elements take full advantage of the situation but there will be no lack of politicians of various types colluding with these elements. The confusion and passion roused by the split make co-ordinated action between the official Communists and Leftists impossible even when both are under fire and when their common base is in danger of being swept away. If this partisan passion is allowed to continue unchecked it will clearly affect the mass organisations with disastrous consequences for the Communists as a whole. One small piece of cold comfort is that this recognition has dawned upon some sections of the Communists, at any rate, who are anxious that ideological political problems should be vehemently argued but within the limits of polemic and discussion.

The Vijayawada blaze has, incidentally, exposed the futility of the Congress trying to make capital out of the Communist split. It is itself riddled with so many groups, often without the slightest ideological or political significance, that any such manoeuvre will only recoil upon itself. Any one group in the Congress seeking to take advantage of the split will be immediately feared as becoming too powerful by the other groups who will not hesitate to denounce it. The vicious circle will only get more vicious.

And the final and most menacing of all lessons is that the underworld in parts of India is getting increasingly assertive in the context of the failure of political articulation. The demoralisation of the people is a fertile breeding ground for the growing insolence of anti-social elements. And let us not lull ourselves into the belief that we are too civilised to have a solid organisation of such elements at some future date, as Germany had, or that we are immune to the Huey Long-type of politics. The Vijayawada blaze lit up quite a few murky spots of India as she is today.

From the London End

East-West Trade *Business or Politics ?*

THE principles that lie behind the imposition of embargoes on trade are becoming harder and harder to define. While the British shy away from the prospect of imposing trade sanctions against South Africa, they are prepared to trade with Cuba, much to the consternation of the Americans who, for their own part, are busy trying to negotiate deals for sale of nuclear power plant to Rumania. While the British claim that politics cannot be allowed to enter into trade in non-strategic items, i.e. buses to Cuba, Vauxhall is not going to be permitted to sell £1 million worth of trucks and bus chassis to Indonesia.

Defining Strategic Goods

Dealing with this tricky question, the *Economist* says: "The heart of the matter is that with Rumania asking to buy Western nuclear reactors, and trade deals with West Germany being defended in the Hungarian Press, the old simple patterns of embargo and lifted embargo are coming to an end."

The problem of what constitutes

strategic goods has occupied the countries of the Western world ever since the War. An organisation known as COCOM (consisting of the NATO countries with the exception of Iceland and the addition of Japan) was set up shortly after the war to co-ordinate an embargo on trade in strategic goods with communist countries. At that time the cold war was going strong and almost any sort of trade with these countries aroused disapproval. With the gradual thaw in East/West relations, many of the embargoes on trade have melted away and the usual process now is for COCOM to revise its banned list annually with the result that the number of items on the embargo list has declined steadily over the years. As it stands to-day, the official list of COCOM is almost entirely restricted to weapons or equipment of war, together with such sophisticated electronics equipment as could be used in missile construction.

In theory, therefore, the field has been left fairly wide open, but diffe-

rences of opinion still emerge. The USA, of course, still refuses to sell any items, however trivial, to China which it does not recognise, and considers that Cuba is in a category all of its own. The British feel that the US should not continue to send aircraft spare parts to Indonesia, while the Americans disapprove strongly of Britain sending buses to Cuba.

Willing to Trade With Cuba...

Taking the Cuban deal first, despite intensive pressure from the Americans, the British Government has decided not to stop the follow up order of 500 Leyland buses for Cuba. The Minister of Aviation, Julian Amery, told workers at Leyland's factory in Lancashire on June 26: "We have no intention of interfering with a normal commercial transaction which will bring advantage, not only to your firm, but to the country as a whole". When the Cuban Government, late in June, exercised its option to buy a further 500 buses from Leyland Motors, in addition to the 450 it pur-