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India: Tamasha

25A Nizamuddin West
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, New York

Dear Dick,

The Indian National Congress, or the Congress Party for short, held its 69th Annual Session in Durgapur, 120 miles from Calcutta, early in January. I went to it. A Congress Session is rather like a party convention in the United States, part politics and part 'tamasha', a Hindustani word that can be loosely translated as an uproarious gathering. The politics take place both in private and in public: in the semi-secret meetings of the Congress Working Committee and in the log-rolling activities of individual politicians, and in the semi-public meetings of the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) and the plenary sessions to which anyone and everyone can go. The tamasha is everywhere: the banners, the motorcades, the crowds of delegates and onlookers, the peanut sellers and shoe repairmen who squat on the sidewalks to serve the crowds, the dust, the horns, the shouts, the gossip, and the appearance of the session itself.

Congressnagar, or Congresstown, covered about 250 acres that had been previously rice paddies or scrub brush. The focal point was a huge circus tent for the AICC meetings. Not far away an area big enough for the five hundred thousand spectators expected for the plenary session had been enclosed with corrugated galvanized sheeting. The buildings to house offices, mess halls, and delegates were made largely out of split bamboo woven into wall-sections, and they were long, low, and barrack-like. Some of them were arranged in three-sided rectangles with the doors opening onto the central ground. After a few days feet and tires had powdered the soil, and dust rose warm-smelling in the winter sun. The whole thing reminded me of a country fair. I expected the open rectangles to contain tractors, plows, prize sheep, teams of draft horses. And I wouldn't have been surprised to see a shed ranked with cows, sacred or profane, switching flies off their backs.

The purpose of these annual sessions is to adopt a set of resolutions expressing the party's principles and policy, ideology and techniques, much in the matter of the four-yearly party conventions in the United States. The procedure is quite standard. At Durgapur the Congress Working Committee met on 5 and 6 January. The members debated--with some heat, according to reports--and redrafted resolutions that earlier had been given preliminary shape in New Delhi by Cabinet Ministers and party officials. The Working Committee presented its drafts of the resolutions to the Subjects Committee (the form that the All India Congress Committee--AICC--takes during annual sessions) on 7 January. That day and the next the Subjects Committee debated the resolutions and finally adopted them. On 9 January the resolutions

went to the plenary meeting of the Congress Delegates, which, after two more days of speeches, also approved them. The plenary meeting is open to the public.

A few words about Congress organization might be helpful here. The Working Committee is the Congress's central executive. It has twenty members, thirteen appointed by the Congress president from the ranks of the AICC and seven elected by AICC members. Because the Congress is the dominant party in India it is nearly synonymous with government, and Prime Minister Shastri, six ministers of the Central Government, and two state chief ministers as well as Congress President Kamaraj and other party officials are members. The present Working Committee began its two-year term of office last year at the Bhubaneswar session when Kamaraj became party president. Due to the death of a member, there was also an election at Durgapur. Darbara Singh, a Sikh and the Home Minister in the Punjab Government, defeated K.D. Malaviya of Uttar Pradesh for the vacancy.



"This is from the Minister, sir. He wants five days casual leave to go to Durgapur...."

Courtesy of Patriot

Singh had the tacit support of Kamaraj, Shastri, and several other ranking members of the committee, according to reports. Malaviya lost partly because his brand of socialism is not popular with the leadership just now and because one or two powerful politicians from his own state don't like him. Also his name was more than slightly tainted in a corruption scandal a few years ago and at present the Congress is under enough fire for corruption proved and alleged without reenlisting a black sheep.

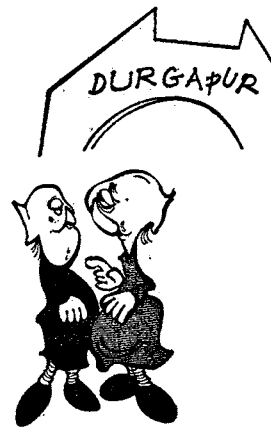
The All India Congress Committee, which numbers about six hundred and fifty, comes below the Working Committee in the hierarchy. Its membership includes the president and past presidents of the Congress, the presidents of the Provincial Congress Committees (PCC's, the committees at the state level), one-eighth of the members of each PCC, elected by the PCC itself, leaders of the Congress parties in the state legislatures, the leader and 15 members of the Congress Party in Parliament, and members co-opted by the Working Committee—often from groups whose representation in the AICC would not otherwise be adequate. The party constitution provides that two days before the Annual Session the AICC must meet as the Subjects Committee to frame the resolutions for the plenary meeting. The AICC meets as such several times during the year apart from the Annual Session. The Annual Session, officially speaking, consists of the Congress president and the Delegates. All members of the PCC's are automatically Delegates. Totalling about 5000 persons, the PCC's are comprised of members elected by the ordinary members of the party in proportion to the population of the constituencies, PCC ex-presidents, District Congress Committee presidents, AICC members living in the state, and a few others. The delegates to the Annual Session are entitled to vote on all matters. Enough about organization.

