

The Unhappy Utopia

—J P in Wonderland

W H Morris-Jones

IT is nearly a year since J P Narain made available for discussion his paper "A Plea for Reconstruction of Indian Polity". I do not know how he feels about the reception accorded to this document, but if I were in his place I think I should be a little disappointed.

Discussion of a kind has no doubt taken place — in conference rooms, drawing rooms and common rooms, in London and Oxford, Bombay and Delhi. It may even be true, as Delhi rumour had it, that some of J P's suggestions were being sympathetically entertained among highly placed, officials of certain Ministries. On the other hand, various parts of his argument have been subjected to rough handling in the informal debates.

SYSTEMATIC SOCIAL THEORY

The one thing that seems not to have happened is a serious examination of his ideas as a whole;* it is this which I feel is a little hard on J P. For what he seeks to put forward is nothing less than a comprehensive social philosophy. His own title is, if anything, on the modest side: even more than "polity" alone is at issue here. One only has to look at the range of authors from whom he quotes — economists, psychologists and political scientists as well as general publicists. And if it be said — as indeed it is not unfair to say — that J P has borrowed heavily from others, many replies can be given.* One is that his debts are honest ones, openly acknowledged. Further, who among us anyway does his work without borrowing? J P certainly makes a selection that is all his own and it is, moreover, a selection which he has digested and made coherent. This, it seems to me, is already more than anyone else has done in this field in post-independence India.

Here, then is a systematic piece of social theory. We should be grateful for something so precious and rare and the most fitting way

to express this gratitude is by Liking its claim seriously and giving it careful examination. That is a task beyond a short article but I should like to make a beginning here — and to do so by discussing two of the key notions in J P's thesis: 'participation' and 'consensus',

PROPHET BLINDED BY HIS LIGHT

First, however, I must draw attention to an interesting general aspect of J P's thesis. J P's modesty and humility as a person are well-known and find expression when he engages in conversation about his thesis: he wants to know what others think and he invites criticism. We find this stated in the Preface to his thesis: **the ideas and proposals herein expressed are in the nature of tentative suggestions to serve as a basis for discussion". At the same time those who have talked with J P often have the impression that his mind is not as open to change as this way of putting things implies. Criticism in practice does not seem to have any marked positive or constructive effect. The critic retires feeling that his points have not only not been met but have scarcely been received, and he wonders whether J P is not, despite all the modesty of manner, a prophet blinded by his light rather than a seeker who genuinely welcomes co-operation.

I leave the psychology of this on one side, but it is possible that the puzzle is solved if we take note of another feature of J P's approach: his emphasis on the importance of being 'Scientific'. Now 'Scientific' can refer to an attitude which comes very close to that which is associated with modesty by temperament: an eagerness to throw one's hypotheses open to questioning and correction, a willingness to believe one is mistaken. This is indeed the method and mood of science. But 'scientific' can also be used in a way which has a contrary tendency: to set a seal of sanctity on a particular view, to emphasise its unchallengeability, to confer the status of Truth, and to exorcise doubt.

SCIENTIFIC?

There is something of the latter in J P. It probably derives in part

from his Marxist past which in so many interesting and important ways remains with him still. For Marx certainly used 'scientific' in an imprecise way and for prestige effect. He, the first scientist of society, had thereby uncovered The Truth and others were so evidently in error. In Marx Science is turned neatly into its opposite — Dogma. J P has something of this tendency — as when he claims for his ideal polity that it is "not only most suited to us but also most rational and scientific".

That J P uses 'scientific' to endorse one particular view rather than to mean a mood in which many views are examined is also indicated by his pronouncement that 'Western polity' is contrary to "the scientific organisation of society". (What does that mean?) It also seems that J P is still holding on to Marx's hand when he finds it possible to talk of the principles which he advocates as (a) "in line with the natural course of social evolution" (who tells J P which course is 'natural?') and (b) "more valid from the point of view of social science" (what makes J P so sure that there is a single body of knowledge called social science that can, as it were, award marks to various sets of principles — and put his own top of the class?)

TRUE DEMOCRACY

But Marx is not alone to blame. In some measure J P is merely sharing the modern Indian worship of modernity. It is one of the important features of contemporary Indian thought that it seeks to combine a sentimental attachment to the supposed character of ancient Indian polity with an equally sentimental worship of all that is 'advanced' and 'Scientific'. The day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow are full of wonder and joy; only today is vile. J P is very much a spokesman for his people in all this. What could be finer than to link the envied science of the West with India's glorious past? (Actually J P goes one better: in the name of respected Science' he is able to expose the actual Western world as an unworthy failure and

An exception is the able little article by C R M Rao in the *Hindustan Times* of March 6.

