

Letter from Moscow

Russia Favours Pooshtoons

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TWICE within a fortnight, the Russians have clarified their attitude towards Pooshtoonistan. They say the dispute is a legacy of the British policy of divide and rule. When they left undivided India, the British went back on certain assurances to Afghanistan so that the two neighbouring States, Pakistan and Afghanistan, do not come to terms. Border tribes have a right to determine their future, a right for which they have been agitating for a long time. It is regretted that the Government of Pakistan obliged the British by continuing the old policy, by resorting to arms: villages are being bombed from the air, tanks have been moved up. According to reports reaching the Russians, there have been heavy casualties. Russia, it is emphasised, has to take note of these developments, because her border is not very far. The sooner the conflict is settled by peaceful negotiation, the better. There is no hint of any Russian action in the matter. But Russia has made it clear that her sympathies lie with the Pooshtoons and with Afghanistan.

The Russian declaration should not have surprised Pakistan, Khrushchev did not mince matters when he visited some Asian countries last year. What, perhaps, is unexpected is the timing of the new declaration. It came soon after the oil agreement, which seemed to open up prospects of friendly and business-like relations between Moscow⁷ and Karachi. There have been signs here of a softer approach to Pakistan; Pakistan Day was observed and reported in the Soviet press and Moscow radio spoke of the sacrifices made by the people who created Pakistan.

This may have jarred on Indian ears we know what these sacrifices were, we know how leaders turned some legitimate aspirations of the Muslim masses into other channels, into a blood bath, in which we too participated with equal violence. But politics is not always honourable; honesty and expediency do not always go together: and in this

matter, Soviet Russia is no exception.

It is difficult to probe the shifts in public utterances here about Pakistan, friendly a month ago, somewhat critical later. Perhaps, note was taken of the anti-Indian outburst in Karachi and East Pakistan and of the visit to the USSR, of the Afghan Prime Minister. Perhaps, it was not forgotten that Pakistan is a member, of SEATO and SEATO was meeting in Bangkok to discuss possible intervention in Laos.

Things have not come to a head in Laos. The Russians are pleased. They think the West did not intervene in Laos primarily because of the strength of the peace movement. The strength of the socialist camp was another factor. Between them, they created a wide rift among the SEATO powers, and Kennedy and Macmillan had to retreat from the brink of war.

Strengthening Ties

Meanwhile, Russia is strengthening her ties with the non-aligned powers. The delegates from Mali and Ceylon had had a busy and interesting time. General Ne Win is being shown around. There is no end to delegations, thanks to the mild weather in Moscow and the spread of goodwill among nations. Fraternal parties have been discussing their future in Hungary, Austria, England and India (*Pravda* has carried a long article by Ajoy Ghosh on the Indian situation). According to the Russians, the Belgian Communists have done quite well in the last elections; and forces of reaction are on the retreat everywhere and socialism is marching ahead. To be precise, the Russians are moving forward to the next Party Congress and Communism while others are completing their socialist revolution. And spring has come. Spring sowing, the Party Congress. Communism, heroes of our time, what Khrushchev said—it goes on and on in the Soviet press.

A remarkable thing about the Russians is their gift of speech. They seldom falter or are at a loss for

words. Poets, painters, politicians, engineers, farmers — they are all orators. Sometimes, one is glad that one has not picked up enough Russian to follow them through. It is delightful to see the man presiding at a meeting passing a time-up chit to the speaker. But when one comes to think of it, the gift of speech' is inseparable from democracy, from the art of persuasion. And the Russians are fluent at all levels, because they have to argue and persuade at all levels—in the farm, in the factory, in the office, in the party, in the Soviets. Even the dumb and the deaf here communicate their thoughts to each other with an ease that is captivating. Couldn't this sign language be a world language? It is time to attempt that. Tourism then will know no bounds.

But the written word is another matter. Editorials are another matter. Here, repetition is irritating and does curb the intellect by making people think in chorus.

Journalists were taken to several new construction sites the other day; Moscow, as all know, is growing at a tremendous rate. The stress now is on prefabricated panels of larger size. The entire floor, for instance, is made out of one panel. A sixty-flat panel building takes about three months to complete, with eight people working on two shifts. Five-storey houses are preferred. They will have no lifts. In housing construction on a mass scale, there is little room for variety, but it is being attempted through different colours. For instance, the south-western district of Moscow is pleasing to the eye. But pleasure is still a luxury. What the builders have foremost in mind is utility and the time factor. We were shown some passing old huge buildings whose facade cost quite a lot—monstrosities of the Stalin era.

On either side of the road to the airport, builders are busy. The first structures are visible. Further ahead is the site for the 1967 World Fair. By then many more hotels will open in Moscow.