

Letter from India

A Wayward but Evolving Democracy

S.V. Raju

The 14th General Elections to India's Lok Sabha were held in April-May this year.

Correctly billed as the largest democracy in the world, Indians can be justifiably proud of the fact that democratic governance has not faltered, except for a brief period of eighteen months in 1975-76 when democratic rule was suspended — an exception to prove the rule as it were. Statistics about the quantitative dimension of Indian democracy are equally impressive. The Indian citizen was called fourteen times in fifty two years to choose his rulers. Not bad for a nation where 35 per cent cannot read or write and 26 per cent live below the poverty line. And, for much of this, credit is due, primarily to India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who, with missionary zeal, protected and nurtured the tender roots of the parliamentary form of government *à la* Westminster. The Election Commission of India — a statutory independent body answerable only

to parliament — carried forward Nehru's mission. It has lived up to the expectations of India's Constitution-makers, as a jealous guardian of the sanctity of the vote, the right of the Indian citizen to exercise his vote freely, brooking no interference from governments of the day. Credit is also due to the courts of India, particularly the Supreme Court for its role in protecting the democratic system. Thanks to Nehru and these institutions, the physical infrastructure of Indian democracy is sound.

But it is quite another story when it comes to the content of Indian democracy — the quality of governments that these elections threw up. We have adult franchise and the age of voting is now 18. Voter turnout is creditable. There is frantic wooing of voters by

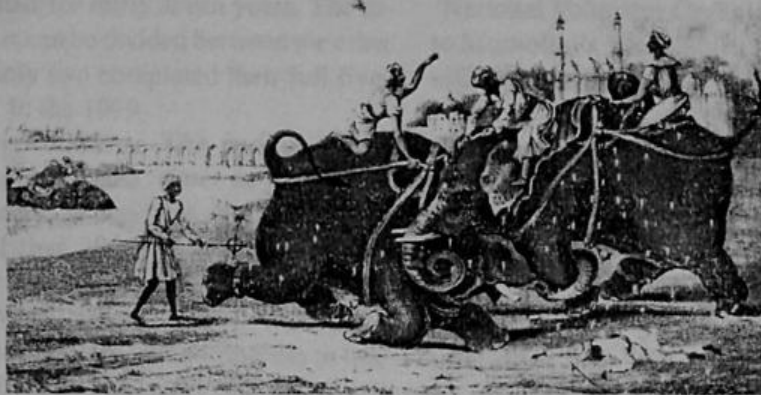
candidates of every party. Barring sporadic violence, with gangs capturing polling booths and stuffing ballot boxes, notoriously in states like Bihar in the North and the East including vast tracts of rural Bengal where communist cadres have a vice-like grip over the electorate through sheer terror, polling has been largely orderly and peaceful in most parts of India. Yet the quality of legislators elected to parliament and the state assemblies leaves much to be desired. In fact the quality has been deteriorating with every successive election.

The Westminster model implies political parties.

While the Election Commission, aided by the courts and by a number of alert non-government organisations, has been constantly streamlining election procedures and making it difficult for 'undesirables' to enter the legislatures, political parties

are lagging behind, paying scant attention to the competence and character of the candidates they nominate.

For four decades after independence, the Indian National Congress dominated the political scene like a colossus. As the party that led India to freedom, it was the favourite with the electorate. Being an 'umbrella party' accommodating various shades of political opinion and interests — an inheritance from the days of the freedom struggle — helped. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that before independence the Indian National Congress was a movement. Come freedom it turned into a political party but the momentum of its role in the freedom struggle kept it going for almost forty years — a period described by



political scientists as the era of 'one-party dominance'. The first cracks appeared in 1962, soon after India's humiliating defeat by the Communist Chinese army. Two years later, a broken-hearted Jawaharlal Nehru died, in harness. He had not only dominated the party but towered above all others in the country. Significantly, his successor who was elected by the Congress was not a member of the Nehru family. Unfortunately he died (also in harness) after a tenure that lasted less than two years. Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi (no kin of Mahatma Gandhi) managed to get herself elected as the leader of the Congress and took office as Prime Minister in 1966. This marked the beginning of dynastic rule and the decline of the Indian National Congress from a party that led the country to freedom to one tied to the apron strings of *the family*. In fact the Indian National Congress is now better known as the 'Indira Congress'.

Between August 1947 and the present day, India has had sixteen prime ministers. Of these, the Nehru family accounts for three, who between them shared the Prime Minister's chair for thirty seven years. The remaining twenty years can be divided between the other thirteen of whom only two completed their full five-year term in office. In the 1999

elections the Congress Party was thrashed and almost ceased to be a national party. It was generally believed that 2004 would be a make or break election for the party. Many hoped

2004 presented an opportunity to the Congress to free itself from the family. But *the family* had systematically, since 1966, emasculated the party's leadership in the states to ensure control over the party. It was, therefore, hardly surprising, when the 2004 elections were round the corner, for members of the Indira Congress to flock to *the family* imploring Mrs Sonia Gandhi to lead the party once again to victory. There is no evidence that any of them wanted to use the opportunity to rebuild the party organisation, independent of *the family*.

