

FROM THE EDITOR

MUST WE RESIGN TO A CULTURE OF TITILLATION?

To our readers this editorial may appear to be a repetition of a theme. It is. The situation warrants such a repetition.

The time when a certain ideal is formed is very important. But more important is the time when the process of putting the ideal into execution begins. Freedom and democracy, constituting our political ideals, were great. But something has gone wrong with their practice. We have freedom, but we practise it more as licence and we reduce democracy to anarchy. There was no political education even for the political aspirants, what to speak of the masses.

Thus, our politics is in a sorry state.

But the state of affairs in politics can be changed. The situation is not beyond redemption.

Something far more valuable is at stake now—our life-style, our literature and our values.

Carrying education and entertainment down to the masses through the TV is a good ideal. But this good ideal can in no time become a curse unless great caution is resorted to at this hour—when the process of its phenomenal growth is on. It will be too late afterwards; you just cannot do anything about it. Every sensible person in the U.S.A. and in several Western countries laments the havoc the TV is working in their lands, but there seems to be no escape from the demon's clutch.

At what stage does the ideal become a curse?

The cost of operating the TV is huge. Hence the authorities get the programmes sponsored by commercial houses. However strong be the control by the authorities in theory, ultimately he who pays the piper calls the tune and in this case the transition is rather subtle. To begin with, they bring in things which are not quite objectionable. In any case, you cannot specify a single scene or posture as objectionable, though you know that it is not aesthetic. Encouraged by the 'acceptance' of the stuff by the people the commercial hirers of the TV-time go a step farther—and they can go on and on. They won't know where to stop.

That is what happened in the West.

The process has/begun in India for those who are sensitive. Charming Ragas—inspired tunes given to us by creative geniuses of the past—are used to hawk a commodity (you are shocked, then you get accustomed to it, soon you hear your children humming not only the tune but also the words), illusory associations are made between lofty human emotions such as love, sacrifice, motherhood etc. with wares for sale and then—gradually but surely, violence and sex are brought in more boldly. They call it aggressive advertising. Aggression against what? Against the finer values, of course. And once the commercials have paved the way for it, all kinds of filth can pass as entertainment, even as art.

The authorities cannot check this, partly because the persons who constitute the authorities are likely to come from that level of the society which had already become a victim of wrong values before the TV began popularising them, and partly because they are charmed by the money that comes from the commercials.

That a thousand times more money will be necessary for any effort to cure the society of the disease it will imbibe by this kind of use of the TV and yet the cure will not be possible, is a different matter. Even with all its resources a government cannot eradicate the perversions, the illusions, the violence which the wrong use of the TV can breed.

The authorities often give figures—how many letters they have received in support of such and such programme. Those who want certain programmes will write. Those who do not want will not write. The latter may be infinitely greater in number.

Our taste can slowly change. We can fall in love with a culture of titillation. There are numerous little ambitious artistes waiting on the wings, "willing to do anything" as some of them openly declare, sponsored by money-bags, to promote the new culture.

Once the culture of titillation has taken root, all serious forms of culture and literature will suffer, apart from the life-style in general.

Let us remind ourselves once again: the TV is a means, an immensely powerful means. Let us "use it very cautiously and ideally. Let there be commercials, but even there let us set healthy examples. Let them be matter-of-fact and humble. Let not the commercial houses become the masters of our taste, designers of our ideals. .

The TV is still at the primary stage in India, but it has already affected the life-style of the urban societies. People have less time for friends, less time for courtesy, less time for reflection. One shudders to think of a tomorrow when this powerful means would have gone the way of the West. Short of a total public awareness, wrong use of this medium cannot be forestalled when the country concerned is a democracy.

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

THE LOST SWEET NAMES

"In no other country are the place names so fascinating," said an Italian at the airport who could pronounce with surprising accuracy Bhubaneswar, Brindavan, Amritsar, Bhadrachalam and Srinagar. "Next to India my own country can take pride in place names that are sweet: Naples, Milan, Florence, Rome, Nice. No wonder Shakespeare was keen to use them as backdrops for his plays. The English place names are absurd!"

That reminded me of a dialogue between an Englishman and an American. Said the Englishman, "Odd names your American towns have. Hoboken, Weehawkeh; Oshkosh, Poughkeepsie ..."

"They perhaps sound queer to English ears. Where in England do you live?" asked the American.