Memoirs of an Elephant —/



"When I was
very young...
good-looking
and adventurous...

It was the 1880s—the place was Assam.

At that time these strange creatures, human beings, were all over the place here busily unearthing some black stone they called "coal". They started putting mile after mile of iron rails on the ground just to carry these ugly looking rocks. Left to me, I would have carried them on my back—that's self reliance! All the same, I used to help them build the railway.

One day, on my day off from work I took a stroll into the forest. I remember splashing through some dark sticky fluid during my walk and when I got back I got quite a reception!

It seems that I had discovered something they called OIL. From that minute on there was no peace, and for the past 70 years the pace has been hectic here at Digboi: they have drilled about 1,000 oil wells in this time.

I casually asked one of the AOC workers why they are so interested in oil. He told me that *oil is vital to Indian Industries*, and that Digboi is the first commercially producing oil field in the country.

ASSAM OIL

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traitor to the science cause.) Along this road too we reach Science as God-like dictator, not Science the questioner. J P is only one of the more distinguished victims of the paradox of Science as magic-maker.

When J P discusses democracy he expresses ideas that will be readily endorsed in India. This is part of the importance of J P : he puts explicitly and more or less systematically notions that are widely held or at least felt among his fellows. One of the most powerful of these is the idea that a true democracy is one in which the degree of citizen participation in the political process is so great that men can really be said to be "governing themselves." This idea has an interesting pedigree in the history of political thought and an obvious immediate appeal. Nevertheless, I would suggest that experience has shown its limitations.

POLITY OF FRUSTRATION

It is to be noted that historically this idea has gained prominence when there has been in a society some element of political frustration. Usually a new social class, seeking its due place in the political sunshine, has raised the slogan of participation of all in order to justify its own claims to be heard. Modern India is a polity of frustration. It might be supposed that this would be because submerged layers of Indian society are coming up to the surface and meeting obstacles on their way. This is indeed happening but that frustration expresses itself not so much as an element in the general malaise but rather in the kind of support which the Communist Party is able to secure in certain areas such as Kerala.

The more general kind of frustration seems related above all to two things. First, it is yet another consequence of the long years of nationalist struggle. The important feature of those years was that there was room for everyone on that wagon. Participation in government was very difficult indeed but participation in the movement was open to all, and psychologically this was at least as satisfying. Every temperament, every mixture of motives and needs, could find its socially approved use. In the political life of independent India opportunities for mass participation are by comparison more limited, yet the days of the movement have left behind in Indian society a large group of peo-

ple accustomed to such participation. What J P declines to see is that today is normal and yesterday's struggle level of participation the exception.

POLITICAL UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Frustration is, however, more than merely the consequence of unreasonable comparisons with bygone days. It is the consequence of one particular form of political underdevelopment. (What a pity the economists have stolen and established a monopoly of that term!) India is politically underdeveloped in that its political system is simple and almost single-track. It is dominated by the legislative bodies at centre and state levels and since independence the life of the political parties too is focussed almost wholly on these. Trade unions, local elected bodies, peasant organisations, professional associations, opinion-forming societies — such things, which so fill out and put flesh on the political structures of western democracies, are absent or weak or dependant. Indian polity has the shape of a tall slender tower with a platform at the top; a pyramid would be more solid. So J P's cry for a participating democracy can be understood : a politically more developed society would offer more opportunities for activity, it would be able better to absorb the energies and expartations generated during the days of the movement.

DANGEROUS MIRAGE

To say this is not, however, to endorse J P's emphasis on systematic mass participation on "communitarian⁴ lines. Self-government has several legitimate meanings, but J P's conception which seems to envisage some kind of identification of rulers and ruled — the 'withering away' so to speak, of the distinction between government and people — is a dangerous mirage. It is no accident that those political thinkers for whom nothing matters except that the people should 'rule themselves' prepare the way for totalitarianism. Rousseau is the best example. Satisfied with nothing less than each man retaining his 'freedom' by taking full part in the laying down of the laws he is to obey, he ends by asserting that some men will obtain their 'freedom' by being coerced; ordinary language and ordinary people both suffer.

