

Pre-Planning the Elections

CONGRESS can no longer equate itself with the country. But it is still the largest political party. Its leaders are aware of the lessons of history. Political parties cannot thrive unless they represent the wishes of the people. Ideological considerations cannot be ignored. But a political party cannot survive without a strong party organisation. With the approach of the next general election, Congress has been wise in concentrating its efforts on both fronts. Avadi reflects the Congress shift to Socialism. Social and economic legislation since then has represented the pronounced socialist bias of Congress. Its foreign policy has been paying good dividends. At Amritsar, it took steps to introduce strict discipline within the organisation. Congress is taking no chances. It is clever in implying that it has to take precautions to win the elections so that it can save the country from chaos.

Deeper influences explain some of its major political and economic decisions. But it has timed its actions deliberately to suit its interests as a political party. India lives in her villages. Congress has exploited this socio-economic make-up of the country to strengthen its hold. Village uplift is not only one of the main aims of the Second Plan, Community Projects and National Extension Service are being implemented to fit in with party tactics. Nationalisation of the Imperial Bank has been justified as a means to revitalise the village community. Congress has taken elaborate pains to convince the people that widespread malpractices as well as the existence of "privileged sections" within the private sector have compelled the Government to nationalise life insurance. These are not the only actions to assure the country that Congress is opposed to vested interests, and is a government of the people. Abolition of landlordism and reform of the Company Law are supposed to mirror the economic consciousness of Congress. Progressive reform of the Hindu Law reflects the social conscience of Congress.

There are wider economic compulsions behind the bolder Second Plan. It has two socio-political aspects which are relevant to party politics. Relative expansion of the public sector implied fulfilment of

the Avadi pledge. This aspect of the Second Plan reflects the popular belief that Socialism implies nationalisation of major means of production. Pandit Nehru's pronouncements indicate that Congress leadership is not unaware of the recent evolution in Socialism. New Delhi's preoccupation with the Kaldor plan for reforms of the system of taxation emphasise this awareness. Pandit Nehru is pragmatic in his approach. He has justified the envisaged broadening of the public sector as assumption of control by the State over the strategic points of the economy. These tactics provide him and Congress room for manoeuvre against the doctrinaire Socialism of PSP, even as such a policy ensures political support and economic co-operation of industry.

Creation of full employment is one of the major aims of the second Plan. It has an economic basis. But the Congress Party, if not the Congress Government, has always laid emphasis on the popular, political aspect of employment. It has claimed credit for focussing the country's attention on the growing unemployment problem. This explains the Second Plan's professed emphasis on the development of village and small-scale industries for the dual purpose of creating employment and of supplying consumer goods. Political rivals of Congress, however, are mistaken in thinking that Congress is poking as a Labour Party in order to win the vote of the workers. This may be one of its aims. But the simultaneous stress on the expansion of heavy industries within the public sector and the spread of technical education indicate the concern of Congress to win over the educated middle-class. Praja-Socialists and the Communists are over-optimistic in hoping that they can exploit the frustration of this section of the community in their political fight against Congress.

Success of the Congress Government's foreign policy; the bolder Second Plan, its bias against the private sector and its emphasis on employment have enhanced the election chances of Congress. Its political rivals are in a predicament. Communal organisations like Hindu Mahasabha have lost prestige. PSP remains a house divided against itself. As Congress has shifted to

Left, PSP has found itself in a dilemma. Political developments within Russia and the closer relationship between India and Russia have caused embarrassment to the Communist Party. Though the Congress claim that, it is a national Government is not conceded, many of its rivals are committed to lending support to some of its major policies. Recently, the Mahasabha has declared that it will support Congress on issues like Goa, Kashmir, the Second Plan and refugee rehabilitation. CPI is also committed to supporting Congress on many national issues. PSP has always lent support to Congress on issues on which it endorses Congress policy.