Soon after the elections, and when it was certain that the Congress would return to power, though this time as the head of a coalition, it was natural to expect that Mrs Sonia Gandhi would be Prime Minister — the spectacle of fawning courtiers falling over each other to swear loyalty and begging her to be Prime Minister was televised live. But, in an act of unexpected statesmanship and to neutralise a threatened agitation by the other principal opposition party demanding that a foreigner should not be Prime Minister (Sonia Gandhi is Italian by birth but a naturalised Indian citizen), Sonia Gandhi declined the

prime ministership, preferring to continue as Congress Party President instead. Some uncharitable wags commented 'she can afford to because she knows that she is the real power behind the throne. In any event two Nehru-Gandhi siblings are being groomed for purposes of dynastic succession.' Be that as it may, admittedly, the re-emergence of the Congress as a reckonable national force is to be credited not to its leaders, or to its organisation or to its ideology. It was entirely a one-man or rather a one-woman show and if a leader ever deserved to sit on the prime ministerial chair, it was Sonia Gandhi.

The other contender is the Bharatiya Janata Party, better known by its acronym the BJP. The BJP is old wine in a new bottle. In its previous *avatar* it was known as the Jan Sangh. Both are creatures of the RSS. If the Congress has no separate existence outside *the family*, the BJP has no separate existence outside another family the RSS *Parivar* (Sanskrit for family) and widely referred to as such. The RSS or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (roughly translated 'National Volunteer Organisation' — often compared to Mussolini's Black Shirts) founded in the 1920s is a highly organised group committed to Hindu revival-

ism. Its approach is based on its belief that Hinduism is endangered by the 'political assertiveness of minority groups like Muslims and Christians and their efforts to convert Hindus to these faiths, that the political

authorities are pandering to minority groups, and the belief that foreign political and religious ideologies undermine community bonds'.

A word that has acquired coinage particularly among Hindus is 'pseudo-secularist' to describe the secularism of the Congress. Pseudo-secularists are those who appease the minorities meaning Muslims, hence 'pseudo'. This is being assiduously propagated by the RSS and the BJP and is proving to be quite effective. The *swayamsevak*s (members) are the steel frame of the family of organizations around the RSS that work in the political arena, in social welfare, in the media, and among students, labourers, and Hindu religious groups. The symbiotic links between the RSS and the family are maintained by recruiting into the affiliates RSS members who have already demonstrated organizational skills. The BJP is the political arm of the RSS. Both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister of the previous BJP-led coalition government 1999-2004 are RSS *swayamsewak*s.

In the 1996 elections to the Lok Sabha neither the Congress nor the BJP had enough seats to stake a claim to form governments on their own. Nevertheless the

BJP was foolhardy enough to form such a government on its own. That government lasted a mere 15 days! The Congress of Sonia Gandhi did not stake a claim to form a government, aware of its numerical weakness, nor was it prepared to head a coalition. Patchwork coalitions were formed by a conglomeration of smaller parties. Between June 1996 and March 1998 India had two coalition governments. This was a sobering experience for both parties. Both realised their limitations. They could not be in power on their own. They needed allies. The age of coalition governments had finally arrived.

Coalitions are a mixed blessing. They deny monopoly of power to a single party; they strengthen the

federal character of the Indian Republic; and in the long run make democratic decentralisation of administration a reality. These are sure recipes for effective governance. But the alliances that emerged in the 2004 elections

were not principled. There were actually two alliances and something called the Left Front. The Alliance led by the Indira Congress was called the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the one led by the BJP was named the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The third was an amorphous gathering of communists, socialists and the like. What united the two alliances was the prospect of power. What kept the amorphous group of leftists, dominated by the communists, together was to keep the BJP out of power. And therefore, this Left Front which preferred to stay out of the UPA because of the latter's support of economic reforms, promised the UPA that though they may numerically not have the majority in the Lok Sabha, the Left Front guaranteed in a manner of speaking that they would not allow the UPA government to fall.

But the parties in both alliances left nothing to chance in ensuring that their candidates did not lose in the elections. This dictated their selection of candi-

dates. Among them were goons and gangsters accused of rape and murder, film stars (matinee idols in particular), politicians charged with corruption and misappropriation of funds, sons and daughters of the rich and famous or of politicians in positions of influence. There was only one criterion — winnability. Today in the UPA government in Delhi are three ministers accused of murder or misappropriation of funds. The BJP launched a campaign demanding the exclusion of these 'tainted ministers'. This included boycotting parliament. A sad outcome was that the Union Budget was adopted with a voice vote and without discussion.

The claim has been made that the elections have

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clearly been against economic reforms and that accounts for the defeat of the NDA. Nothing can be farther from the truth. The UPA too rooted for the reforms though as they repeatedly said 'reforms with a human face'. Logically

therefore the UPA should have also done badly. But one look at the elections results indicates that the results were very close. The UPA secured 217 seats and 34.59% of the votes polled; the NDA 185 seats and 34.83% of the votes. Surely this cannot be described as a vote for or against economic reforms as the communists and their Left Front allies claim.

All the hoopla during the month-long campaign does not appear to have moved the voter too much. But what exactly was he trying to say? The following observation was made at a seminar in Mumbai: 'What the voters are saying is that they are not interested in the pie in the sky. They want something for themselves today... the voter says "no ideology, we first". He wants something in his pocket immediately every time.'

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