India Grapples with Freedom

by SHIVA RAO
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Tomorrow India will split into two full-fledged dominions within the British Commonwealth. India proper will have a population of about 290,000,000; Pakistan will have 70,000,000. Some states, like Hyderabad and Kashmir, have not yet declared whether they will join one of the new dominions or remain independent. Nehru has made it clear that refusal to join will be regarded as an unfriendly act, and Mountbatten has tried to persuade recalcitrant princes to see the wisdom of joining.

Many of these princes are threatening to make nuisances of themselves, as Nehru bluntly said a month ago. Since the division of India has taken place, and the British withdrawal will be almost complete with the formal declaration tomorrow, princes like Nizam of Hyderabad are reviving old claims to territories such as Berar, which he ceded to the British some decades ago. Berar is a rich, cotton-growing region with a population of 4,000,000 virile Hindus who would rather fight than accept again the suzerainty of Nizam, a ruler with medieval conceptions of the relations between a prince and his people.

Nizam is not alone in pursuing former grandeur. Lesser princes, who have apparently decided to join the Indian union, have collected, during recent months, suspiciously large quantities of war material. They harbor strange notions of princely dignity and privilege. Autocracy dies hard, however much the princes may accept the outer forms of a democratic regime.

What makes these princes a formidable menace to India's infant democracy is that, with their considerable resources, they can find work for large numbers of demobilized soldiers who are desperately looking for employment. Over 1,500,000 of these men who helped the Allies win the war are today a danger to the establishment of democratic rule. They fought the war because they were paid well to do so; no high principles of liberty or freedom moved them. A demobilization officer once explained his difficulties to me. "These men," he said, referring, at the moment, to a unit which had been in Italy for two years, "they like Italian wives, dancing with Italian women, going to the cinema. How can they now go back to their Punjab villages, which have none of these attractions?" Demobilized soldiers, scattered throughout India, want work and adventure. Many princes can provide both, and arms in abundance.
That is one great danger. Another is the rapidly vanishing supply of food. Imports have been disappointing; Burma, normally our best supplier, is busy putting down gangsterism and cannot turn its attention to the export of rice. Our summer rains have been irregular and inadequate, and the forthcoming rice and maize crops will reveal a considerable deficit. Some provinces have a six weeks' supply; others, no more than three. The daily ration has been cut down to eight ounces; further reduction seems impossible. The appearance of famine conditions has been reported from three regions near Delhi. Summing up the food situation, a worried official used these words: "Like 1943 [meaning the Bengal famine] but on a more widespread scale." Late rains, even at this stage, may save the withering crops and provide water and fodder for cattle, but the new dominion governments, particularly Nehru's, will face a severe food crisis immediately after the assumption of office.

The lack of food won't be the only major problem. Cloth, salt, sugar, matches, and oil are all things India's millions want every day of their lives. They are equally difficult to obtain. Industrial workers impatiently demand decent living conditions and wages enabling them to meet the high prices of most commodities. The strike fever seems to be spreading, despite Nehru's insistence that industrial strikes, whatever the provocation, constitute "stabbing the country in the back." The peasant, groaning under the demands of the landlord and his agents, wants to know when the promise to abolish landlordism will be kept. Everywhere there is deep social and economic discontent which won't wait indefinitely or express itself wisely.

Mountbatten, foreseeing much of this months ago, decided upon an almost immediate British withdrawal, the final stage of which will be reached this week. The question is whether the two successor governments, India and Pakistan, can successfully tackle the situation, complex and difficult enough to tax all the resources of even a well-established administration. British withdrawal is taking place under circumstances of exceptional adversity.

In the course of my last dispatch, I hinted at the realignment of political forces which might result from the division. It is clearer now that the Hindu Congress and the Moslem League cannot command the allegiance of all their present followers for much longer. The Socialists, who have formed a dissatisfied group inside the Congress, are becoming increasingly critical and may decide to break away altogether. The Communists, whose relations with the Congress have been even more unstable, have built up for themselves an influence the precise measure of which will be revealed in the next general elections. They are likely to win a number of seats at the expense of the Congress.

The Moslem League, too, is showing signs of internal cleavage. The establishment of Pakistan has had unforeseen results. For 30,000,000 Moslems living in India proper Pakistan means no gain; on the contrary, they lose privileges like separate religious electorates and representation in the legislatures and permanent services in excess of their population ratio. The Pakistan Moslems can afford to divide on real issues.
Thus, in the recent contest for leadership of Western Pakistan economic considerations were given prominence.

Bitterness caused by the division of India will not subside for some time. The new dominion governments will have their hands more than full, dealing with famine, the general shortage of consumer goods, and terrorist outrages. Later, when the worst of the present crisis has passed, it seems more than likely that the vested interests--the princes, big business, and the landlords--will make a determined attempt to capture the machinery of government. Nehru has vision, courage, and strong democratic convictions. So long as his leadership lasts, India’s government cannot succumb to totalitarian influences. It is essential, therefore, that his Cabinet deal successfully with the urgent social and economic problems facing the country.

Regarding Pakistan, one cannot be equally sure. Jinnah will be governor-general and president of the Constituent Assembly; later he will also be president of Pakistan’s Parliament. He will choose the members of his Cabinet and the governors of the provinces: in other words, Pakistan will be a dictatorship without concealment or apology. If Pakistan under Jinnah can solve its problems more effectively than India under Nehru's leadership, dictatorship will have established a strong claim to the allegiance of India’s millions.

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