

While sharing with the Rotary Club of Bombay this afternoon the experiences and impressions of his "Thirty Days as a Parliamentary Candidate" in the recent by-election to the Lok Sabha from Rajkot, Mr. M. R. Masani said that there were two new things about which he had become aware during the campaign,

The first of these was the fear of authority which still gripped a large part of the rural population. This was probably a local phenomenon due to the bad tradition of arbitrary action which existed in Saurashtra and which the Home Minister of Gujerat had upheld in grand style during this campaign. The other was the intensity of the antagonism that existed among all classes of people towards the "dholi topiwallas", the wearers of the white cap. Mr. Masani said that it was sad that the Gandhi cap which many of them had worn with such pride in the days of the struggle against British rule now attracted so much ill-will thanks to the behaviour of many of those who wore it. Gandhiji, with his sure vision, had foreseen this danger when, at a prayer meeting not long before his death, he had said: "It took a great deal of selfless service and sacrifice for the Congress to win the confidence of the people, but if Congressmen betray the people and instead of serving them become their masters, then, whether I live or not, I can from my long experience warn them that the country will be aflame in revolt against the wearers of the white cap."

According to the speaker, the people of Rajkot were politically conscious. They were a particularly hospitable lot and showed that they were free from narrow parochialism by their acceptance of a candidate who was attacked unsuccessfully as an "outsider."

In the light of the fact that a Parliamentary constituency normally had a population of seven and a half lakhs, of whom four lakhs were on the voters' roll, and that it often covered an area as large as the Lebanon, Mr. Masani referred to the inordinate cost to political parties of fighting elections. While the candidate's expenses were limited to a modest figure, there was no limit to those of political parties. This was bad, because it gave money power undue influence. Mr. Masani commended Rajaji's proposal that elections should be a matter not of private but of State enterprise. This could be done in two ways. First, the candidate's manifestos and voters' slips giving each voter's name, address, roll number and place of voting, which at present were being distributed by political parties or candidates, could be distributed and posted to the voters by Government. Secondly, instead of making the voter walk sometimes as much as four or five miles to the nearest polling station, the election could be taken to the voter by a system of mobile polling stations like the mobile post offices already in vogue. If a van arrived in a particular village at a time already announced in advance and stood in the public square for a couple of hours complete with ballot box, the Polling Officer and the Polling Agents of the respective candidates, the percentage of voting would be much higher and the temptation to arrange for the transport of voters, which was a corrupt practice, would be eliminated. These two measures would undoubtedly bring down sharply the cost of contesting an election.

According to the speaker, success in an election lay in two major factors. First, the organisation and, secondly, the platform. Only an efficient organisation could provide a conveyor belt to carry the message of the candidate or party to the people in the remotest villages and to rake in the votes. This conveyor belt consisted of mobile men - men in jeeps equipped with loudspeakers

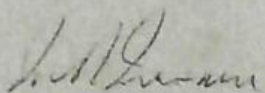
and carrying literature. In view of the distances involved, it was no wonder that transport was the biggest single item in the election budget. Television would be a tremendous help to rival candidates in educating a predominantly illiterate electorate but unfortunately this aid could not be expected in the immediate future. Mr. Masani mentioned how the Italian Government had recently installed television sets throughout the villages of Southern Italy as part of a campaign to spread literacy in those backward areas and welcomed the recommendation of the team of experts on mass communication sponsored by the Ford Foundation at the request of the Government of India for the early installation of television.

A good organisation, however, would not be of much use unless there was a worthwhile message to carry embodied in a party's platform or manifesto. This should be a body of principles easily explained and understood to which the electorate would respond. Every political party was a combination of ideals and interests and it was the task of the manifesto to reflect the fusion of these two elements.

Even so, elections, like a horse race, were always something of a gamble. Even the most experienced political observers could go hopelessly wrong, as evidenced by the fact that the Congress officials in Rajkot sent a telegram to their bosses in New Delhi on the evening of May 26 after polling had concluded confidently forecasting their victory.

The excitement during counting and on the announcement of the result was something that had to be witnessed to be believed. If an outsider had visited Rajkot after midnight on the night of the 27th May and seen the mammoth procession in which 25,000 to 30,000 happy and boisterous people participated, he would have thought that Rajkot had just been liberated from an oppressive imperialist regime.

Not for publication:


(M. R. Masani)