"Well, for the most part of the year I am at Chipping Norton. The rest I divide between Briggewade and Leighton Buzzard!"

The Italian's observation flattered me. I hope the participants in the seminar organised by the PLANS (Place Names Society) that took place at Nagercoil were conscious of the splendour of Indian place names, most of which are a rare combination of sense and sweetness.

Many of our place names were even more charming in the past. For example, Patna was Pushpapur or Kusumpur, both meaning City of Flowers. A third and subsequently more popular name was Pataliputra. Patali meaning the trumpet flower.

Orissa was Utkal (Utkrishtayasya Kala, that which had excelled in fine arts). Karnataka was Kuntaladesa, Kulu was Kulanthapitha (the end of the habitable world), Trivandrum was Tiru-Ananta-Puram (the sacred infinite city, or according to another version, the city of the godly serpent, Ananta), Dwaraka was Dwaravati, Gulmarg was Gauri Marg (the way of Gauri, Lord Siva's consort), Lucknow was Lakshanavati (believed to be after Lakshmana, the younger brother of Rama), Gauhati was Pragyotishpura (the Light of the East), Goa was Gomant, Pondicherry Vedapuri (the seat of Vedic studies), Madurai Madhurapura and Ajmer Ajay Mem.

Everybody of course is aware that Bihar is from the Buddhist Vihara and Punjab from Panch-Ab (Five Rivers).

How places got their names is the most important point of research in this particular lore and it will be good if the Place Names Society comes out with a book enlisting their findings to date. Even the history of the relatively recent names are not widely known. An article on Jammu stated without any hesitation that the land got its name from a certain fruit (Jambu?) whereas historically the name is derived from its founder, King Jambooloehan of the 9th century, just as Bhopal was from Bhoj Pal (a pal or lake dug by King Bhoja) and Bikaner from Rao Bikaji.

Apart from deities and kings, sages and even demons too have lent their names to so many places. Kashmir (Kashyap Mir) is associated with the mythical sage Kashyap who made the land emerge out of a huge lake. Gwalior comes from the name of a hermit called Gwalippa. He cured a Chieftain Suraj Sen of a deadly disease and the Chieftain founded the city after the hermit's name. Similarly, Nagarjunakonda is after the illustrious Buddhist savant, Nagarjuna, Chowringhee in Calcutta from Chowringi Giri and Jabbalpur from the sage Jabali.

This Jabali, one of ancient India's two famous atheist philosophers (the other one being Charvaka), is not to be confused with Satyakama Jabali of the Chhandogya Upanishad. The atheist Jabali advised Rama to return to Ayodhya and ascend the throne without caring two hoots for his father's promise to Kaikeyee. When he understood that this suggestion had shocked Rama, he at once changed his strategy and said that he was speaking only in a lighter vein. However, the sin of offending a pure and divine mind could not pass without consequence and the place on the river Narmada where the sage Undertook penance bears his name.

At least two of our important cities bear the names of two formidable demons—Mysore that of Mahishasura and Tanjavur that of Tanjam.

The names of two of our most important cities, however, are of uncertain origin. The Pandavas were asked by King Dhritarashtra to establish their capital close to a forest called Khandava, the haunt of criminal demons and ogres but under Indra's protection. The forest, however, was devoured by the God of Fire with the support of Krishna and Arjuna, who forestalled Indra's efforts at saving it. Soon a rapport was established between the two camps and the new city built by the Pandavas honoured Indra by bearing the name Indraprastha.

But how did Indraprastha become Delhi? Probably there was a King called Dilli (Dillip?) a forgotten pioneer of the city. But a tale has an irresistible explanation. Once upon a time the place suffered from frequent earthquakes as the snake-king Vasuki whose hood was just under it often changed his position. A certain King drove a giant nail and fixed the hood to the surface of the earth. Centuries later another King, curious to find out how the snake fared, dug the nail out and since then the hood at times nodded resulting in the place becoming Dhili or unsteady. Thus we got Delhi!

What about Calcutta? Is the name derived from the ancient village Kalighat? The folktale has its own version of the situation. The first Europeans arriving in the area asked a native driving his cart loaded with sugarcane the name of the place. The zealous salesman in the rustic thought that the strangers were interested in his ware and they wanted to know how fresh they were "Kal (yesterday) Kata (cut)," he replied.

The would-be great city had been christened!