

Illustrated Weekly
12-8-62

(236)

WHAT 1962 ELECTIONS TEACH ABOUT 1967

by

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There is widespread disappointment in the country that the recent General Elections have not thrown up an alternative government. There is reason for this disappointment since an essential component in our democracy still remains missing. Those who have read The Politics of Democratic Socialism by E.F.M. Durbin will recall that this British Socialist thinker describes an effective opposition as the acid test as to whether or not there is a real democracy. One has only to read the Constitution of the U.S.S.R., a truly beautiful document, to realise how right Durbin was!

There are some people who say that, in a developing or backward country, we cannot afford the luxury of a parliamentary opposition. In other words, they say that, in a backward or developing country, a one-party government is desirable. We see that the leaders who today are in power in Ghana, Egypt and Indonesia have actually carried that belief into practice. An interesting example of the relevance to our country of this issue occurred when Mrs. Indira Gandhi visited Kenya not long ago. When she was in Kenya, she happened to say that she did not quite see why there should be two political parties in Kenya and why one would not suffice. A leader of the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) and one of the Ministers of the then Government promptly rapped Mrs. Gandhi on the knuckles and said that if that is what she believed she should confine her preaching of it to India, since in Kenya they believed in a two-party system as in England. This little incident shows how easy it is to drop into the habit of saying that Opposition is a luxury a backward country cannot afford. On the contrary, in a backward country, the need for an Opposition is a hundred times greater than in an advanced country where democratic traditions are stronger and the liberties of the people are more secure.

Now, this missing element in our democracy, this political vacuum, was sought to be filled by the establishment of the party to which I belong some three years ago. Mr. Rajni Kothari, writing in Samir of June 1962

in which the results of the elections are analysed, seems to think that it has at least partly fulfilled its task. He says: "The role of the Swatantra Party seems to be significant. Its very rise, quite apart from its spectacular successes (not fully reflected in legislative returns) has made political controversy more ideologically oriented and divisions within the Congress Party more crystallised. It has also filled an important gap in the country's political organisation - the availability of an Opposition party which can canalise all dissenting elements from the Congress. A party so much like the Congress and so different, that is the crux of its achievement. This will become more clear with the passage of time."

Popular Will Expressed

There appear to be two major factors why this gap in the equipment of our democracy has not so far been filled. The first is the nature of the electoral system which is that of single member constituencies and election by a simple majority. Where there is a multiplicity of opposition parties, such a system ensures not only that no opposition party can challenge that in office but that the biggest party, even when it does not represent the majority of the electorate, secures large majorities in the legislatures. This, in fact, is what has been happening in India during the past three General Elections. Thus, in the recent elections, the Congress Party secured only 45 per cent of the popular vote in the elections to the Lok Sabha and only 40 per cent of the popular vote in so far as all the State Assemblies put together were concerned. Yet, the Congress Party occupies over 70 per cent of the seats in the Lok Sabha. We thus have today a minority government led by Mr. Nehru enjoying a purely synthetic majority and with no clear mandate from the people. Similarly, the reality is that, in all except ~~the~~ ^{some} States, the Congress Cabinets in office are minority governments.

I remember making a proposal in the Constitution Committee of the Constituent Assembly that there should be Proportional Representation in the elections to Parliament and Assembly. This, however, was rejected by the leaders of the Congress Party, to which I then belonged, and defeated on the ground that it would come in the way of stable government which the country needed. I felt then, and still feel, that this view was based on a misunderstanding. It is not the system of election that necessarily decides whether you have a stable two-party system or a multiplicity parties and fluctuating coalitions as in France under the Third Re-

is the temperament of the people that is decisive. There are countries like Switzerland, Sweden and Ireland, all of which have Proportional Representation and have enjoyed extremely stable governments over decades. I suspect that we are ^{more} ~~rather~~ like the Latins in temperament than the Anglo-Saxons and Teutons, and that no amount of legislation will make us evolve a two-party system if we are not made that way. Quite apart from the tendency of our organisations, whether in politics or elsewhere, to split and splinter, there is also the general reluctance to be in the wilderness. Unless at least a third of a country's politicians are prepared to be in opposition at any given time, it is clear that a two-party system can hardly be expected to emerge.

The second and much more far-reaching reason why a two-party system has not emerged is the size and nature of the electorate. It must be remembered that India is as big in population, area and complexity of languages as the whole of Western Europe and that to build a political party in India is like building a political party which functions from Scandinavia in the North to Spain and Greece in the South! This apart, around four-fifths of the voters in India are illiterate. That does not mean that they are less intelligent than those who can read and write but it does mean that it is difficult to approach them. They cannot read your Manifesto or your speeches in Parliament. Television, which could solve the problem, is only a distant dream. The media of communication are thus terribly limited.

