

How the people really voted

(189)

By M. R. Masani

*MM's
Auto
Punch*

WE in India have a peculiar knack of failing to interpret correctly the significance of election results. In 1971, almost the entire press announced that Mrs Gandhi had won a spectacular victory in the parliamentary elections and it was widely claimed that she had obtained a "massive mandate." As I pointed out at that time and have not tired of doing so since, Mrs Gandhi received no such thing.

What she got was 43 per cent of the votes cast, these being 54 per cent of the electorate. Statistically, she got 23.9 per cent, say, 24 per cent, of the electorate behind her. She was thus a minority leader. But she got 352 seats in the Lok Sabha. She misused her huge parliamentary majority to amend the Constitution and finally to get enacted the infamous 42nd Amendment which deserves to be repealed in toto.

Now we are back at the same old game of distorting the recent election results by the assumption that the Janata party lost disastrously in the south and obtained a smashing victory in the north.

It is desirable that we should consider to what extent this assumption is correct because it is good for the country that political controversy should be based on facts and not on fiction. The overall picture provided by official figures is that the Janata Party and the Congress for Democracy, which had a common symbol on the ballot paper, polled 43.17 per cent of the votes cast, while the Congress party polled 34.54 per cent of the votes cast.

Those who voted constituted 60.54 per cent of the electorate. In so far as seats in the Lok Sabha are concerned, the Janata-CFD combination got 298 (52 per cent) while the Congress Party got 153 seats (30 per cent) on a house of 542. For once, the "multiplier" worked against the Congress Party.

Carefully examining the figures published by the Election Commission, we find that in the southern States those opposed to the Congress Party got not less than 42.64 per cent of the votes polled in Andhra Pradesh. Similarly, in Karnataka not less than 43.26 per cent voted against the Congress Party. Does this amount to a smashing victory for the Congress Party and such a humiliating defeat for the Janata Party?

Similarly, in the north we find from official figures that a sizeable minority in the northern States voted for the Congress Party. The impression created is that we are hypnotised by the number of seats in the Lok Sabha obtained by these parties and forget the extent to which these results have distorted the will of the electorate.

Here are the figures for some of the major States in the north which show the percentage of Congress Party votes cast in each of these States compared with the corresponding percentage in the 1971 elections in brackets: Assam 50.56% (56.18%); Orissa 38.18% (38.46%); Punjab 35.86% (45.96%); Madhya Pradesh 32.5% (45.6%); Rajasthan 30.56% (45.96%); West Bengal 29.39% (26.23%); Uttar Pradesh 25.04% (48.56%); Bihar 22.90% (40.06%); Haryana 17.95% (52.56%).

and the south. Until later elections mitigate this distortion, all that can be done is to show the greatest care in avoiding anything which might appear to weaken States rights or to destroy the autonomy of the states under our Federal constitution. The other thing is to go easy with the language issue and eschew anything which may be considered an attempt to impose the Hindi language on the south.

It is time we now turn to consider the electoral system which has led to these distortions and to the unfounded assumptions which are based on them. To me it has always been a matter of deep regret that we failed to get some system of proportional representation embodied in our Constitution. A move I had made in that direction in the Constituent Assembly was opposed by leaders of the Congress Party to which I then belonged. Now the chickens have come home to roost.

The Committee on Electoral Reform appointed by Jayaprakash Narayan on behalf of the citizens for democracy has in its report, which was published in February 1975, well before the present elections, some interesting things to say on the subject. The Committee was impressed by the near unanimity of opinion on the basic premise that the present system of election of 'first past the post' does not lead to a fair reflection of the popular will in the legislatures. On this point opinion is fairly unanimous, and, indeed, the figures cited in the successive reports of the election commissioners prove it.

What grave proportions the seat-vote distortion has reached in India is shown by the following figures in the committee's report, the figures being the percentage of Congress seats with the percentage of Congress votes in brackets: 1952 — 74.4% (45%); 1957 — 75.1% (47.4%); 1962-73 (44.7%); 1967 — 54.4% (40.9%); 1971 — 67.9% (43.5%).

In the light of this, the committee went on to observe: "The objections to these distortions are not academic or abstract. They have led to concrete evils and have created a situation where there is danger of people losing faith in democratic institutions and the electoral process. Such a situation is generating large-scale popular alienation and apathy."

In the end, the Committee suggested an alternative system based on the West German system, which is described as a "mixed system." It provides for the election of one-half of the members of the Bundestag by single member constituencies on the model prevailing in India, and the remaining half of the members of the Bundestag from lists of candidates submitted in advance of polling by the various recognised parties in such a way that the Bundestag as a whole fairly represents the voting strength of the various parties and groups.

The formula which the committee commended for study as a desirable alternative to the present law on the subject runs as follows:-

"1. The country would remain divided into single member constituencies, both for Parliament and the State Assemblies, as at present. As at present, candidates of political parties...

It will thus be seen that...