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Pitfalls At The Poll

TO be a Member of Parliament has its glittering rewards. But some of the things one has to do to get there, says a colleague just back from reporting the Rajkot by-election, would deter all but the strongest.

This has no reference to the necessity for collecting a lot of money, mobilizing an effective election machine from among political workers as temperamental as a bevy of prima donnas, and making uneasy compromises to get support from diverse elements.

What seems to have shaken our colleague was the experience of watching Mr Minoo Masani canvass from door-to-door in an important bazaar in the heart of Rajkot city.

At the very first shop he visited, the Swatantra cohorts had a garland ready. A photographer was posed for action. A small crowd had assembled. But the garlanding and canvassing could not start because the shopkeeper had sent for lemonade, and would not hear of the show being started until everyone present had been refreshed. At the next shop, lemonade was replaced by almond sherbat, but the rest of the drill was the same.

It was the owner of the fifth or sixth shop—obviously the acknowledged leader of the locality—who decided to send for ice cream. The local MLA chaperoning the Parliamentary candidate protested that this might take time and, besides, everyone had already had enough to eat and drink.

The shopkeeper brushed the protest away with a wave of his hand "You give me five minutes of your time," he said with a smirk, "and I shall guarantee you 1,000 votes."

Three shops, two more lemonades and some sweets later, our colleague decided that since he had no votes to lose, he would firmly refuse further hospitality. And he did.

But Masani could ill-afford to do so. Every time he begged to be excused he was reminded that he had accepted refreshments at the previous shop. Masani eventually insisted that he would drink the sherbat offerings only if the journalists in the party would drink as well. "Why should I suffer alone," he said in an aside.