

# Elections in India

By M. J. Audi

Consent of the governed is the basis of a democratic State. Election is a method which enables the governed to choose their governors. It enables the electorate to sit in judgement upon the performance of rulers. Election, in this sense, is the quintessence of democracy. In Asia and Africa only India holds periodic elections. The size of Indian electorate is also ever-expanding. In 1952, it was 173 millions. In 1989, it is 498 millions. To-day India's electorate is bigger than the total population of entire Western Europe or the United States of America. Thus, India is world's largest democracy. Electorate is the elixir of elections. In the history of Democracy, the suffrage was severely restricted by qualifications of race, religion, property, education and sex. All of them have disappeared. In India to-day right to vote is extended to 18 year old.

## Parties

Democracy, specially parliamentary democracy, is unworkable without political parties. The parties clarify and define issues to the electorate. They pave the roads through a jungle of conflicting opinions. Without these roads the electorate, like Ulysses, would wander without purpose. As Viscount Bryce put it, political parties freshen the mind of the nation just as rise and fall of the sweeping tides freshen the water of long ocean inlets.

However, importance of elections should not be exaggerated because elections are just one of the components of democracy. Tragically in India democracy is synonymous with elections. Proudly we boast that on the continents of Asia and Africa, free and fair elections regularly take place only in India. This is true. But it is not true that because of such elections we are a democracy in true sense of the term. Identification of democracy with elections is as ludicrous as accepting a synthetic stone for Kohinoor diamond. Even our elections are not truly democratic because they do not accurately reflect the popular will. Weak political parties, money-power, muscle-power, oligarchy of families and prevailing voting system are the chronic ills afflicting elections in India.

Parties fight elections through the candidates. There has been a steady deterioration in the quality of candidates with every general election. The debates within the legislatures and performance without not only confirm poor quality of the representatives, but also their total disregard for public good. With due

respect to honourable members of Parliament, it must be recorded that in Swaraj, India has not produced even one parliamentarian known for outstanding calibre, excellent eloquence and accurate perceptions of National Interest. This is but natural when such considerations as caste, language, religion and region decide not only, the distribution of tickets but also appointments of ministers, governors, ambassadors, judges and members of Public service commissions.

## Poll aim

The candidates themselves look at the election as the surest short cut to personal prosperity. Within five years, they make money enough for their five generations. Hence, politicians in India cling to offices like the limpets clinging to the rock. The electorate is pathetic spectator. The voters express their torture on the ballot-paper. During the elections of 1971, one of them wrote: "How am I to choose between the good and the bad when I find cheats everywhere". Political parties, the guardians of parliamentary democracy, are intensely allergic to democracy within party organisation. Bogus membership and bogus leadership threaten to become basic traits of Indian political parties. By and large, our political parties confirm English poet Pope's opinion that a political party is an organised madness of many for the benefit of a few.

It is an difficult for a poor person to enter India's legislatures as it is for the rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. The Electoral Law prescribes ceiling on campaign expenditure by the candidate but permits any expenditure on the campaign of candidate by his or her "friends and relatives". One wonders whether this provision is a tribute to the "benami" mentality which dominates dealings in our country. In this *Modern Democracies*, Viscount Bryce concluded that "democracy has no more persistent or insidious foe than the money-power". According to him, the power money can exert upon the Governments is to be specially feared in countries where two conditions coincide. They are the existence of a few great fortunes amidst mass poverty and opportunities for making fortunes which the Government can grant or withhold. Ever since independence, India's old and new industrialists have been investing heavily in elections.

## Donations

The history of company donations to political parties is interest-

ing. It was the so-called great democrat Jawaharlal Nehru who introduced and encouraged company donations. Indira Gandhi outlawed them, but collected funds from industrialists through the "souvenirs". Rajiv Gandhi has re-introduced the company donations. The businessmen are honest enough to admit that they do not believe in "disinterested charity". They insist upon the "reciprocal charity". In 1977, when the Janata Party came to power, it set up a committee to investigate the sources that contributed to Indira Gandhi's "souvenirs" but did not reveal its findings. Perhaps, Janata Party found that moneybags supporting it in 1977 where the patron-saints of Congress (I) before. The hold of money-power is clearly visible on the policies pursued by the successive Governments of India. The rich in Swaraj are the children of this unholy alliance between Business and Politics. The worst crimes are economic crimes. These criminals receive special blessings of the powers that be.

Money-power works subtly. Muscle-power perforce works openly to win the elections. Disruption of public meetings, intimidation of voters and their impermanence, capture of polling booths, tampering with ballot-boxes are impossible without the help of muscle-power. The Mafia gangs are already well-entrenched in India. The neo-industrialists of Swaraj—the smugglers and the slum-lords are the active associates of the leaders of political parties. In 1988, some political parties flaunted the photographs of some prominent national leaders in the company of the smugglers.

## Voting system

Our voting system is borrowed from the British. It is known as "first-past-the-post" system. It works well only where there are not more than three political parties. In a country where political parties spring like mushrooms, this voting system not only negates the will of people but also destroys democracy. India is an excellent example of this type. As every contest is multi-cornered, the total electoral vote is split. A candidate with the least vote wins the election. Worse, political party polling minority of votes bags majority of seats. There is no correlation between the percentage of votes polled and the seats bagged in the legislature.

The Indira Gandhi era contri-

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buted a term to electoral vocabulary — the Indira Wave. The Indira waves of 1971 and 1981 did not cross 43 per cent. In 1977, the Janata Party claimed to be the har-binger of "Second Revolution in India", but did not cross 45 per cent. In 1984, Rajiv Gandhi boasted of the "massive mandate" but his vote was just 48 per cent. From 1952 to 1989 all Governments of India are "minority governments" with less than 50 per cent of total electoral vote, but with more than 70 per cent of seats in Lok Sabha. The prevail-ing voting system had made Indian democracy a pure gamble for the seats of Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas.

Two more anti-democratic devi-ces which defile democracy in India merit public attention. The first is one and the same candidate con-esting from many constituencies. It is not only a slap in the face of the electorate which rejects the candi-date in one of the constituencies, but also the distortion of popular ver-dict. Second is the facility which enables the defeated candidate to recontest from the "safe consti-tuency" or his election or nomina-tion to the Rajya Sabha. This is working but a "backdoor entry" to Parliament.

"Power to People" is our latest political slogan. Power to People does not mean creation of corrupt cliques at the Panchayat level. It means complete accountability of the rulers from the Prime Minister of India to the Talathi of Panchayat to the people. Should the world's

largest democracy be mocked by such grave anti-democratic traits? It has been well said that people always get the government they deserve. The people of India are capable of giving themselves the best democracy by one simple but very effective direct action. They should not exercise their precious right to vote till these chronic ills are cured. So long as these ills persist, democracy in India would be only a name and not a thing.

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## Ancient canal is China's lifetime

(Contd. from Col. 6)

computers. Many of these products are exported.

The ancient canal is to play a more important role in the future. A grand scheme has been devised to divert water from the Yangtze to millions of hectares of farmland on the dry plain north of the Yellow River.

This would involve widening and deepening the narrow sections of the canal and building another five staircases of pumping stations. Although this is essentially an irri-gation scheme, it will also make the northern section of the ancient canal navigable as far as Tianjin. More ships locks would also have to be built.

No date has yet been set to begin this gigantic water diversion scheme. But construction has already been endorsed by the State Council, China's highest adminis-trative body.