

FROM THE EDITOR

AIDS — ONLY A SYMPTOM

"The 1980s will be the Decade of the Scientific Payoffs. The impressive decline in the incidence and mortality of heart disease that has already begun to gather momentum will accelerate. Cancer deaths will dip and then plunge. Dramatic progress in aging will bring new youth for the millions. The close of the decade will bring a virtual end to disease and a welcome reduction of pain and suffering."

This is a passage from the concluding chapter of Alvin Silverstein's *Conquest of Death* published in 1979. A scientist and pragmatist, he prophesied that those who can survive the decade, will find themselves in a disease-free world — on their way to immortality!

And then came the AIDS. The latest serious report on the issue, at the time of going to press, informs us that the chances of any effective immunity against the dreadful disease is dim. Dr. Valentin Pokrovsky, President of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR, an authority on the subject, says, answering a question put to him by *The Hindu*, "The best way to tackle AIDS from the point of view of medicine is to disseminate information to the people on the disease and to organise campaigns for a healthy lifestyle and safe sex."

Dr. Pokrovsky warns us that apart from being a medical problem, "AIDS is a social and even a political problem."

For a long time we took the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as a mere legend. The inhabitants of the Sodom were destroyed because of their depravity. God had told Abraham that even if there were fifty good people in the city, He would not destroy it. Abraham had gone on with his query: suppose there were only forty five — or forty or only thirty or only twenty or "suppose only ten are found?" And God had said, "Then for the sake of the ten, I won't destroy it." But ultimately even that many decent people were not found. "Then the Lord rained down fire and flaming tar from heaven upon Sodom and Gomorrah and utterly destroyed them, along with the other cities and villages of the plain, eliminating all life — people, plants and animals alike." (The Living Bible)

AIDS is scourge born out of man's depravity, of perversions he could have very well done without. The question is whether the literal figure "ten" — figuratively enlarged to mean ten per cent of the population'— would be found to deserve exemption from destruction if this scourge goes on spreading, probably breeding hitherto unknown diseases in its horrendous march. True, the number of perverts is always limited to a very small section of the population at any time, but the question the society must answer is, how much it is doing to discourage the spread of perversion. If it is not doing enough, it is guilty of encouraging it, albeit indirectly.

We are carrying a book feature in this issue on AIDS. It is written by one who has lived long in the West and who is in a state of mind to assess the situation in its total perspective. We commend it to be read by all. We are sure, many will agree that the AIDS is only a symptom, the real disease being deep-rooted in the life of the society. The disease is thriving in our total life-style. Let us consider one single issue. Can we, on one hand, let all the video parlours and even homes exhibit blue films with abandon thereby allowing the minds of the young to be dominated by whores and pimps, and expect the young on the other hand, not to show signs of moral bankruptcy? It will be absurd. And who are the people who are promoting this alarming trend? They are the average educated people, 'responsible' householders, businessmen, executives and so on and so forth. They perhaps see this newly cultivated fancy as an isolated, pardonable licence, not as an aspect of an overall degeneration.

It is high time society wakes up to the deception it is playing on itself.

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

OUR INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE

This happened in the seventies. My enterprising friend, Mr. Hablu, ran into me on the city footpath. "What are you doing here?" he asked, pleasantly surprised. I informed him that I was on my way to another place — waiting for my plane the next day. He took my arm into his. "Come with me. We are according a grand reception to Shri Bhargav, the winner of the Bharatvarsha Award for literature, at the Maharaja Hall."

There was no escape from his iron grip. Besides I had great respect for Bhargav and nothing very important to do in the evening. I followed him

The Maharaja Hall was a cosy place. I met Mr. Hablu's colleagues, the office-bearers of the literary organisation that had organised the reception.

"We have distributed a large number of invitations. Still there is half an hour to go. Don't be disappointed," Mr. Hablu consoled me. He had read my mind — or perhaps his own mind — looking at the total absence of any audience.

One old man came — then a lady with a toddler. They were the relatives of one of the coterie of organisers and would-be speakers.

Five minutes to 6 P.M. My friend was nervous. But, to his great relief, the lights went out. Power-cut. Two minutes to 6 P.M. The celebrity arrived. He was escorted to the dais with the help of candlelight. He never saw the 'audience' not because it was just not there, but because it was dark.

The speakers knew that they were speaking into an empty hall, but the celebrity did not know it. He spoke affectionately, thanked the organisers and the audience" and the President declared the meeting over. People pray for light. That day I ardently wished for the darkness to prevail for a little while more.

But, alas, the lights came back just when the celebrity was stepping out of the hall. (True names of the persons, the award and the hall are not given).

I need not describe his face.

Now, we reproduce a news from The Statesman of 4 February '89.

GERMAN INVITEE FINDS LECTURE HALL EMPTY

Inviting foreign experts to India is a logical way to help propel the nation into the 21st century. However, as a recent incident in Calcutta showed, such invitations will afford the country little if the etiquette of our national institutions remains mired in the Stone age.

The Calcutta Mathematical Society, affiliated to Calcutta University, invited Mr. Eberhard Knobloch, Professor of History of Science and Technology, Technical University of West Berlin, West Germany, and editor of an international journal, Historia Mathematics, to a conference organized by the society from January 30 to February 1. The invitation was signed by the University Pro-Vice Chancellor.

Mr. Knobloch, who had never been to India before, arranged for an air ticket, left Berlin, and arrived at Dum Dum airport on January 30. Finding no one at the airport to receive him, he took a taxi to the mathematical society's new building in Salt Lake. He found the building, Asutosh Bhavan, empty and locked. He was directed by a passer-by to the nearby Variable Energy Cyclotron Centre, but, because he was a foreigner, was refused entry.

A by-then angry Professor Knobloch was then shunted to the S. N. Bose Institute for Basic Sciences, also in Salt Lake. The director of the institute arranged to have Mr. Knobloch taken to thg University's College

Street campus. He was informed there that the Pro-Vice Chancellor who had signed the invitation was away in Bangladesh.

He was then taken to the Calcutta Mathematical Society Hall on Acharya Prafulla Chan-dra Road.

Officers of the society and the Applied Mathematics Department told him that the conference had been cancelled. The society claimed that they had sent a letter to Germany to this effect. Mr. Knobloch did not receive it. Academic sources later said that given the unpredictability of the mail service, the letter should have been sent simultaneously with a telegram.

The society apologised to Mr. Knobloch, but was unwilling to make any provisions for the room and board of their guest while he waited for his flight back home.

Fortunately, the S. N. Bose Institute stepped in and offered Mr. Knobloch the use of their guest-house and arranged for Mr. Knobloch to give at least one lecture in the city so that his visit here would not be a total waste. The mathematical society bent enough to allow him to use their hall.

Professor Knobloch left for West Germany on Thursday evening, much the wiser on how to respond to any further invitations from Indian institutions.

No comment is necessary.