

Letter from South

## Character of Corruption

THERE is something akin to expectancy about Nandaji's drive against high-flight corruption among many of those in the middle and lower echelons of society. The more sophisticated among the cynics are able, of course, to ridicule *Sadachar* and *Sadhus*—and some of it is genuinely ridiculous—but there is an impact on the popular mind and a small lifting of apathy.

Some interesting allegations of corruption have cropped up in Kerala, Andhra and Karnataka. All of them involve important and strategic Ministers and have the common pattern of alleged use of political power to start industrial ventures or transport companies or contractors' companies in the names of wives or children. Whatever the truth in these allegations, the heated rejoinders have not always repudiated the facts that Government departments showed unusual alacrity in deciding loans, accepting tenders and disbursing dues. And there is little doubt that the popular mind is far more inclined to believe the allegations than to concur with the defence.

It is extraordinarily interesting to discuss some of the allegations with one of the "victims", who happens also to be one of the more vigorous and able Ministers of a Southern State. In fact, his demeanour and his approach to this question as to life in general were singularly akin to that of Biju Patnaik of Orissa.

He began, of course, with an emphatic denial that there was anything hanky-panky about the fact that his wife and son had started two industrial concerns, had quickly received appropriate loans from the Small-Scale Industries Department and then equally gone on to buy land belonging to the Minister and forming till then part of his compound at something like four times the price originally paid for it by him. All this was a normal commercial deal and there was no reason why the wife and the son of a Minister should be penalised simply because of their relationship to him.

The second and more revealing, point made was that in India today it was difficult for the Congress politician and leader to avoid being dependent on big industrialists and traders. In the days of the freedom struggle not only was sacrifice the order of the day but the Congress was an organisation of struggle. The masses in their millions

willingly contributed to the cause. But even then Gandhiji was shrewd enough to cultivate and to control persons like Birla and Bajaj. Now with Congress as the ruling party, dedicated to the removal of mass poverty, how could Congress Ministers go to those very same poor folk and appeal for party funds? Even the Communist Party was finding it difficult to collect funds from the people and had gone in for publishing houses, travel agencies, tobacco trading and the like. The so-called Left Congressmen also had huge presses and wealthy friends. Thus, in order to avoid complete financial dependence on Big Business, which would demand a price for its aid, and to meet the danger of corruption, farseeing Congress leaders would have to take to some form of moneymaking themselves! This was the only way to ensure that Big Business did not dominate the Congress!

### Shady Characters

The revealing point was the premise on which the whole argument was based. Here was an important Congress Minister, supposed to be actively leading the building of a democratic socialist state in India, reducing the entire adventure of making India to a conflict of long and middle purses. It never seemed to enter his mind that there was the alternative of drastically reducing election expenses, that the way out was that of taking politics and programmes to the voters instead of purchasing vote-leaders, that the achievements of the Congress Ministries could be made such as to be the real vote-getters, not money- Above all, he did not seem to realise how accurately he confirmed the Marxist thesis that-bourgeois democracy was, after all, bourgeois!

Further, why couldn't some measures be taken by the Congress Government at the Centre and in the States to drastically curb, reduce and, finally, eliminate the concentration of economic power which he claimed was making it impossible for any Congress leader to live and work in independence? If the power of Big Business could be broken then Congress Ministers need not think in terms of "Small Business". In effect, the whole argument came down to the admission that, under the Congress dispensation, the powerful rich will always be with us. To fight the source of corruption was impossible, hence the

permissibility of Ministerial money making, even if it came perilously close to corruption!

The third feature of the Minister's statement, almost as revealing, was the display of petulance against what were claimed to be the sources of information that led to the questions in the legislature and the campaign in the press. It could well be that he was right in feeling that the particular transactions in which he and his family were alleged to be involved were brought to light because of faction fighting in the Congress. He was confident that he could unearth real and far bigger scandals involving x, y, z who were important Congress leaders not only at the State level but even in the Union Ministry. House-building, cinema buying, licence rackets, and so on—the material was extraordinarily explosive but, alas!, difficult to use without supporting documents which the Minister must have seen but which, naturally, he was not prepared to hand over. If what he said was true then, in this particular state at any rate, the most consequential of Congress leaders and Ministers were a bunch of shady characters, even though all were his honourable colleagues.

One was struck by the fact that all these allegations and counter-allegations were a manifestation of the unfinished and semi-developed nature of capitalism in India. It is well known enough that corruption is a companion of the most full-blown capitalist societies but one doubts whether its effect is quite as germinal and decisive as in the case of underdeveloped India. In those societies there has been an economic and social congealment of capitalism, operating mainly through its vast apparatus of production and the stimulation and response of the market. We do not yet have either this apparatus and system or the congealment. Hence, the entrepreneurial role of corruption. But it is an unequal competition and unless the smaller bourgeoisie loses its head it must realise that, in the long run, they have no chance this way.

Hence, the fight against corruption is not really a matter of moral uplift or rearmament or a saga of *Sadachars* and *Sadhus*. In the final analysis, it is a question of the pattern of growth in India and a matter of blocking a particular type of capitalist development which has a full blown "giant" sector at