The annual sessions have declined in public regard in recent years, and even greater scepticism greeted the Durgapur session. A Hindustan Times dispatch from Durgapur greeted the session this way: "Rhetoric rather than new policy indications, it appears, will be the order of the four-day Annual Congress Session starting here on Thursday." There was justification for the prediction. Not only had there been little new in the policy resolutions

of recent years, as speakers at Durgapur said freely, but little had been done to implement established policy. The procedure at these sessions had added to the impression of dullness. The Subjects Committee traditionally approved the Working Committee's draft resolutions unanimously after a perfunctory debate. And adoption by the plenary meeting was even more automatic. AICC members and Delegates at Durgapur, when I asked them, said they attended the session to meet friends and socialize and to do some politicking among themselves. Others obviously came to be entertained by the leaders' speeches and to become imbued with team spirit much like the crowd at a college football rally or the Republican or Democratic conventions. There was also the desire to associate—even at some distance—with the leaders of the party and the government. This is a strongly, although not uniquely, Indian characteristic. Thus the annual sessions seemed to be tamasha pure and simple. And the crowds that came for the fun of it, drawn by the name of Congress, the party of Gandhi, Nehru, and of national freedom, and by the presence of today's leaders, added to this impression.

But this year, despite the apparant sameness that made many say they'd seen it all before, despite the 'unanimous' adoption of resolutions because no one was yet ready to push the government to the wall, there was more than tamasha. Durgapur witnessed, I think, the stirring of new life in the party. There was widespread and very vocal criticism of both party and government leaders. The Times of India described it as "the most ruthless criticism of the Government ever to be made at a Congress session". The criticism came not only from within the leadership, but especially from hitherto acquiescent backbenchers. The theme of this session was dissatisfaction with repetitious resolutions unpursued and promises unfulfilled. This mood will grow I think—the backbenchers have no intention of lessening their pressure on the leadership—and perhaps it will cause the party and the government to govern more effectively, to improve the conditions in administration, in agriculture, and in the economy that have brought many Indians to the edge of cynicism and despair.

There were both deep-rooted and immediate reasons for this surge of criticism. First there was Nehru's death. Even when things were going badly, Nehru could make it seem that they were going better. He did this partly by sophistry, partly by dramatizing what actually had been achieved, and partly by existing. Nehru was respected and loved; few believed that they were his intellectual match. As believers, they did not want to, or they feared to, challenge god. For years the Congress and the government under Nehru had delivered the goods. During the last six or eight years of his life, however, for reasons even the most percipient of observers do not fully understand, this had been less true. After his death there was not only the gap in the foreground but through the gap a view of harsh reality. Shastri, Kamaraj, and the others cannot fill this gap, as they too readily admit, yet together they might run the country better than Nehru did in his declining years. But Indians dare blame today's leaders as they would not have blamed Nehru, and his errors, as well as whatever mistakes they may have committed, are laid at their door.



Wilson
"Which side are you—if
or 'but'?"

Courtesy of Patriot

Another reason for the criticism was the food scarcity, especially of rice and grains, and the rapid rise in prices. This is so serious that newspapers here report the U.S. dock strike in terms of wheat shipments to India; they fear that as a result Indians will be even hungrier than they are now. At Durgapur critics placed the blame for this situation on the present government. Although much of the criticism was unjust, the difficulty having been building up for a long time, the government cannot be entirely absolved from responsibility. The dismay about food sharpened the tongues of the critics in regard to other issues, such as corruption and factionalism within the party, 'cliqueism' among the leadership, and the size and effectiveness of the Five Year Plans.

