

respondent's report that at B B C interviews on a special programme Indian students in London performed very poorly compared to their Pakistani counterparts. The information supplied by the Pak embassies may all be mischievous propaganda, including stories of Bombay having been bombed, but rumours thrive most when no facts are made available.

There is thus urgent need for asking Indian embassies to establish close rapport with Indian nationals abroad and to supply the latter with all available information. Such a policy can at least partly offset the harm done by the crimes of omission and commission of the foreign press and their correspondents stationed in India. At least the daily press releases that at present go only to diplomatic colleagues or to unhospitable newspapers

should be made available to Indian nationals.

A measure of equal, if not greater, importance would be to send Indian newspapers, including the leading dailies, to important public and university libraries abroad, gratis and by air. Foreigners interested in our country (as well as Indian nationals abroad) will thereby be able to know our point of view at first hand. (At present, even the reading rooms in Indian chanceries display dailies which are at least a week old, and most libraries get them only after two months.) The expenditure on air postage would hardly exceed a few lakhs of rupees and would prove much more fruitful than that on sending 'delegations' to dozens of countries to do a job for which most of their members are hardly trained or qualified.

LETTERS TO EDITOR

Food Stocks with Consumers

AT the recent meeting of the Congress Working Committee, an interesting statement was made by the Chief Minister of Gujarat. He said that although the output of cereals in the State is expected to be only 13.85 lakh tons against 23.66 lakh tons during the last year, "this shortfall is being offset partly by many people voluntarily surrendering their ration cards and others managing without cereals".

It is possible that the normal tendency of deficit States to exaggerate their deficit and of surplus States to under-estimate their surplus might be operative even now. But it is indeed surprising that the reported movement for voluntary surrender of ration cards in Gujarat has failed to attract attention and emulation elsewhere. The rationale of the movement lies in the fact that many consumers can afford to, and habitually do, stockpile foodgrains for their anticipated needs for a year or so. If all such stocks could be drawn upon the severity of the food crisis now haunting the country can be mitigated a good deal. The crucial issue, of course, is the willingness of consumers to overcome the considerations of uncertainty of food crops next year and to abstain from making any claims on the stocks available with the Government that are distributed through the fair price or ration shops.

It is most unlikely that the habit of stocking up is confined to consumers

in Gujarat only and, therefore, the movement for voluntary surrender of ration cards can usefully spread to other States as well. Such a movement will also help cut down further stockpiling and if a substantial number of urban consumers adopt it there will be fewer opportunities for producers to get higher prices on sale of their crop to non-governmental agencies.

There is also an urgent need for a firm drive to detect bogus cards for foodgrains and sugar. Several of the inspectors appointed for the purpose in Greater Bombay are reported to be avoiding the task of visiting individual households to check on the actual number of family members. In fact, at least one conscientious person I know resigned within a fortnight of his getting a job as an inspector, because he was disgusted with the current practices. The long run solution perhaps lies in issuing identity cards with photographs of members to all households, as is proposed, on a voluntary basis, for Indian citizens in Assam. The scheme can be confined to urban areas to be brought under rationing and can, in the first instance, be tried out on a small scale. The cost would be relatively negligible and the identity cards would have manifold uses. If properly organised, the scheme can lead to population registers such as are maintained in Japan and Sweden and several other countries in Northern Europe. It would also enable the Government to make

a much-needed distinction between the ration quota for sedentary white-collar workers and that for manual labourers whose consumption needs tend to be higher.

Finally, the miss-a-meal movement is unlikely to make any impact on the food situation unless it is accompanied by a cut in the foodgrains quota allotted to each individual. Its psychological value is perhaps exaggerated, although if the movement catches on in the rural areas some impact may be produced on the marketed surplus.

PRAVIN M. VISARIA

Bombay
November 11.

Methanol

IN his excellent article on "Defence-Orientation of the Chemical Industry" (The Economic Weekly, October 16) Ajoy Gupta states that "our present capacity for production of methanol is nil". This is true, but in this context it should be mentioned that a methanol plant is currently under construction as part of the Trombay fertiliser project. This plant will produce refined, technical grade methanol for the first time in India. According to the latest report of the Fertiliser Corporation of India, which is responsible for the Trombay fertiliser project the methanol plant will go into production in the next two months. When in full production, it is expected to produce about 33,000 tons of methanol annually.

R RAMACHANDRAN

Bombay
November 1.

Not a Secular Act

THE Weekly Note 'Not a Secular Act' in your issue of October 23 doubts the wisdom of the public performance of "bhoomi pooja" by the Prime Minister of a country which places great faith in the concept of a secular state. Towards the end you have also stated that it is hard to imagine the possibility of any public work being inaugurated with a Muslim or Christian ritual. I feel that such a possibility may and perhaps will materialise if one of our future Prime Ministers belongs to the minority community. Surely, if our Vice-President can be from the minority community, then some day in the future our Prime Minister may also be either a Christian, a Parsi or a Muslim since our constitution guarantees equality of opportunity and does not recognise any distinction based on caste, creed or colour.

R K CHARI

Bombay,
October 30.