The Machine Counts

In such a situation, ideology counts for little; organisation a great deal more. The recent elections, like previous elections, were not decided by political programmes or ideology. They were decided by the relative strengths of the political machines. If the Congress Party got more votes, though not a majority, it is because its machine was older, stronger and more widespread than the machine of any other political party.

The Swatantra Party's message was very well received. Wherever one could get to the people to address them, they applauded it. But how many people could one ^{reach?} ~~address?~~ The conveyor belt — an adequate number of workers who could reach the masses in the villages — did not exist. With a handful of workers and a handful of jeeps, one can only reach so many people. The

result is that the political programme of the Party never reached millions of people. This is why the appeal remained limited.

There are many other factors that count. Religion counts, and caste — which Jayaprakash Narayan has accurately described as 'the biggest party in India'. Then there are parochialism or local influence, the cult of personality, the patronage of government, the fear of authority. Didn't Gandhiji say over and over again: "India has to learn to say 'no'?" I am sure, if he were alive today, he would say India has still to learn to say 'no'.

Then there is the power of Money. Some of us tried in 1961, when the Companies Bill came up before Parliament, to stop political parties receiving contributions from Joint Stock Companies registered under the Companies Act. I myself moved such an amendment in the Lok Sabha. Every political party voted for my amendment, including the Communist Party which must find it very difficult to vote for anything I propose! The only party that voted against it was Mr. Nehru's Party and, because it had a majority, the amendment was defeated and the door was kept wide open for Big Business contributions to political funds. When the balance sheets of Joint Stock Companies are published in the next few months, I hope some Department of Economics will do a little research and publish the grand total of contributions received from Companies by the respective political parties. It will be found, of course, that the Congress Party got many times more than all the other political parties put together.

Mr. Nehru said after the elections at a press conference that the victory of the Swatantra Party candidates "had nothing to do with the Swatantra Party and its programme." His argument was that they had got elected on personal grounds. It is, of course, possible that, in the case of some Swatantra Party candidates, their local position added to the political appeal of their ideology. But then, if that is so and the eight million or nine million votes cast for the Swatantra Party were not because of the Manifesto of the Swatantra Party, logically it would follow that the 51 million votes that were cast for the Congress Party also were not because of the Manifesto of the Congress Party. The question arises: How many of these 51 million really believe in the so-called socialist pattern of society,

in the collectivisation of the land mis-called 'co-operative farming,' in the Soviet pattern of planning ^{and} in the Defence Portfolio being handed over to a crypto-communist? So let there not be two standards. Either votes are cast for political programmes or they are not. It cannot be that the Congress voters vote for socialism but the Swatantra Party voters do not vote for the Swatantra philosophy! Many more people voted through local influence-cum-caste-cum-money-cum-patronage-cum-fear for the Congress Party than for the Swatantra Party. The double standard must be dropped. What is good enough for the Congress goose is good enough for the Swatantra gander.

What is to be done?
What follows from all this?

All analysis must lead to some conclusion. What is to be done? How do those who believe in democracy propose to serve it and save it from the obvious dangers to which it is exposed? The answer was given by a British politician in the Nineteenth Century when the franchise was extended to the working class: "We must educate our masters." There is no escape from this slow process in our present set up, no short cut.

Our elections lose a great deal of their educational value and their genuinely representative character by the way in which political parties nominate their candidates. The current practice of all parties is to follow the bad example set by the Congress Party, not only of choosing candidates largely in accordance with the religious or caste configuration of a constituency but also of delaying the decision in regard to the choice of candidates till a few weeks or sometimes even a few days before Nomination Day. In the recent General Elections, we saw this bad example set by the Congress Party followed by all others. There was competition between various parties in the clever-clever game of trying to have a look at the other fellow's list and then choosing one's own candidates! The results of this procedure have been disastrous all round. The jockeying for position and the scramble for 'tickets' (a word much misused in India) created dissension within each party. The general calibre of candidates selected tended to be low all round, determined as it was by last moment considerations of expediency rather than by merit. In the absence of a long period of acquaintanceship, the choice made by voters between competing candidates was extremely superficial and generally followed caste and other pre-determined lines.

Since the birth of the Swatantra Party, I have argued that candidates

should be nominated several years in advance of the General Elections so as to give time to the candidates to nurse their constituencies, get known and show results, and so as to give the constituency a chance to know and judge the candidate. I am therefore delighted that Mr. Nehru, at a recent meeting of the AICC in Delhi on June 13, suggested that the nomination of Congress candidates should take place three or four years before the next General Elections. I trust Mr. Nehru's views on this point will be given effect to by the Congress Party so that their good example may be followed by others who have so far been misled into following their wrong practices.

