

FROM THE EDITOR

THE STATE OF FREEDOM

We, the passengers for a Delhi-bound plane were in the queue for our boarding-cards. It was evening and the air was somewhat uneasy. "Don't touch bags lying unclaimed!" warned a flashing message.

Then strode in a dog, held by an official. It is of impressive stature, though gentle-natured. It sniffed our luggage dutifully, but without any contempt.

The smart young business executive standing before me, tense and glum until then, suddenly looked happy. "Thank God," he commented, drawing my attention to the dog. The animal was in the exit after certifying that none of the bags carried any explosive. The young man felt safe.

It has come to this. A wise dog must tell us that we were safe in one another's company.

"Man has degraded himself all over the world. But the Indian scene is specially painful. No other country had produced so many spiritual geniuses. In no other country had people been nourished by such great scriptural works. We are making a farce of everything that was lofty; we are reducing to weapons ladders that were meant to transport us to sublime heights, in the process ensuring our crashing fall," lamented my old professor.

Religion is one such ladder that has come handy to us. Religion that was expected to take us close to God, is being used as an argument for murder and massacre. The second ladder to be abused is our freedom. How easily have we reduced it to licence! The most ancient warning against the exercise of freedom without responsibility and without any regard for truth comes from India. Significantly, it is related to the freedom of speech. The perverted use of this freedom—eloquently expressed in certain comments on Sita, the personification of compassion and purity, deprived the people of Ayodhya of her gracious presence amidst them. There is no Sita or Rama to absorb the shocks of our manifold perverse use of freedom today. Hence the avalanche of consequences must strike us. Our propensity to use freedom as the freedom of our ego and ignorance has resulted in holding one another to ransom.

The fact that a well-organised few can disrupt the rhythm of a nation's life, can blackmail and harass the unorganized multitudes, is well-known. Such well-organised groups come from one field today and from another tomorrow. Varied are the fields—political, religious, educational, so on and so forth. In its excitement to exercise its freedom for agitation, each group turns a blind eye to the rest of the nation. Once a petty mob-leader was directing a bus-burning spree. From the top of his house his little son observed the bizarre bonfire. "Whose was that bus, father? Who will bear the loss?" the boy asked the leader at night. "It belonged to the Transport Corporation; it has to bear the loss." "Whose is the Corporation, father?". "The Government's, of course." "Whose is the Government, father?" the boy persisted until the flabbergasted leader had to admit that he too had no escape from ultimately having to bear a part of the loss!

The simple lesson the little boy taught the little leader should have been imparted to the gentleman by his party, before it launched him into politics. All our political parties and our trade unions have utterly neglected to educate their members about their responsibilities to the nation and

the people, before making, them over-conscious of their rights. The price the nation is paying for this criminal negligence is heavy indeed.

But the vast unorganized multitudes can prove more than a match for the organised few. All we have to muster is a little courage. We all have in us the inborn sense of right and wrong. It will go a long way if we refused to be cowed down by force and refused to be tempted by illusory petty gains. Just as corruption could not be a way of life unless the majority tolerated it, if not contributed to it, no king of rowdyism or tyranny could prevail if the majority stood courageously against it. Courage in this sense is more an attitude than an action.

India was there long before the religious groups and political parties had been formed. India will survive these institutions. Must we, the present generation, be so unfortunate as not to benefit by the time-defying spirit underlying India?

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

THE LOST FOOTSTEPS

Two early nineteenth-century English employees of the East India Company were back in their country. Folks gathered around them as they narrated their adventures and escapades in India where they had to wade through tigers, bisons and crocodiles all day and vampires and ghouls all night.

“I was bathing in the Ganges one noon when a huge tiger descended from the embankment, eying me curiously. What d’you think I did? I splashed water into its face and shouted, ‘Get away, you oaf!’ What d’you think it did? It turned its back and bolted off.”

The audience gaped in amazement at the speaker who seemed to have stolen a march over his colleague. But the colleague quietly nodded and coughed reminisced, “What Dick said is true. I was climbing the embankment from the other side. I stopped the fleeing tiger and, as was my habit, stroked its moustache. Indeed, it was wet!”

But all the officers were not yarn-spinners. There were keen observers among them and some of them have left significant accounts of India of their time. A few of them were soldiers during the great Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. There was even a journalist-world’s first war correspondent, William Howard Russell, reporting the events.

We publish in this issue, along with other special features to mark the Independence Day and the Centenary of the Congress, some little-known episodes from the early uprisings against the British. This is an account not by a historian, but by one interested in old books. It is sharing with the readers some surprising stories of courage and some amusing incidents too- episodes that lie scattered outside the academic territory of history.