The strongest criticism heard at Durgapur was directed at the gap between the promises of party resolutions and the performance of the government. Old-Congressman N.V. Gadgil expressed the general feeling when he called the economic policy resolution merely another edition of a resolution passed a decade before and repassed every year thereafter. But still, he said, "we are not implementing it." The history of this complaint goes farther back than that. Under Gandhi and Nehru the independence movement led by the Congress had both social and nationalistic goals. The Congress's aim of 'Swaraj' meant not only freedom from British rule but self-realization for each Indian. In frequent resolutions and demands for civil, social, and economic rights over the years, Congress reiterated this creed. Just a few moments before India became independent, on the night of 14 August 1947, Nehru challenged the nation to live up to its ideals. "The future," he said, "is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we may fulfill the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. . . The ambition of the greatest man of our generation has been to wipe every tear from every eye. That may be beyond us, but as long as there are tears and suffering, so long our work will not be done."

Many Indians expected that independence would be a magic moment when all dreams would come true. They expected that the men who had brought freedom could bring them prosperity, and if not that at least ease their crippling burden of poverty. Disappointment was inevitable. Since independence, particularly at the Avadi session in 1955 and at Bhubaneswar last year, Congress resolutions have called for innumerable reforms and for the achievement of a 'democratic socialist' society. A great deal has been accomplished; in another country it might have served. But not enough has been done, said the critics at Durgapur, and too many promises have been made and then forgotten. The faces of Gandhi and Nehru (the drawings were better than most) looked down on the AICC members seated on the ground in the big tent. They looked down on the white-covered dais scattered with white cushions on which lounged the mostly white-clad leaders of the nation dressed in the handspun, handwoven khadi that Gandhi had popularized to foster cottage industry and to oppose British textiles—the khadi that active members of the Congress must still wear today. All these things connected the party with its past: at Durgapur both the glories and the failures of its history began catching up with the Congress.

For what reforms did party members clamor? What did they want implemented? The economic resolution at Durgapur began by reaffirming the party's faith in the 'Democracy and Socialism' resolution passed at Bhubaneswar last year. So first let's have a look at that. It said that the Congress should promote in India "a socialistic pattern of society where

the principal means of production are under social ownership or control (my underlining), where production is progressively speeded up and there is equitable distribution of national wealth". The resolution also said that all change must be achieved by peaceful means and summed up the party's ideology as "socialism based on democracy, dignity of the human individual and social justice".

The Bhubaneshwar resolution continued, in regard to rising prices, that "Controls should be applied only when they become indispensable in the larger interests of the community. The objection of the people is not to controls as such but to their faulty administration"--a correct judgement, in my view. It went on to say that there must be a limitation on incomes and private property, especially "in respect of inherited wealth and urban property". And last, it stated that the processing of agricultural produce, especially rice, should not remain in private hands.

The Durgapur economic resolution reiterated these principles. "Progress toward a socialist society in our country," it said, "is to be measured in terms of the success achieved in creating adequate employment opportunities and ensuring for every family a minimum standard in respect of the essential needs of life, in particular, food, clothing, housing, education, and health." Among the more detailed aims discussed were preventing monopoly and the concentration of wealth, implementing land reforms (Most of the laws are already on the books), ending corruption, and giving adequate credit facilities to peasants for agricultural improvements.

These goals are revolutionary and spectacular only in the context of India or some equally underdeveloped country. Change the language a bit and omit one or two points and most Americans, I think, would say that they believed in these goals and methods. In the world of today they are nearly unexceptionable. If they are 'socialist' goals, and the Congress Party calls them so, then most of us are socialists. When he was Prime Minister, Macmillan called the British Conservative Party a socialist party. The Congress is, then, basically a middle of the road party. It has its more extreme wings, but as Krishan Bhatia, and editor of the Hindustan Times, commented about the Durgapur session, "There was much talk about socialism being the party's ultimate goal and the need to hasten towards it. Yet the only wing of the party which was disdainfully refused permission to hold its meeting at Durgapur was the Socialist Forum...The line dividing the various factions inside the Congress is blurred by personal factors. There is no ideological watershed dividing the left and the right of the party." (These personality clashes were probably involved in the absence of the Socialist Forum: For although less doctrinaire leaders of the Congress support it, K.D. Malaviya leads the Forum and Krishna Menon is a member. The anti-Malaviya leaders presumably wanted to deny him his pet soapbox, and Menon, although he retains some influence among the leaders, is not popular.) In the same vein, the daily newspaper Patriot, a self-appointed guardian of its own socialist principles, with which Malaviya is closely associated, wrote that at Durgapur and elsewhere, "on every occasion when socialist practice has been demanded by the people", the Congress "has proved itself incapable of standing up to the challenge of vested interest and privilege".

