

A Kabul Diary

The Importance of Being an Indian

ADAY in Kabul is an at once interesting and instructive experience today, and I recently went through it. Two days would be one too many, and this too is going to be my lot on my way back from the Soviet Union in another three or four days. Now then, here in beautiful Leningrad. I must seat myself at the typewriter and make a few general, very general, observations on Afghanistan and, inevitably, India. In spite of the travails of travelling with a mixed bunch of tourists, who are just bearable in the air but boring beyond belief on terra firma, I rather enjoyed my day in Kabul. It was not very hot, and in the evening it was distinctly cool. The city, for so it must be called, has a rugged kind of beauty of its own. There are hills all around, and they are reliefs in more senses than one, especially for one used to the monotone of the plains of Bengal. There is no dearth of flies and dirt (about the only two things in generous supply), but the boys are healthy and handsome (as Ian Stephens found them) and this almost makes up for the rather unsavoury smell some of the men emit. I can say nothing about the women, for the country is in strict purdah. One hears stories though that the women are rather more intelligent than the men, and that underneath the burkha can be seen if only one could see fashions in nylon and Max Factor as would not shame either Paris or New York.

The city itself resembles neither; it is in fact a Middle Eastern capital, poor, dirty, proud of its independence, unashamed of its many deficiencies, and almost totally unaware that things could be better. One says these things with more sorrow than anger, for Afghanistan is friendly towards India and I would like to see the Afghans take their rightful place in the world. It is to a country like Afghanistan that an Indian should go for a boost to his national ego. The Indian rupee is a respected thing in this part of the world and, in defiance of the phoney official rate of 4 or 5 Afghanis to a rupee, you can get anything between ten and fifteen in the nearest tea shop. And, of course, being an Indian, you are received well almost everywhere. All this is most

flattering, especially because not only does Afghanistan love India but she also hates India's one hater, Pakistan. Most flattering indeed.

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It is not easy to discover the centre of authority in this land-locked country. It is said that the Prime Minister is a liberal sort of man, cautiously reformist. The mullahs cannot still be ignored in matters spiritual, and for them there are not many matters which are wholly temporal. There is also a feudal element, not entirely powerless. Its endless ramifications are often ridiculous; it is possible to meet ticket collectors who have to be addressed as Their Excellencies because of their connections. How any kind of balance is maintained among these three forces secular, religious and feudal I cannot claim to have discovered within a matter of less than twenty-four hours. One explanation offers itself. Perhaps what we are describing as forces are t forces at all. Perhaps all three are so many static quantities. Things in motion collide, not things stationary. That I myself was on the move should make the country appear to me as in motion, as frees look from a moving train. It may not have been an optical illusion on my part that I saw very limited evidence of movement in Afghanistan,

Writing after seeing something of Tashkent, it is necessary to record the opinion that there may well be a very different destiny for the Afghans, a very likeable people for those who love the Afghans. The Kabul Hotel, where we were installed, is the perfect setting for a novel by Mr Graham Greene, but if being the setting of a work of fiction is not the only objective of a country, Afghanistan must clearly do a few things to be taken seriously by the world outside. The first thing to do is to recognise that there is a world outside. Because this is being written in Leningrad, the first commercial port opened by Peter the Great to connect Russia with the West and to start the process of modernisation still being carried on by the Communists, I consider Afghanistan's proud isolationism particularly unfortunate. Geologists think Afghanistan has rich mineral resources. To get them out of the

bowels of the earth is beyond the Afghans as they are now. Why not invite foreign technicians? The jet age also makes a difference. If there could be a direct and regular air service between Moscow and Delhi via Kabul, and also between Western Europe and Asia (which would save much unnecessary detour) Kabul could once again be an important place. Our knowledge of how the early Aryans went out in different directions is speculative and imperfect, but Kabul must have been a sort of a junction. It can be so again, if Pan American Airways and Aeroflot choose Kabul as their airport of call. For both, I gather, efforts are afoot, and it is for Afghanistan to avail itself of the opportunity. What Afghanistan has to do is to make up her mind that she will once again be the gateway of a number of migrating or proliferating civilisations. She may even herself be a civilisation in the process. There is, however, one serious obstacle to that happy consummation.

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The one decisive factor in the affairs of Afghanistan today is an invisible one which is also very real the ghost of Amanullah. For students of revolutions successful and otherwise Afghanistan may well be the most interesting case. Talk to anybody who is somebody in Afghanistan, and you will find that he disapproves purdah and most other things in his country. Why isn't anything done about them still? Because all of them, the Prime Minister included, are afraid that the fate of Amanullah awaits them. It is the glib belief of many that a revolution which has failed is a pillar of later success; there are instances in history to support this view. This, however, is no reason for ignoring the example of Afghanistan, where a leader's attempt to go too fast, has put the clock back by nobody knows how many decades. Was Amanullah too daring? Hair-splitting argumentation is unnecessary. History records that he failed to carry the country with him, and the result has been the demoralisation of all later reformers so far. I had often criticised Nehru for being too slow. Kabul has been a chastening influence. I can no longer say whether Nehru has delayed urgent reforms—or

averted decades of extremer reaction and orthodoxy.