Mass political participation is at once too much and too little to ask

for. It is too much because the great majority of any people anywhere have normally no desire to participate. The body politic is already diseased if everyone wants to join in. Adequate — and, above all, varied — opportunities for the active minority are one thing; expecting activity from all is something very different. Men want many things from governments and they may want to be governed in certain ways, but they do not want to do the governing. The dogmatic democrat who insists that they shall do so is bound to become a tyrant — or to pave the way for one. On the other hand, mass participation is too little — in the sense that there are other political values besides democracy : rights, liberty, responsibility and, justice — and the greatest of these being justice. There are good grounds for holding that it is far safer to cherish these values separately rather than to imagine that democracy by itself will automatically secure all the rest. There may be many weaknesses in Western democracy but it is not one, of them that its modern theorists should admit that government is always the work of a few; this is only common sense.

'CONSENSUS'

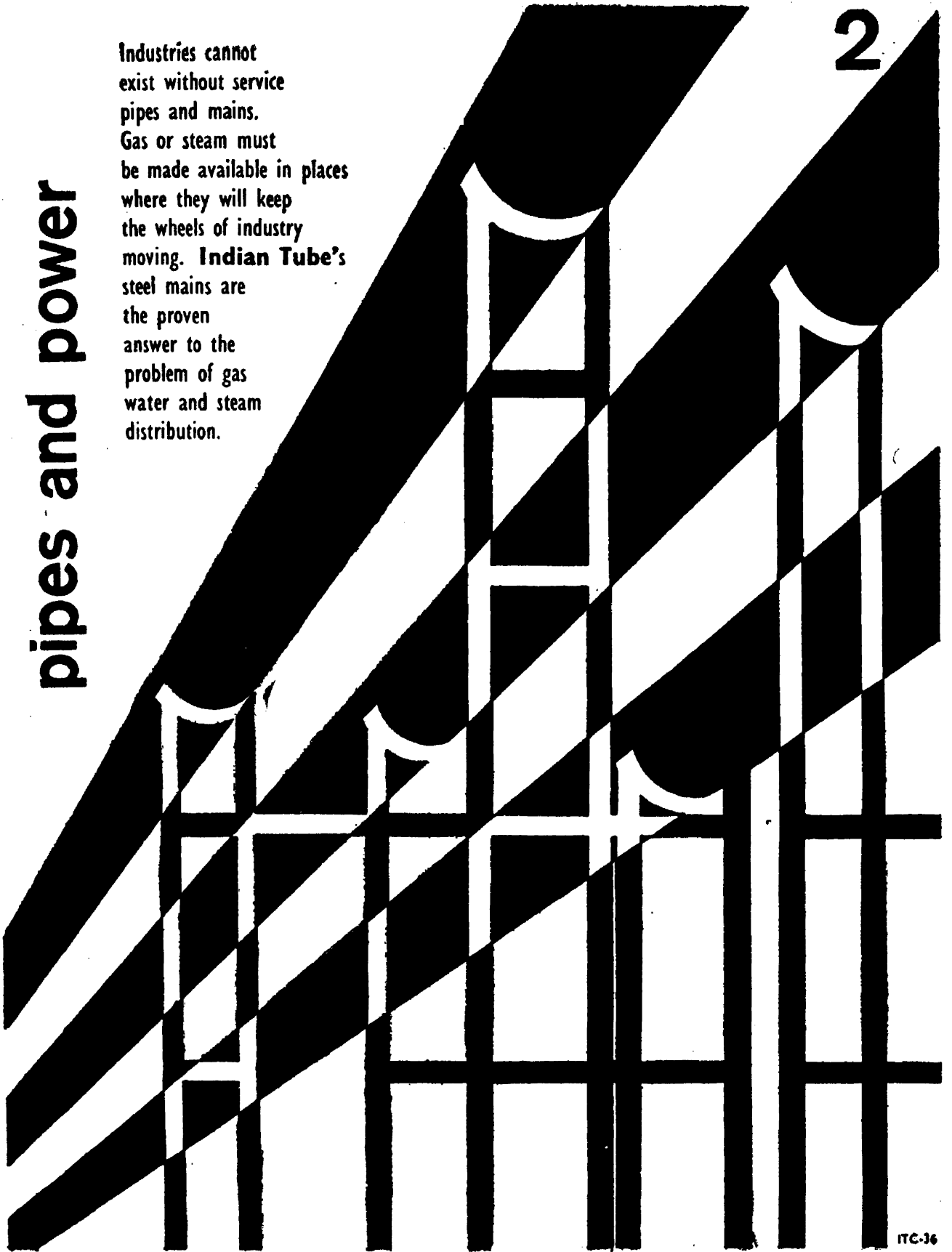
The idea of a participating democracy is linked to the idea of 'consensus'. The notion of all men 'governing themselves' requires for its plausibility the further notion that they agree about how this should be done. All participate in making a decision, but if the decision is arrived at by a 51-49 vote after a bitter argument, will the 49 have [he same feeling of self-government that the 51 enjoy? Participation begins to look a little threadbare unless it is married to certain views about consensus and general agreement. It is no accident that in J P as in Rousseau this marriage takes place.