The Congress's and the Government's attitude toward 'socialism'--that word of elusive definition--has been becoming steadily more pragmatic since independence. The Government last year established its own Food

Corporation in an effort to improve the distribution and lower the prices of grains, but how it is to work, and what other food controls should be instituted, is being discussed not in terms of ideology but in terms of what will work politically and administratively. The Bhubaneswar economic resolution called for all processing of agricultural products to be in public hands, but the Durgapur resolution made no mention of this, although new rice mills and perhaps sugar mills may be set up by the government during the Fourth Plan. In his presidential address at Durgapur this year, Kamaraj said that the state governments might begin manufacturing textiles, sugar, cement, and so on "in order to alleviate the shortages in consumer goods". But he made no mention of cutting down the existing private sector, which will certainly continue to grow despite the numerous bureaucratic hazards that exist. Manufacturing has expanded a respectable five to seven per cent in the last few years, according to one of the country's best economists, and services



Courtesy of The Hindustan Times

The so called 'left-right' split in Congress, seen from left to right: Krishna Menon, Indira Gandhi, and K.D. Malaviya facing Atulya Ghosh and S.K. Patil.

have grown even more. Moreover, certain portions of the economic resolutions, such as the ceiling on urban property mentioned at Bhubaneswar, will probably not be implemented, although many observers, Indian and foreign, think it would be wise to do so. Much may not be done because of inertia, but other, more 'socialistic', planks in the party platform will almost certainly be shelved because they are believed economically impractical and because, if pursued, they might alienate too many supporters, particularly those relied on for financial contributions. The leaders of the Congress and the Government are genuinely concerned for the welfare of the masses; they are what I call humanitarian socialists. This ideology has long been accepted. The need for it is built into the Indian situation. As a Member of Parliament told me at Durgapur, "Put anyone on the dais and they'd say much the same thing. No rightist or leftist can materially change the party's policy."

In this light, much that was said at Durgapur becomes clearer. And it adds up to one major theme: that the Congress and therefore the Government, no matter what it accomplishes, will in the near future concentrate on improving the methods and techniques of administration, that it will concentrate on the implementation of its basic 'humanitarian socialist' ideology, and that there will be few more purely ideological excursions in any direction. The resolution on 'Economic and Social Policy and the Current Situation', for example, said that "the reasons for failing to achieve anticipated results and rise to the level of expectations lie mainly in the sphere of implementation". And it called for an adequately manned and equipped administration in which "there must be the maximum insistence on the accountability for results". Kamaraj, in his presidential address, spoke of the need for "work-oriented" young men and said that the party would be judged by its "performance in solving the food crisis and the unemployment problem, both of which threaten to engulf the country". The concept of democratic socialism would mean nothing to the masses, said the Chief Minister of West Bengal, P.C. Sen, unless they were assured the minimum necessities of life.

The economic resolution also said that more effective implementation of programs could not be achieved "unless a dynamic socialist outlook permeates the administration". Jagjivan Ram, a former minister and a member of the Working Committee echoed this view, saying, "The main defect in the administrative machinery, which India inherited from the British, was that officials were often not imbued with the ideals of socialism and did not have faith in it." In view of the content of Congress socialism, this would seem to be not an exhortation to government employees to exhibit revolutionary zeal, but simply a statement that they should stop being content with pushing papers and should take the people's welfare to heart for a change--and anyone who has witnessed the indifference and the callousness of civil servants knows that this is necessary. Until civil servants take a strong, positive interest in increasing their efficiency and in implementing reform programs (and the politicians must both be decisive and back up the administration), there will not be much improvement in Indian social and economic conditions.

