

Capital View

Kashmir Realities under Debate

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DELHI is preparing to go to sleep for a couple of weeks. Finance Minister Morarji Desai is away in Europe lost in the labyrinth of foreign aid talks. The Prime Minister too is in Kashmir for a much-needed holiday. Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, supposed to officiate in the absence of Nehru and Desai, has gone South. And, to top it off, the weather is conducive to sleep. But the Congress chieftains are worried, worried about the political and military situation in Kashmir.

It is not generally known that one of the reasons which prompted the Prime Minister to return to Kashmir for a second holiday is his rather belated desire to press on Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad the need to clean up the corruption so rampant in his State, particularly in high places, and to make it clear that from now on the Government of India will not tolerate the crude and open suppression of democratic liberties in the valley of the Jhelum.

Criticism Permissible Now

The Prime Minister's well-known reluctance to entertain any criticism, no matter how valid, of Kashmir affairs has now broken down. The first signs were visible during the recent general election when, despite a suspicious number of uncontested returns in favour of the National Conference from constituencies in the valley, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad's so-called 'peace brigades' did not hesitate to beat up and blackmail opposition elements. Active workers of the Praja Socialist Party documented these facts and presented them to the Prime Minister,

At this stage, several leading Congressmen found the courage to speak up about the corruption prevalent among Ministers, their close relations and friends. Business houses, attempting to find agents who would market their goods in Jammu and Kashmir, were compelled to deal with the ruling esta-

blishment. Even vegetable and meat contracts for the army posted on this critical frontier were cornered by these elements. Moreover, evidence was advanced to prove that the considerable developmental funds going into the State were also being misused,

Reports also began to percolate through the Income Tax Department that vast fortunes had been declared in the wealth tax returns of close relatives of leading members of the Government and administration in Jammu and Kashmir. One gentleman, who did not have much to his name in 1917, was now the proud possessor of Rs 90 lakhs!

Closer Integration

It was about this time that the Prime Minister took his first holiday in Srinagar after his recent illness. In the course of his talks with Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, he made it abundantly obvious that he was most unhappy about the corruption and demoralisation in Kashmir. In the presence of Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad's colleagues, he called for urgent steps to remedy this deplorable state of affairs. In an atmosphere heavy with flattery and polite conversation, which touches the outskirts of problems, this kind of intervention from the Prime Minister acts like a catalytic agent. Now, the Government of India has more material evidence in its possession to indicate that internal Kashmir affairs cannot be allowed to drift.

Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's suggestions about integrating Kashmir more closely with India and his emphasising the necessity to revise some of our notions about the 'special status' of this strategic region, has caused irritation among the leading elements of the National Conference. They

seem to imagine that this is a disguised Man Sanghi approach' to the problems of the State. But in Delhi, Shastri is known to reflect the Prime Minister's mind.

This second holiday of the Prime Minister is going to be *no* holiday for Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad if the present trend of thinking in the Capital continues. The opinion is dominant that the only possible way of normalising the situation in the valley is to encourage independent political activity in the State by the various Indian parties. The lack of this activity is seen as the cause of the deterioration in the administration headed by Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad.

Of course, this unleashing of healthy political activity is not without its dangers. Whereas in Jammu the communal Parishad is fairly active, in the valley there is every likelihood that other communal groups will show their hand. The Praja Socialist organisation is broken and disorganised. As for the Communist Party, it has for so long been in an opportunist alliance with the National Conference or its leftist section that it will take some time to recover from the insidious infection of such contacts. Perhaps, the leftists in the National Conference can be persuaded to stir themselves.

It will be interesting to see what stand the Prime Minister will take. He is now so used to accepting the inevitable 'strong men' to run the States that it will be embarrassing for him to discriminate against Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad who is no worse than some whom we have come to regard as the pillars of our Republic. Yet, he has to act — particularly after the recent developments over Kashmir in the United Nations.

Back in Delhi, another vital aspect of the Kashmir situation is keeping at least one ministry awake, while the rest sleep. Defence Minister Krishna Menon has returned from the USA more than ordinarily troubled by the thought that Pakistan might attempt to activate the Kashmir front. Information reaching Delhi makes clear that the military regime in Rawalpindi believes that it now has powerful international backing — even from China in the Communist bloc! Adventurers could be led to believe that this is the time to strike, and then to appeal to the General Assembly to 'save the peace',

Are we in a position to meet this threat? Ever since our Ambassador in the USA, B K Nehru, publicly admitted that our armed forces are ill equipped, enquiries made at the highest levels have elicited evasive answers. However, those correspondents who made it a point to study the effectiveness of the Goa operations claim that in respect of supplier and equipment the position was quite serious. In fact, certain items were 'mobilised' only by depleting vital reserves.

Re-thinking on Defence

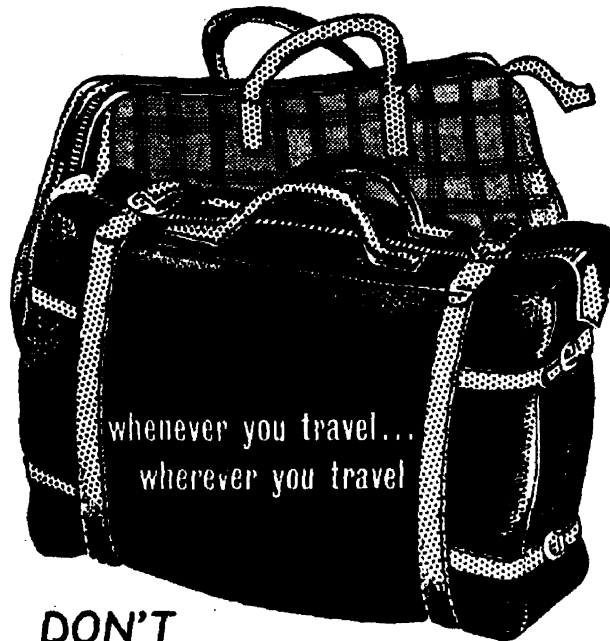
The stories now circulating in the Capital are disturbing, to say the least. It is maintained that although plane, tank and truck manufacture has been boldly undertaken, it appears that apathy has prevailed in those sections of the defence production organisation entrusted with the supply of ordinary but essential equipment. A confusion in priorities, bottlenecks in the supply of raw materials, lack of coordination between the private and public sectors and mistaken perspectives are advanced as the reason for this state of affairs.

If these reports are correct, then the Defence Minister, facing the possibility of prolonged border tensions in the East the North and the West, will have to give his immediate attention to resolving these problems, particularly where they concern the needs of the army and air force. In the process, perhaps, the very principles on which our defence forces are organised will come in for closer scrutiny. The old and pertinent question whether a few very expensive super-

sonic jet squadrons are more effective in the sky than militia units on land, armed with light, highly destructive weapons, will have to be answered more cogently than in the past. We cannot forever treat as sacrosanct the notions of defence which we inherited from the British with the transfer of power if these notions prevent us from making proper use of our limited resources.

Despite what his determined opponents have to say, the Defence Minister has the flexibility of approach to spark some fundamental re-thinking on the concepts which condition India's defence system. The pity of it is that he has delayed this re-assessment for so long.

The Capital will continue to debate the repercussions of recent Kashmir developments for some time. These may prove more far-reaching than is imagined at present.



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