The rivers and canals of Leningrad will be freezing shortly; my fingers are beginning to anticipate the process right now, and this discourse must, be brought to an end as early as possible. Well, I was happy to see that Afghanistan was friendly towards India, for I like friendship. Most of my friends are utterly useless in the sense that they are incapable of doing much good or harm; I like my friends that way. It may still be doubted whether a nation's foreign policy can be, or should be, governed by the same Forsterian principle of personal relationships. Which is the Power among what we like to call the Colombo Powers¹ As for Bandung, only three or four countries really believe in the India line on international affairs. Burma, Indonesia, and possibly Ceylon. Not one is a Power in any significant sense. Germany could afford an Italian ally; the United States can enlist the useless support of such dubious allies as Formosa, Korea, Viet Nam, or Portugal. Can India afford the same luxury? I do not know the answer, but there in the Paghman gardens in Kabul I was wondering whether India was not acquiring the habit of picking up friends whose capacity to do India much good is nil and whose chances of receiving much help from India are not immediate. The windfalls now accruing to India from the continuing conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States are all welcome, and let's drink a toast to Nehru. But these profits are adventitious, and a long-term foreign policy for India still awaits formulation.

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Hotel Astoria,
Leningrad, USSR,
October 2, 1956.

Letter to the Editor

EQUAL FREIGHTS AND NATIONAL INTEREST

THE observations of the Estimates Committee regarding equalisation of the freight on coal, reported in your issue of September 29, are fraught with grave consequences for the country. The purpose of a freight rate structure is not merely to raise revenue, for which a uniform rate should be simple and admirable to administer, but also to regulate economic activity with a view to reduction of costs, including cost of transportation. In the present

Indian context, it is also a question of minimising investment in transport which is already large in the Second Five Year Plan.

Now what exactly is the long range effect of uniform freight rates on coal? Uniform freight presumably aims at uniform spatial consumption of coal, so that production requiring coal may develop with as much ease in Travancore, Punjab or Assam as in West Bengal and Bihar. However, if this kind of situation develops, then the haulage of coal will very likely be much more than double its present average of 300 miles, since most of the coal is mined in the corner of a quadrilateral (the approximate geographical shape of India) with arms 1500 miles long. The same thing will happen to steel also, which will annul any advantage of location in the production of articles consuming steel. Since coal traffic constitutes about 40 per cent of the total goods traffic in ton-miles, this would enormously increase the transport commitment of the Plan, leading to a big increase in the requirements of rolling stock and investment in track. It, as is likely, foreign exchange needed for the resulting increase in investment is not available, an overall reduction in the size of the Plan would be inevitable.

However, in the short range, established industries are not likely to shift to new locations to take advantage of freight rates, because

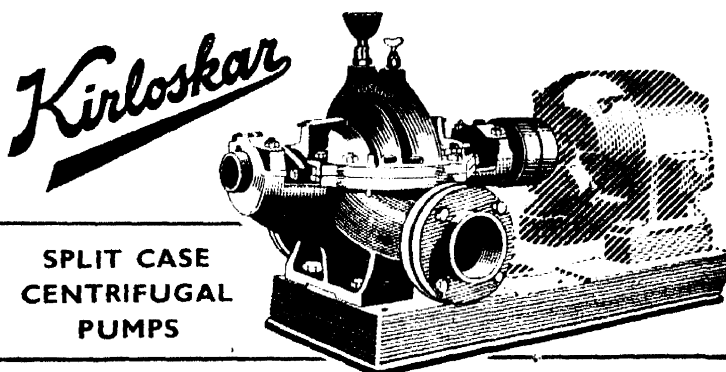
for most manufactured articles, transport costs form a small part of the total and the products of these industries (mainly engineering) being in short supply, and prices being competitive, the burden of higher freight rates can be shifted to ultimate consumers. Thus unless the rates of freight on manufactured articles are also made uniform, the relative advantage of consumers in different geographical areas will remain unchanged, and there will be only an upgrading of average prices.

It is also very unlikely that a transition from the short range to the long range situation described above will make a substantial difference because the investor, staking his capital, will hesitate to believe that experimental official policies will really nullify natural differences.

It seems therefore that the relative advantages of geographical location cannot be so easily annulled. If it can be done at all, it must be at the cost of national interest. However, to regard equality as desirable even at the sacrifice of national interests is to seek equality with vengeance and this we believe is against the spirit of the Union into which the States of India are banded.

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