The Future of Bombay City

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OUR enthusiastic espousal and ardent avowals of the doctrine of non-violence have not entirely succeeded in taming the Adam in us. An unedifying exhibition of his distressing presence in our bosoms was afforded four times in ten days in our city, whose enviable reputation for tolerance was tarnished in unrehearsed displays of violence.

Bombay was not the only place, though, to suffer from such disturbances, for excitement was reported in also Poona and Kolhapur. These outbursts were, however, a minor affair compared with incidents in Rewa where a mob broke through a police cordon outside and inside the Vindhy Pradesh Assembly, entered the chamber while it was discussing the States Reorganisation Commission's report, severely man-handled the Finance Minister, threw a file at the Chief Minister and flung stones and shoes, forcing the Speaker to adjourn the House sine die. So scant was the respect for the sanctity of the House that stones were thrown by the demonstrators just before the House was adjourned. Such Incidents are an unhappy omen for the progress of our incipient democracy. They show the extent to which passions can be aroused by issues affecting the inmost lives of peoples.

The interests of democracy are not served by such outbursts, and we have only ourselves to thank if the impression gains currency that a band of rowdies can disrupt orderly existence and hold a city to ransom as it did in Bombay. Occurrence of such deplorable incidents is symptomatic of frustration. A horse will surely kick when it is cheated of a carrot dangled before it.

Our leaders cannot complain at the turn of events, for when their party was in the wilderness and had not tasted the plums of office, it dangled before the people many promises formed on a linguistic basis. The delay in the implementation of this part of the Congress programme has been unconscionably long.

Nor were the interests of democracy served by the Congress Legislature Party's whip directing its members not to vote on the official resolution approving of the States Reorganisation Commission's report, although they might express their opposition to it during the debate. The whip amounted to a virtual gag. Elements were not wanting outside the august chamber to capitalise on this negative interpretation of democracy.

There is no doubt that such outbursts of ill temper as we have witnessed to our dismay stem from disappointment that the future of Bombay City has not been settled in a manner according with the aspirations of such people as comprise the largest section of its cosmopolitan population. Geographical considerations leave none in doubt about the area to which the city legitimately belongs.

This fact has been recognised by experts. Their views are reinforced by the pronouncements of public figures noted for their sober judgment. Such views have, however, availed the champions of a United Maharashtra naught. So far as the latter are concerned, the problem would seem to be very much where it has been all this time, and their dis-appointment is understandable in the circumstances.

Formation of a separate state for Bombay City is a counsel of despair, they feel. Detached from the hinterland to which it belongs, the City will be in about the same condition in regard to its vitality as the tail shed by a lizard or an appendage dropped by a crab. Despite assurances and safeguards to ensure its continuing vigour and importance, the City will languish from inanimation.

Opposition to the separation of the City can, accordingly, be appreciated. To tear asunder what has been and must go together is partition. Political pundits, constitutional authorities and literary purists may quibble that territorial redistribution and administrative alterations are not partition. This contention is sophistry, for the fallacy inherent in it is patent. Territorial redistribution invariably involves subtraction from one unit and addition to another, but at times it takes the form of separation pure and simple.

Bifurcation of territories organically united is undesirable, as the pages of history are strewn with examples showing that it culminates in irredentism, which invariably explodes in violence. This tendency is always carried to dangerous lengths in the name of linguistic cohesion and self determination. Forces of unrest are unleashed, and unless effectively quietened, thrive on themselves.

A classic example is at hand. Britain was the pioneer among nations in our times to practise partition. The scene is our own country 50 years ago, when Bengal was divided, in 1905, into two provinces: (i) Bengal, and (ii) Eastern Bengal and Assam. This administrative redistribution of the functions of an area originally conducted from a common source was deeply resented. It evoked strong and violent opposition from the people. Serious political unrest followed. Leaders of all shades of opinion were unanimous in their denunciation of the partition, and clamoured for its abolition. The partition was undone in 1912, when the province was reconstituted and Assam again separated as it had been before its incorporation into East Bengal.

Moreover, the proposal to separate Bombay City and confer on it the independent status of a City State is hardly much less different from the demand recently voiced by Tamils in Ceylon for a separate state for themselves in that small island. On the same analogy, one need not be surprised if, amidst the din and strife over Bombay, the residents of Matunga moot a proposal tomorrow for union with Madras or Kerala!

Maharashtrian claims to Bombay rest on unassailable grounds as has widely been acknowledged, but no useful purpose will be served by a tedious reiteration of the familiar arguments. It is true that diverse communities have pooled their resources and labours, and contributed, each in its own way, to the raising of the imposing fabric which Bombay City is. Yet, one cannot deny that Maharashtrians were in the vanguard in the early days, a century ago, when the foundations of the city's present greatness were being laid. This fact may be gleaned from old records.

Thus, Maharashtrian names figure predominantly among the early graduates of the Bombay University, which was established in 1865. Even
a cursory glance at the records of the Town Council which preceded the establishment of the Municipal Corporation shows that Maharashtrians were at that time in the forefront of public life. This fact is evidenced by the names of several streets in what was then the city of Bombay lying outside the Fort. The names of Maharashtrians loom large, also, among property-holders in the last century, as old surveys and title-deeds show.