This second idea, like the first, exercises a great fascination over modern Indian thinking. It is present in the idealisation of the conduct of village affairs (by taking the 'sense of the meeting') and in the widespread condemnation of political parties — both of which are prominent in J P's thinking. It is even to be 'found' echoed in Asoka Mehta's talk about the political compulsions of a backward economy with its emphasis on the co-opera-

pipes and power

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tive role of an opposition. The central conviction is that there is nothing to prevent men of good will from seeing eye to eye and pulling together for the welfare of all — nothing, that is, except bad or inappropriate institutions.

'ORGANIC COMMUNITIES'

This idea, like that of participation, owes something to the period of the freedom struggle and the difficulty of getting adjusted to the world of real politics. In the good old days — so runs the theme in the bark of the mind — we all worked together in the great single cause; why can we not recapture that unity of purpose? (Incidentally, it is convenient for the purpose of this exercise not to have too good a memory; some people have managed wonderfully to forget the deep divisions within the national movement.) The idea must also be seen as a most understandable reaction to an awareness of how divided and heterogeneous a society modern India really is: already so divided — by regions, by states, by communities and by castes — can we afford the apparently additional divisions which parliamentary democracy seemingly encourages?

So J P seeks to eliminate elections and parties by building up basic democracies from below — in units that are 'organic communities' and in which selections of 'candidates' could be achieved by the sense of the community. On all this several points could be made: whether parties can really be so easily 'eliminated' or whether they would not simply find other means of operation; whether the effect of an emphasis on consensus and general agreement (rather than elections and conflict) would not be merely that traditional leaders would have their positions consolidated and the socially submerged sections remain politically voiceless; and so on.

GOOD FAR FROM COMMON

But here I would rather turn attention to the very concept of consensus and query the extent of its validity. It is of course true that the process of taking decisions in any body can have divisive effect and that it is sensible to minimise this so far as possible. A committee or a cabinet will instinctively strive through full discussion to reach a point where genuine agreement is reached and a vote is unnecessary.

But this, although important, is not the only thing that matters* Sometimes it is just as important that issues should be stated sharply in order that alternative lines be made clear. Moreover, the stress on consensus seems to imply a peculiar view of the common good. It is thought of as something single and simple—discernible to men of insight and goodwill, attainable (as Rousseau again believed) through the silencing of particular or selfish interests.

But is this really our experience? Is the position not rather that the common good is something towards which we can approximate only through a forthright expression of all relevant clashing interests and their reconciliation so far as is possible? The pretence that interests do not clash, that a common interest is somehow already present and only needs to be uncovered, is likely in practice to yield a good that is far from common. And there is no community, however organic it may be, without different interests. Even J P's villagers will not see eye to eye as to whether the road or the well should come first, for some will benefit more from the one, some from the other. The stifling of the conflict of interest and opinion (for opinions can also clash even among men of the same interest—and why not?) serves not the common good but some influential and powerful partial in-

terest-group. Consensus is a fair name for what could be an ugly reality.

TODAY'S DILEMMA

Both these notions thus seem to me to have their dangers if pushed to extremes as in J P's thesis. Nor am I persuaded that there is anything special in the spirit of Indian life or in the circumstances of Indian development which calls for such emphasis. No doubt there is much frustration and little pride and enthusiasm, and the plans suffer thereby. But there is no magic 'reconstructed polity' which will transform the situation. Neither the restoration of the day before yesterday nor the vision of the day after tomorrow will help today's dilemma. What is called for is the much more humdrum acceptance of political life as it really is and the achievement of piecemeal reforms — the closer linking of politician and electorate, the building up of voluntary associations and the provision of adequate immediate incentives to greater individual efforts.

I repeat that I have not been pretending to do more than touch on a small—but to my mind crucial—part of J P's thesis. Much more could he said and needs to be said. This brief examination may serve to indicate how seriously his ideas deserve to be taken—even if only for the reason that by examining them with care we can see more clearly by contrast where we stand.

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