

The Canker in the Commonwealth

IT is amusing that any one should accuse Nehru of "giving fresh substance to the bogey of Indian Imperialism along the East Coast of Africa" by voicing his detestation of the treatment of Africans in some parts of Africa but also his "abiding sympathy with countries which sought their freedom from colonial authority". Those who know anything of the temper of awakening nationalism in the first flush of its triumph in general and of African nationalism in Kenya in particular—as evidenced, for example, by the activities and pronouncements of the African Union and of the views of Kenyatta, its leader—would not harbour such delusions even in their wildest dreams. If it is only amusing that Nehru should succumb to such delusions, what is one to say of the speculation that India's Prime Minister was voicing these sentiments only to divert attention from "some of the more drab aspects" of the achievements of his Government? In the happy family that the Commonwealth is, such inter-family matters, *eg.* treatment of the Kikiyus in Kenya or of Africans in South Africa, can only be discussed in hushed tones, behind closed doors.



There is much that is good in nationalism, it gives self-respect to people who are fixed by it, especially in its first flush, but like romantic love, which it resembles in many ways, there is also a passionate exclusiveness about it which expresses itself in an antipathy against those who do not belong to the nation. The anti-idea is inseparable from the group idea and the first awakening of nationalism in South-East Asia has not unnaturally expressed itself, violently sometimes, in resentment not only against members of the former ruling race, but also against others who had immigrated and established themselves under the protection of that ruling power. Indonesians resent the economic position of the Chinese traders, however fairly it may have been won; there was no love lost between the Burmese and Indians the moment British armies evacuated Burma; the Chettiar bankers will not be tolerated for long in Indo-China

when the French power withdraws, as it must.

It is true that Indians have contributed much to the economic development of East Africa. The account that was published in these columns a fortnight ago of the part played by Indians in the development of East Africa was based on a first-hand study of the situation made by the author who writes about the backwardness of the Africans in their own country, elsewhere in this issue and of the very inferior position that they occupy in the economic hierarchy. By comparison, the Indian immigrants are far advanced and they have made the fullest use of the opportunities in the land of their adoption. They now own saw mills and sisal plantations, practically run all the shops, control cotton trade and run most of the ginning factories and so on. Not that in their own way they have not been appreciative of African aspirations. The wealthy Indian settlers have contributed liberally for establishment of schools for Africans. But it would be idle to claim that the economic life of the people of East Africa any more than their social life is multi-racial. Where the Indian has pushed in, either the European has been pushed out or has not thought it worthwhile to enter. The first is true of the ginning factories, the second partly true of the retail trade. The European-owned store is no match for the Indian shopkeeper who sleeps behind the shutters and thrives on a margin of profit on which Europeans cannot subsist. It may not be quite true that because of the British Government which means, familiarity with the law and administration and other incidental advantages, that Indians have been able to establish themselves on the East coast in spite of their several handicaps. Geography has something to do it. For Indians were on the East coast even before Britain established her rule. Distance rather than the protection of Britain may explain why Indians failed to establish a foothold on the West coast of Africa, though conditions there are very similar. Nevertheless, such is the logic of nationalism that it will not be unnatural for the Africans to connect the two and regard the Indians as interlopers and camp followers of

the British though they may have done much to develop the country. Judged by the same token, have not the Europeans done so much more?

Indeed it is where the feeling of nationalism is developed that such resentment is inevitable. Where the awareness is not so keen superficially the spirit of accommodation is more evident. It is common knowledge that when Gandhiji's ashes were taken by the Indian population for immersion in the Nile at its source, invitation was extended to all the African leaders in East Africa to participate in the function, native chiefs from Uganda and Tanganyika responded warmly and joined, while all the leaders of the Kenya Africans held aloof. Kenya Indians recall that when they gave a reception to Jomo Kenyatta after his return from Europe, Kenyatta's own response was not too warm. He welcomed the Indian people to his country and extended an invitation for them to stay on so long as they co-operated with the Africans but that was about all. He left the audience in no manner of doubt that Indians would be welcome on African soil only so long as they maintained cordial relations with the people of the soil but no longer. In fact, the Indian people know it full well that if some day East Africa passes into the hands of Africans at the end of a bloody fight, they will have to withdraw with the retiring British power.

True enough, exclusiveness as an attribute of nationalism does not remain equally strong at all times and it is more in evidence when nationalism is not quite sure of itself. With greater self-assurance, there is also a greater spirit of accommodation so long as there is no suspicion of a challenge from the outsiders, either of political or economic domination of any sort. The same Burmese who had risen to a man and forced the Indian population to stage a hasty retreat on foot over difficult country without any roads, suffering untold hardships and much loss of life on the way, are today generous and hospitable. Burma welcomes Indian participation in the economic development of the country, the only concession she asks for is that people who have adopted Burma as their homeland should take Burmese citizenship and fully co-operate in

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whatever measures of economic reform Burma wants to undertake. The re-distribution of land is a case in point where co-operation is not easy for the simple reason that Indian traders and bankers had acquired considerable landed property and they now stand to lose if land is to be re-distributed. This had been a bone of contention between the two countries but fortunately bitterness was avoided partly because acquisition of land has been made subject to payment of compensation and partly because in practice, it has not been as energetic as the profession.

To go back to East Africa, those who are at all familiar with the background would laugh at the suggestion that India may have any aggressive intentions in sponsoring the cause of African nationalism. The European community in Kenya has been extremely critical of every gesture of Nehru that showed the slightest sympathy with or concern for the African peoples. They were annoyed that Nehru should accept the gift of a monkey skin rug from Joseph Murumbi on the ground that it betokened sympathy

for or approval of Mau Mau, The Indian High Commissioner in East Africa has made it abundantly clear time and again that India has every sympathy for national aspirations; of Africans but dissociated herself completely from violence in any form because that was not the Gandhian way. It is an open question whether the white Mau that Britain has unleashed in East Africa is more violent than the black Mau Mau that an ignorant, superstitious and defenceless people have resorted to in despair. Even the worm turns and the smallest of animals will fight back when it is cornered.

South Africa, Kenya, and Central African Federation—all are tarred with the same brush. It is for them to decide with which particular shade of black they have painted themselves. It is Kenya's misfortune that she had the high lands which are suitable for European settlement because of its salubrious climate and things that are happening in the land of the Kikiyus support the contention that equality and democracy are thin veneers that wear off in no time whenever interests clash.

tribes go without let and hindrance amply demonstrates it. There is not much difference in the treatment of Africans in South Africa and Kenya when it comes to a final showdown. In neither country will the white settlers agree to rule by count of heads. In the circumstances Nehru's rebukes are directed against all those who want to perpetuate this basic injustice, servitude of the peoples and domination of a privileged handful. Far from promoting Indian imperialism along the East Coast of Africa, the Indian population of Kenya resent intensely Nehru's pronouncements which make their position awkward, since they are there on the goodwill of the British and have no illusions that the privileges that they now hold under British rule, however they may have been acquired, would go the moment British arms are withdrawn. It is not Nehru who will protect them, if something goes wrong. It is on British power that they depend for their safety. for the protection of their properties and whatever good things of life they now enjoy.



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