

A Deep Freeze ?

IN Andhra there is an uneasy calm descending. Nobody quite knows what to do and what to expect. The cease-fire is so uncertain. The Americans are so tantalising. Will they send the food or won't they? And on what basis should one begin? Suppose the food comes after all the fuss and strain of the levy on farmers, storage and rationed distribution? Won't it all have been a foolish waste of time?

This, is how many of the top Congress leaders in the State argue and keep themselves in a State of suspended animation. The days of seminars and tripartite meetings are the days of evasion, of a pretence at emergency. Much of the original enthusiasm has evaporated now that the realisation has dawned that the rationale of an emergency is radical social change.

There was a Food, Seminar held the other day. Its fatuous nature was quite clear from the start since the Government had not even thought it fit to draw up an agenda. There was a general airing of views by all and sundry. The only piece of fun was provided by the squabble between the Pradesh Congress Chief, Thimma Reddy, and some officials, who knew that the Ministry was behind them. In any event the quarrel was over a minor point about the implementation of the shockingly inequitable land revenue system. Since there was a quiet determination that nothing concrete was to be achieved this petty quarrel was allowed to hold the centre of the stage. The only other point of interest was the proposal to have a drainage tax in the delta areas to deal with the financial side of a very long overdue measure.

Taxes versus Savings

There has been something of a battle in the wings on the question of taxes versus savings. Shastri's admonition has been taken quite seriously. If voluntary Savings are not pushed up to a very much higher level then the only alternative would be to impose a stiff dose of taxes. As far as savings are concerned the biggest "donors" should be the Nizam and the temples—great hoards of gold and valuables are available with both these symbols of persistent feudalism. The Nizam shows absolutely no signs of relenting, apart from a grand donation of Rs one lakh! An Union Deputy Finance Minister flew down to Hyderabad to "persuade" the

very aged potentate but as it happened it was his birthday and the Minister was not given an appointment. He tried to explain it away as having been due to the old man's ill-health. The very next day there was a shrill protest of contradiction—the Nizam was well but, well, he couldn't and didn't see the point in seeing the emissary from New Delhi.

The temples, especially the Tirupati Devasthanam, are said to have agreed to weigh the Prime Minister in gold—a diminutive affair, after all. But even here second thoughts are on the way. Temple gold is "sacred" and would it be right to treat it in this way? Then, again, some devotees have been honest in the past few years and started giving the God 14-carat legal gold. Should this now be disposed off or should "real" gold be given? Nobody knows what to do. Tackling the Nizam would be difficult enough but the temples, especially Tirupati, are quite beyond the powers of our secular Ministers who rarely do anything before first making their *pranams* to the idol of Lord Venkateswara or Malikarjuna, is the case may be.

Land Revenue : A Suggestion

It seems to have been decided to impose savings, therefore, on those who cannot escape it—the civilians and the workers. A sliding scale is going to be fixed and the 'savings' deducted at source. Grumbling there may be but these two sections will have no choice but to comply. Obviously, however, the yield is going to be very meagre. Taxes cannot be avoided and, indeed, should not be.

It is true that as far as land revenue is concerned Andhra is perhaps the first among the States of our Union. But it is as iniquitous a tax as any that can be imagined and with the great jump in prosperity of the rural rich there is plenty of surplus to mop up still. The low rate of land revenue actually acts as a production disincentive. The landlords and kulaks of the delta districts just don't know what to do with the money they already have—how much can beer, whisky and women absorb after all? If they could be prodded into producing more to keep up their present vulgar standards of living Andhra should be able to double or even treble its present production. It has been estimated that a steeply

rising land revenue surcharge on just about some 3,000 persons throughout the State would give Andhra almost all the extra revenue she needs. It could even be that the land revenue could be reduced for the smaller farmers or even done away with altogether, considering the tremendous expense of collection. Would the Government dare, though? After all, somebody said, these three thousand are the real rulers of Andhra and how can the Congress government afford to touch them.

Popular Fervour Unabated

In the meantime, this criminal inaction on all fronts comes against the background of very severe drought, said to be the worst in living memory. The Rayalaseema region faces the prospect of a full-scale famine and even Khammam has been hit. All-party committees, including the local Congress leaders and MLAs, have been set up to provide adequate relief in these districts, comprising a good third of the entire State. No buffer stocks worth the name have been built up and Brahm-ananda Reddy will find it very difficult to keep his promise to Shastri to supply as much food as the latter asked for.

And yet all these depressing trends have not killed the people's fervour. Potharaju, the ack-ack hero from Amritsar, is given a lion's reception wherever he goes. His popularity, for the moment at any rate, is beyond even the him star's reach. The people still flock to political meetings in a way they have not done since 1955, not only in the towns but in the very deeps of the countryside. This popular awakening will soon enough embarrass all those who wish to convert the emergency into a deep freeze of India as she is and should not be.

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