

Death as arbiter

11/4/80 by Arun Shourie EKA

IN early May, it turns out, Air Marshal J. Zaheer, Director General Civil Aviation, wrote to the Secretary, Civil Aviation, and informed him that Sanjay was violating air safety regulations, that this put his life as well as the lives of others in danger and that, as it was difficult to issue written orders in his case, would the Secretary please request the Minister for Civil Aviation to take the matter up with Mrs Gandhi? The Secretary seems to have talked to the Minister. He, like everyone else, was then busy with the assembly elections and did not get around to talking to Mrs Gandhi for a while. When the file was ultimately shown to Sanjay, he reacted characteristically. Within hours Air Marshal J. Zaheer was asked to proceed on leave. G. R. Kathpalla, Deputy Director General, Civil Aviation, who used to be dutifully in attendance on several of Sanjay's flights, was asked to take charge.

I mention the incident as it is typical of what everybody was saying was going wrong. Rulers unwilling to listen to advice, most officials too frightened to give advice, a solitary official who had the temerity to offer honest advice given marching orders, another only too eager to step into his chair by tendering the advice that was sought, a plane that should not have been there, a pilot whose licence should have been cancelled doing stunts he was not equipped to do... (And things have not mended with the accident. Look now at the frenetic efforts to prevent a full and candid inquiry: if these succeed, all they would have accomplished would be to prepare the ground for the next tragedy.)

Ever since he was a child, everything Sanjay did led him to believe that he could exceed the prescribed limits and get away with it. His days at school, in UK, escapades with automobiles, Maruti, the Emergency... everything he ever did confirmed him in this belief.

This conditioning was his strength. Conventional lea-

ders who grew up in the system took its obstacles to be real. He saw them as mere cobwebs that could be brushed aside. But not all limits are mere obstacles. Brakes enable one to drive a car faster. Thus what gave him strength—the gall to disregard limits—what enabled him to rise so swiftly, also led him to destroy and mutilate much that is valuable. And it is that same gall which got him in the end.

There is personal tragedy, of course. But there is national tragedy too. For an accident has settled a political question. In a country in which millions live by a code of despair such an accident will further confirm the people's faith in just waiting and letting time resolve all issues.

There is no worse way to settle a political question, indeed no worse way to settle a human question than to accept death as arbiter. The strides a society takes spring not from overcoming a specific political problem (for new problems shall surely arise) but from what it learns in the process of overcoming that problem. The longer the process lasts, the larger the number that are convulsed by it, the better it shall prepare society for dealing with the next obstacle.

Lessons learnt even from processes lasting decades and involving millions do not last long and have to be learnt again and again. How long did the lessons learnt during our national movement last? And what of China and Vietnam today? But that protracted struggles involving large numbers alone can teach the necessary lessons, even lessons remembered for a short while, cannot be denied. This is so for two reasons.

First, what holds the people down is not the specific problem but the complex of arrangements and attitudes which had allowed the problem to grow so large. And the deliverance of the people lies not in the removal of that problem by a magic wand but in *unlearning* through

the struggle to change the state of affairs so much of what they have internalised. As the debilitating notions have been internalised over centuries, convulsions lasting decades can alone ensure that necessary unlearning.

Second, the conviction that they are powerless—powerless in the face of nature, of social institutions, of rulers—is what debilitates a people most. And this conviction can be shaken only by the actual experience of changing, moulding, overthrowing nature, institutions, rulers and doing so again and again. As large numbers have to learn these lessons, large numbers must change, mould, overthrow with their own hands. That is why Champaran, Kheda, Bardoli, the Long March are so much more valuable than *coups* engineered by a dozen conspirators, that is why *coups* engineered by a dozen are so much more valuable than murder by the lone assassin.

How much worse when no one intervenes at all, just chance masquerading as God? What lesson shall people infer, a people who are in any case not convinced about the utility of socially relevant action? The lesson that if you wait long enough an accident shall take care of everything. Thus is heteronomy reinforced.

Sanjay's sudden death reminds us again how precarious politics now is. All speculation, all analyses turn on what one single—and at the moment, isolated—individual will do. Will she rely on the band Sanjay had collected around him? Will she recall her 1973-74 team? Will she turn to the civil servants, as they hope, and will they then be a sobering influence, or will she turn instead to the Brahmachari? Will she reach out to a Chandra Shekhar, an Antony, a Pawar or all of them and have them render the service that so many—from Kamaraj to Urs—have rendered in the past? Shall Chandra Shekhar be the new Urs? Now that several Congress (D) "leaders"—the

over 65 at the centre and regional satraps like Chenna Reddy—will breathe more easily, will Mrs Gandhi let them be or will she carry out Sanjay's plan of jettisoning them? Everything, it seems, hangs on just one individual.

"But Sanjay's contribution is much more lasting. He brought youth to the fore. With their leader snatched away from them in such a cruel way, they shall weld together. You will see how they shall take oaths over his ashes."

Wrong in the short run. Right in the long.

Sanjay was their armour. With him gone, their only security shall be the office each occupies. As their anxiety to land office mounts, so shall competition and division among them. As for the welding power of oaths, free-booters won't be held down by mere words. The jostling has already begun.

But it is true that these young men shall play an important role in the longer run. Sanjay did not create them. He became their focus. Even without a single, exclusive focus, they shall count. For they are everywhere. Ever seen Raj Narain's volunteers? Or the Shiv Sena's or the DMK's?

And that is why it is important to get a measure of these young men. "Youth has come into its own, things shall not be the same again", is an incomplete proposition. The equally important question is: *what* youth?

For on that depends which things will not be the same again and which shall.

Soon after the victory of which Sanjay was rightly hailed as the architect, the new MLAs in UP solved their accommodation worries in the most predictable manner possible: they stormed into the MLAs' hostel and just broke open the locks with shots from their revolvers.

They are the young men in our tomorrows, the lumpen of all classes...