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Bengal Needs A Government

THE present leader of the West Bengal Government shares with Shri Morarji Desai the distinction of having been appointed a minister after being rejected by the electorate at the polls. But he holds the unique distinction of continuing to remain a minister without submitting to the ordeal of another election contest as Morarji did, which must be said to his credit. The fact that Shri P C Sen was left in charge of the Government when Dr B C Roy left the country in the thick of the Calcutta disturbances says as much for his ability as for the key position he holds in the party machine. Congress legislators and the Congress Pradesh Committee contended for power and mastery in West Bengal as they did in other States. In the early days of the Congress Government in West Bengal, bickerings were frequent, the cleavage wide and the Ministry never secure in its saddle. But of late, the differences have been patched up to a sufficient extent to ensure a stable ministry. At least Dr B C Roy has not been hampered by dissensions among his supporters, in the legislature.

But though stable, the Ministry has been far from popular and the hold of the Pradesh Congress Committee and of the Congress Government in the State appears to be feeble indeed, judging* from recent events. For it is not only the West Bengal Government that cut a sorry figure by refusing to take any notice of the popular opposition and resentment which found an outlet in the agitation against the enhancement of tram fares. This had clearly been made a test case for the popular elements to try out their strength against the Government which came down, but not gracefully, by agreeing to refer the dispute to a tribunal and suspending the higher fares until the tribunal has decided the issue. The Pradesh Congress Committee cut an even more sorry figure when its President, Shri Atulya Ghosh, issued an open challenge against the threat of general strike which was carried out in spite of the opposition of the Congress Party. The WBPC could do nothing to stop it, it could not even send out some volunteers to persuade the people not to take part in the strike. Far from helping to restore peace, the Congress President's appeal seems to have added fuel to the fire and the general strike became a trial of strength, not only with the Government but with the Party also. This is not a distinction without difference, in view of the recent history of Congress politics in the State. But if he could not stop a general strike the President of the BPC should at least have demonstrated, by his subsequent actions that he stuck to his guns. Far from doing that, Shri Atulya Ghosh was one of the first to congratulate the Government on its wisdom in referring the dispute to a tribunal. If he had thought this to be the right course, why had he not exercised whatever political influence he and his Committee could exert for the adoption of this sensible course at an earlier stage, if he believed well that timely action on his part could have made some difference?

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Since it has now been decided to refer the question to an independent tribunal, it would not be proper to prejudge the issue, but without being guilty of it, one can still say a quarter anna rise in tram fares

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is not such a big thing after Bus fares had been raised in Calcutta some time ago by much higher amounts and had been accepted by the people without so much as a protest. But why bus fares alone? Railway fares "had been raised by 12½ per cent when it was known and admitted that the higher fares were not necessary to meet the cost of operation of the railways or to earn normal depreciation and fixed interest charges. There had been no protest, no public demonstrations or no outburst of violence on the part of the same unruly Calcutta mob. Assuming that it is the trouble-makers who are behind all this, they had not succeeded in making the issue of high railway fares into one of mass agitation, for focussing discontent. Indeed, the intensity and the volume of agitation raised by what is by all counts a trifling affair of a quarter anna leave no room for doubt that it has to be accepted as a political gesture and it is essential for the future governance of the State and the handling of its problems on the right lines' that the political significance of the happenings should be correctly assessed and that its moral should not be missed.

Democratic governments have learned how to read the barometer of public opinion, watch the direction of public feelings and look out for the danger signals. All this works because there are possibilities of a shift in party strength within the legislature and of a realignment of forces within the party, not to speak of the ultimate check of a fresh election and appeal to the country. An attempt to translate all these in terms of what amounts in practice to a single party legislature will be enough to show that the functions of a popular government, more specifically that of making its actions responsive to popular wishes, do not follow as a matter of course from the popular form of that government. On the contrary, in a situation like this, the form may not only, be deceptive but may give rise to untold evils, if much is made of it and it is exploited as a trump card. Moral infallibility, righteousness to downright tyranny . . . , the abominations are of everyday experience, ranging from well meaning and high falutin purpose to inadequate performance, inefficiency, corruption and what not. Similarly in its relations to the public, the behaviour pattern of governments which are popular only in

from but not in function ranges from arrogant hauteur and mock heroics to supine subservience or abject surrender, Decisions proclaimed to be irrevocable are reversed and heroics are followed by surrender. Whether stone throwing or fast unto death works the trick is immaterial. That the trick works is an eloquent commentary on the emptiness of the form.

Every time an assembly of more than five is prohibited by the promulgation of Section 144 in Calcutta, public meetings fill to overflowing and the attendance is greater than ever before. There has been no exception this time either. This alone speaks for the hold that the popular government has on the people as much as anything else, like the success of the general strike and so on and so forth. The Government has always been in a blue funk and its show of strength to cover its fear, far from frightening and demoralising the people, provokes defiance and more intensive demonstrations. To what limits of impotent fury the Government has been driven was demonstrated by the police attack on the newspaper

men in Calcutta which has at last brought home to people all over India its ineptitude and utter helplessness. The Bengal press, by and large, has lost its morale but even to popular papers cannot help publishing photographs and using streamer headlines. For, however impolitic it may be to displease the Government, to lose circulation would be a great deal worse.

The tragedy of it is not that some have lost their lives and public peace is disturbed but that the bulk of the population of Calcutta should still go about their normal business as if nothing had happened, instead, of getting together and devising ways and means for securing a better government. Surely there are less objectionable and more effective means still open to them to exert their will and to get the government of their choice by organising for the purpose and working in an orderly, systematic and sustained manner. If the people of Bengal fail today, they will continue to have the government which they deserve rather than the one which they want.

United Nations Must Act

IF it was a deliberate strategy of the Communists to establish that Washington and the UN Command in Korea were speaking with two voices, it seems to have succeeded. Many must have expressed surprise at Communist disclosures of happenings in the recent secret truce negotiations at Pan Mun Jon. This was deliberate, as Syngman Rhee's latest stand on Korean armistice confirms. It would be uncharitable to endorse the implied Communist insinuation that Washington has egged Rhee on to create new obstacles to truce in Korea. But the conclusion seems inescapable that the UN Command's truce negotiations with the Communists have diverged in some essential aspects from the promises made by President Eisenhower's envoy to Rhee. This is the ostensible reason advanced by Syngman Rhee for his decision not to observe the implementation of the armistice.

This is not altogether a fabrication by Syngman Rhee, who seems to have succeeded in convincing even those who deplore his actions that his stand is motivated by his strong sense of nationalism. Sophisticated explanations have been advanced that Rhee's attitude to the

Korean armistice is a deplorable reflection of aggressive nationalism which is a pronounced characteristic of Asia and the Middle East today. To digress from the general to the particular, Rhee's belated sense of nationalism is supposed to be reflected in his opposition to the entry of troops and representatives of India and of the Communist members of the Repatriation Commission into the territory of the sovereign Republic of Korea. It is not known whether Rhee has any objection to any such entry of Swedish and Swiss representatives. But this only emphasises, Rhee's apologists underline, Rhee's strong anti-Communist bias.

To such arguments, the only reply is that they are irrelevant to the immediate Korean issue involved. What is more pertinent is the question whether President Eisenhower's truce envoy had agreed that India and Communist representatives of the Repatriation Commission should be admitted only to the neutral, demilitarised zone. Rhee's Foreign Minister says that this has been accepted by Mr Robertson. One of the reasons why, Rhee now threatens to obstruct the truce is that this promise has been broken by the UN Command. This by itself, is a