The responsibility for bringing about India's peaceful social revolution does not fall, however, entirely on the government and the political wing of the Congress Party. The organizational wing can play a major part in bringing about reform. Many speakers and the texts of two resolutions made this clear at Durgapur. The resolution entitled 'The Task before

Congressmen' said that the entire party organization must "maintain close and living contact with the people" and must help infuse the youth of the nation "with a sense of purpose and participation in the development of the country". The debate on this resolution touched off some of the strongest criticism of the lack of implementation of reform programs. The economic resolution said the Congress should take the lead in involving the nation's millions "in processes and activities which are designed to achieve rapid economic progress and social justice". "Trained cadres in large numbers," the resolution continued, "must go out into the country and undertake a vast campaign of education of the people to create widespread understanding of the policies and programmes bearing on the creation of a socialist society and to call for the effort and sacrifice which are needed for its realization. This is the most important and urgent work before the country and Congressmen have in it an important role and a special responsibility." Unless the Congress does create and use cadres of village workers in this way, said Kamaraj in his presidential address, "it would be difficult to mobilize the support of the people for building up a socialist society." The party is on trial, said Kamaraj, and "if we fail to live up to the high expectations of the nation we would have destroyed the great public confidence we have built up in the Indian National Congress."

Anyone who went to Durgapur would, I think, have been impressed by the way the camp was run. Food, lodging, toilet facilities, transport, police, and administrative procedures were well organized. I heard it said that things at Bhubaneshwar went off even better. The office work, the management of the food depots and the mess halls, etc. was done by men like doctors, lawyers, members of the Bengal legislature, as well as lower level Congress workers. Serving in the messhalls, most of the management of the crowds, and many other activities were handled by the Congress Seva Dal, a volunteer corps of boys and girls somewhat like Scouts--white shirts, blue shorts, and white sneakers for the boys; white saris with blue borders for the girls. These kids were bright and alert looking. They had good discipline and they were effective in their jobs. From all this I got the feeling that the Congress could organize anything it wanted to. And the Congress does have machinery that reaches into the villages, although for some years it has become active only at election time. Congress workers could bring family planning, better farming methods, and a fresh approach to many problems to the countryside if the leadership so decides. Gandhi suggested in 1948 that the Congress become a social service organization. At last year's Annual Session as well as at this year's, Kamaraj spoke of the party's need for cadres of workers and roots in the villages. The goal is not new, but like so many others it remains to be pursued.

No major change in India's policy on 'the bomb' emerged from Durgapur. The Government will not now make, or begin research specifically to make, an atomic bomb, nor does it intend to in the future. But Prime Minister Shastri refused to state that India would never make one. This seems to me not to be dodging the issue but the position any statesman would have to take: he cannot bind future leaders with his own policy. Krishna Menon attacked him for this, as others did for refusing to begin making atomic weapons now. I shan't go into all this because it is well known, but other aspects of the debate are worth mentioning. In the first place the issue has caused people to think as well as orate. The ingredients and the implications of non-alignment are being reconsidered. Although the Government will continue to adhere to this policy, at least verbally, the

explosion of the Chinese bomb has made it less of a sacred cow. And many Congressmen at Durgapur distinguished between the principles of non-alignment and non-violence instead of claiming, as has been the fashion for so long, that the latter is founded on the former. Although admitting that atomic weapons were different, perhaps morally and certainly psychologically and politically from conventional weapons, they argued that if India was sufficiently non-violent to have an army (and enlarge it) and to fight the Chinese that it would be no less non-violent if it made an atomic bomb. And several speakers expressed the belief that Indian acceptance of a nuclear umbrella would not conflict with its non-alignment policy. Bibuti Mishra, a general secretary of the Congress Parliamentary Party, told me that within this policy India could accept a unilateral American guarantee to defend the country with atomic weapons in the face of a Chinese nuclear attack.

The bomb issue also produced much criticism of the Government. There was a disinclination to accept the Government's view simply because it was the Government's. Although habit was too strong and most backbenchers did not vote as they had spoken, the bomb policy in the 'International Affairs' resolution was not passed unanimously as the party had claimed. Three persons voted against it, one of them told me. But more important, the backbenchers, and the dissidents among the leaders, will continue their pressure in Parliament and in the party on this as well as on economic and social issues. If thoughtfulness and the expression of criticism have been inspired and are maintained, then the Congress will continue to have within itself the elements of the Government party and the 'loyal Opposition'. In the past this has allowed the Congress, although dominating the nation's politics, to represent a wide variety of opinion and political purpose, thus making democracy in India a reality.