The British were undoubtedly the first to realise the immense potentialities of Bombay as a great entrepot of commerce and trade. The opportunities for successful business which they created were soon seized and exploited by, first, the Parsis and, then, the Kutchis, among whom the Khojas, specially, were prominent. They started mills, and it was not long before Bombay became, thanks to their venturesome spirit, India's Cottonopolis.

The overwhelming bulk of labourers in the mills, the port, the railways and the Municipality's outdoor works were none other than the burly Ghatis and the wiry Konkanis, while Government and foreign business offices were staffed almost exclusively by Brahmins, Pathare Prabhus, Parsis and Christians. This composition of office staffs in those days may easily be verified by a reference to the records not only of official establishments but also of those foreign firms which have survived unto our day.

The commercial expansion of the city and its growing prosperity soon brought to Bombay a vast influx of people from all over India, who believed that its streets sparkled with gold, just as Dick Whittington thought that the streets of London were paved with gold. Steadily, the original structure of the population underwent a change, creating not only a marvellous demographic mosaic but also the present complexities about the city's destiny.

Meanwhile, opinion in Gujerat is strongly in favour of the establishment of a separate Gujerat State, though they have intimately been associated with every facet of the City's varied life. There is no denying the fact that, by and large, Gujarati business acumen has most conspicuously been connected in the past few decades with the development of the city to its present pre-eminence. There are, obviously, cogent reasons compelling them to sever the present bonds and strike out on their own. The exit of Gujerati enterprise from Bombay will give Gujerat a unique opportunity to scale heights of prosperity which no other State in India will be able to attain. Every factor is in favour of this clearly foreseeable result. Its soil is productive. Moreover, the area is well industrialised, and new industries are being set up.

The inclusion of Kutch and Sau rashtra in Gujerat gives it an unrivalled advantage over the future Maharashtra State. Saurashtra has several ports capable of berthing ocean-going vessels. The new port of Kandla in Kutch which owes its development to Sindhi enterprise, is being built on modern lines, and has an oil terminal to boot. The needs of Gujerat are at present served by the port of Bombay, but once the new Gujerat State is in being, it is almost certain that all cargo consigned to Gujerat will be shipped there directly and not routed via Bombay as at present.

The volume of traffic now handled in Bombay will thus shrink, and the prosperity of the port and the city will suffer. If the port of Bombay will serve the needs of Maharashtra, as it needs must, industrialisation of this region on an extensive scale will have to be promoted as rapidly as possible to ensure that Bombay does not sink to the level of the Heptanesia from which it has been developed.

Meanwhile, fears expressed by business magnates in Bombay have apparently led to second thoughts among Maharashtrians. The picture has been changing almost daily with the conflicting utterances made by leaders of Maharashtrian opinion. A Maharashtrian State without Bombay is not of much importance, so that we find that some spokesmen who were loudest in their demand for Maharashtra with Bombay or nothing are now not opposed to a bilingual state including Vidarbha, which, despite its smallness and similarity to the Part "C" States, whose disappearance is certain, has been made an independent unit, though its population is just about double that of Greater Bombay and its area is practically insignificant compared with the future States of India.

The controversy over Bombay's future has to a certain extent been complicated by the emotion and passion which was imported into the discussion on the morrow of the publication of the SRC's report. The miasma in the air continues, and unless it is cleared and the problem brought back to the plane of reality, the present acrimony will continue. Such a prospect cannot be viewed with indifference, as it will be a constant impediment in the way of the growth of the country to its proper stature.

Bombay as a city State, with its cosmopolitan population and its diversity of interests, will be, as Shri M H Jayakar, one of the country's elder statesmen, remarked at the celebration of the birth centenary of Sir Narayan Chandavarkar, a place fit for only vermin and worms. Even the boundaries for the proposed city State do not conform with the natural lines of geography. After all, the future of Bombay city itself is at stake. The wishes of its inhabitants, who are striving even today amidst a welter of confusing cries, for its advancement, should be consulted. No procedure would be more democratic.

The proposal that Bombay City will be able, if it chooses, to opt for Maharashtra savours of Fabian Tactics. The reason for the time-limit is not easy to fathom. If it is meant to blunt the edge of the present clamour, the device may not succeed, but may, on the contrary, give it further sharpness. There is no guarantee that uncertainty over the city's future will end, and that it may not be prolonged for another five, fifteen or fifty years. A bold solution of the problem at this stage will avert much subsequent bitterness.

Meanwhile, the attitude of the Sindhis at the present juncture must serve as an eye-opener to those who entertain fears and distrust. Having lost their homeland, the Sindhis, who are striving to build a new settlement for themselves in Kutch, with Gandhidham as its nucleus, find themselves completely swamped in the new Gujerat State. They will be an insignificant minority and find themselves immensely handicapped in their efforts to preserve their traditions and their own distinctive culture. Yet, no clamour has been raised by them any more than one has been raised by the small Maharashtrian community in Baroda, which will be a district of the new Gujerat State.
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