Similarly, as far back as March 1960, in my General Secretary's Report to the Patna Convention of my Party, I had stressed the value of quality as opposed to numbers: "We should be careful not to depend on dubious elements. Our enthusiasm and eagerness to see the Party grow should not lead us to welcome people in our fold without due discrimination. In the pursuit of importance and numbers, the weightage that needs to be given to quality should not be overlooked. People are tired of the old faces and the old voices. They look for new thinking. It will be good policy for us to attach more value to new and unknown people, preferably the young, whom we can infuse with our message and enlist among our workers.....It is less harmful to have no unit in a particular place or district than to have a bad one."

Pre-conditions to Victory
Perhaps I may be forgiven if, in the light of the modest experience that I have obtained as Secretary of two political parties, one in the Thirties and the other more recently, I were to venture some suggestions as to the factors which, in my view, make for political success. I am not here referring to the adoption of any particular set of policies or adherence to any ideology. The question I am posing is: What, concretely, are the organisational factors that would make for the success of an Opposition party in the 1967 General Elections? I suggest the following by way of an answer:

1. Candidates for election, whether for Parliament or Assembly, should be provisionally chosen four years before the elections, that is, ~~by~~^{at} the beginning of 1963. The purpose would be to give the candidate a chance to nurse his constituency and to show his mettle as the party's mouthpiece and

standard-bearer. The party should be free to change its prospective candidate at any time when it is found necessary. The final choice should be made and announced a year before the elections, in the light of experience gained.

2. In making a choice, the credibility of the candidate should be decisive. Men of dubious morality and character should be ruled out, however attractive they might otherwise be on grounds of caste, religion, local influence or financial resources. No tall promises made by a party of clean government and more efficient administration will be accepted by the electorate unless the man or woman who stands before them embodies in himself or herself the two qualities of integrity and competence.

3. The large number of primary members a party enrolls, though ²⁵ n.p. of some value, is not decisive in terms of organisation. What is decisive is the building up of a cadre of intelligent, loyal and disciplined workers though and round whom the organisation at the grassroots level can be built. It is they who have to carry the message of the party to the voters' door. What ultimately decides an election is whether or not a party has even a small core of supporters who are themselves convinced and are therefore able to convince others of the rightness of their cause.

4. It is obvious that the social basis of a party must be broad-based and that in its ranks elements such as small farmers, industrial and agricultural workers, artisans, shopkeepers, professional men, Harijans, Adivasis, youth and women should find a place.

5. The maintenance of a high level of discipline and rectitude is a pre-condition to effective functioning. Connivance at indiscipline and malpractices is much too common in the ranks of all parties in India. This lowers them in the eyes of observant and intelligent people who wonder how, in the case of an opposition party, clean government will be ensured by such a party when it is placed in power if it is not in a position to ensure certain standards of behaviour within its ranks when power is still remote.

6. The collection of funds from thousands of middle-class and small people instead of reliance on a few big contributions from those with means is another test that a party which hopes to win success must be prepared to face. This carries with it the concomitant of proper accounting and auditing of funds so collected and firm action against those members of the party who

De Sanga mishandle such funds or fail to render proper accounts.

7. The sum total of all that has been said above would, if given effect to, result in the creation in the minds of the electorate of the image of a party as one that is made up of good men and true animated by a desire to serve the country and working hard for the cause.

When political power and economic patronage are concentrated in the hands of the ruling party, as they are at present, only an opposition party which is accepted as morally superior by the people at large can hope to make the grade. In the absence of such moral superiority, all talk about the corruption of the ruling party and all promises to provide good government will meet with scepticism. I am convinced that, if these seven components are not there, no amount of money, no amount of local influence, no caste support, not even a beautiful manifesto and clever speeches will enlist the support of the electorate in 1967.

I am aware that there are intelligent people, honest in their own personal lives, who think that, in a backward country like ours, condoning indiscipline, disloyalty, casteism and mishandling of funds help in building a party. Now, quite apart from any moral considerations, I am deeply convinced that such an approach is pragmatically unwise and unsound. Such people claim to be realists but to me it appears that this is cynicism masquerading as realism. No democratic party or movement anywhere was built on cynicism. Democratic causes are furthered by faith in the goodness of people and their intelligence.

By vocation a management consultant, I venture to think that efficient and clean management is as essential to the growth of a political party as it is to that of a business enterprise.

While parties are essential in a democracy and will be for many generations to come, a political party is a mere means to an end and not an end in itself. It follows from this that the interests of the party cannot be an end which justifies doubtful means. The inter-relation of ends and means is a lesson that some of us in my generation were fortunate enough to learn at Gandhiji's feet. 'My party right or wrong' is therefore a slogan as unworthy of credence as that other slogan 'My country right or wrong.' The choice between conformism to the party's demands and

heresy is always a difficult and delicate one. Each man's conscience must decide as to where to draw the line. Professor Tenny once responded to a suggestion made to him by Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the British Labour Party, to which he belonged, with the words: "Your party has the right to demand any service of you but to dishonour you."