Human affairs seem to be based on if's: if a horseshoe nail hadn't been missing..... A columnist in the Times of India wrote that an increasing number of Congressmen were being "overcome by a sense of frustration and uncertainty". If this is true, this could lead to increased factionalism in the party, he said, and even endanger Congress fortunes at the polls. (Factionalism is about the only thing that at would at present endanger Congress supremacy.) The Congress talks of cadres and of enthusing youth to help develop the country. "But the volunteers will come," said an editorial in the Hindustan Times, "only if the leadership is less preoccupied than it now seems to be with power equations at the top." The annual sessions of the Congress, said another editorial, continue to be viewed by the Delegates "as occasions for catharsis", and the "repetitive declamation" amounts only to "letting off steam". But if the Congress and the country are to move forward resolutions must be implemented, food must be grown, and industrial production increased. Or are Congress resolutions, as Patriot called them, "a number of unconvincing sutras, a ritual having significance neither for those who perform it nor for the people who are supposed



"No sense in inviting nuclear or Defence experts. They wouldn't understand a word...."

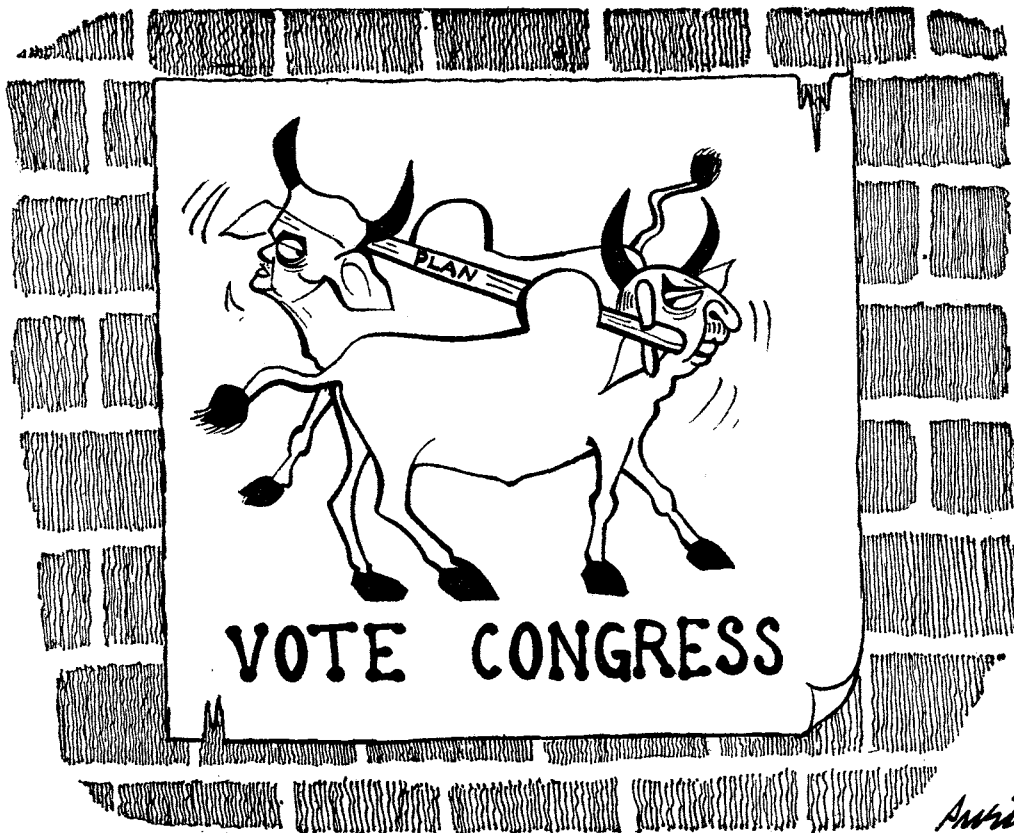
Courtesy of Patriot

to be the beneficiaries"? What nearly everyone here hopes against and fears is what the Hindustan Times expects may happen. "The tasks before Congressmen," said an editorial, "if what has happened in the past is any guide, will remain precisely where they were when the resolution comes up at another session."

Yours sincerely,

Red Austin

Granville Austin



Courtesy of The Hindustan Times

Shastri and Kamaraj

P.S. Next installment: Financing a tamasha.

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