Congress is not uninterested in taking advantage of conditional support to it by its rivals. But the recent proposal of Pandit Nehru is none the less intriguing. He has advocated that elections should be direct only at the base, and indirect thereafter. Three years ago, Jayaprakash proposed such a plan for elections so that a people's government could be formed. Panchayat Raj is not an entirely new concept. Some such plan for elections was tried in Yugoslavia.

The idea goes back to Gandhiji, but its implementation through the present system of Panchayats will mean perpetuation of the undesirable alignment of power and influence which goes with unequal land holding. That is to say, indirect election will strengthen the very system the Congress is committed to change through measures of land reform but in which progress has been the least satisfactory, if and when land is redistributed, and village panchayats become genuinely democratic, they could be a suitable medium for indirect elections, but not at the present stage.

Pandit Nehru is not as much interested in the representative aspect of this system of election as in its cheapness and simple mechanism. In a vast and poor country like India, there is much to be said for indirect elections except at the primary stage. There is another point. The Yugoslav experiment, as also the Jayaprakash proposal, is based on indirect primary elections on a non-party basis. Pandit Nehru's silence on the precise basis of the proposed direct panchayat elections is highly

significant. Can it be that Pandit Nehru has not forgotten the implications of the unexpected success of Independents in the last general election?

Congress organisation alone spreads even to the villages. Even if indirect representation on the basis of direct panchayat elections is introduced, Congress will meet only minor opposition except perhaps from CPI in some States, as none of the other political parties has the requisite organisational set-up. On most of the political and economic issues, Congress is now sure of winning the elections. Only on the issue of reorganisation of States will it meet with stiff opposition. Pandit Nehru may boast that, the Union Government has reached its decision on reorganisation of States in the wider interests of the nation even at the risk that Congress may lose the elections in some States. But the Congress Party has taken adequate precautionary measures. At Amritsar, it issued a directive warning Congressmen that resignations from legislatures and ministries on the issue of reorganisation of States will not be accepted. It is difficult to understand what could be the motive behind MPCC's naive move to bypass this clear directive.

Through enforcing discipline, Congress hopes to win the elections even in the States where linguistic controversies are most bitter by nominating veteran Congress leaders to contest the seats, it is futile to speculate whether Congress party tactics will ensure its success in the elections in Maharashtra and Punjab. But a developing political trend needs to be emphasised, though Congress does not yet seem to be aware of it. Recent elections in West Bengal for the State Assembly as well as for Parliament have been lost by Congress nominees on the issue of reorganisation of States. On this issue, all the Left parties with the single exception of Dr Bohia's Socialist Party (India) have combined with the Communists to nominate single candidates to contest the elections. CPI has made overtures to the parties of the Left to reach an electoral alliance for the next general election, PSP seems to have learnt the lesson of the last general elections. It is now willing to enter into an electoral marriage of convenience with CPI. With such an electoral alliance, the com-

bined Left may succeed in winning more seats than it is possible for both CPI and PSP by contesting the elections separately. Congress won the last general elections on the split vote. By entering into an electoral alliance, the major rivals of Congress, PSP and CPI, may

prevent repetition of circumstances which helped Congress to win an overwhelming majority. Any development which enhances the chance of a strong opposition emerging out of the elections will be welcomed by those who profess faith in democracy.

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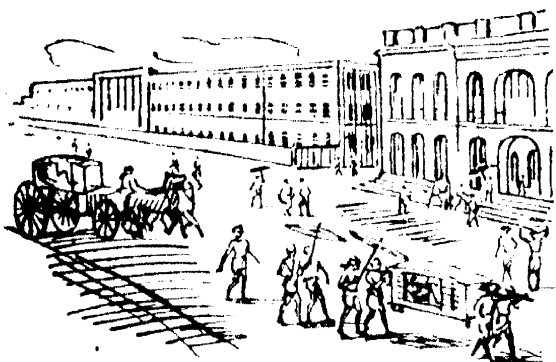
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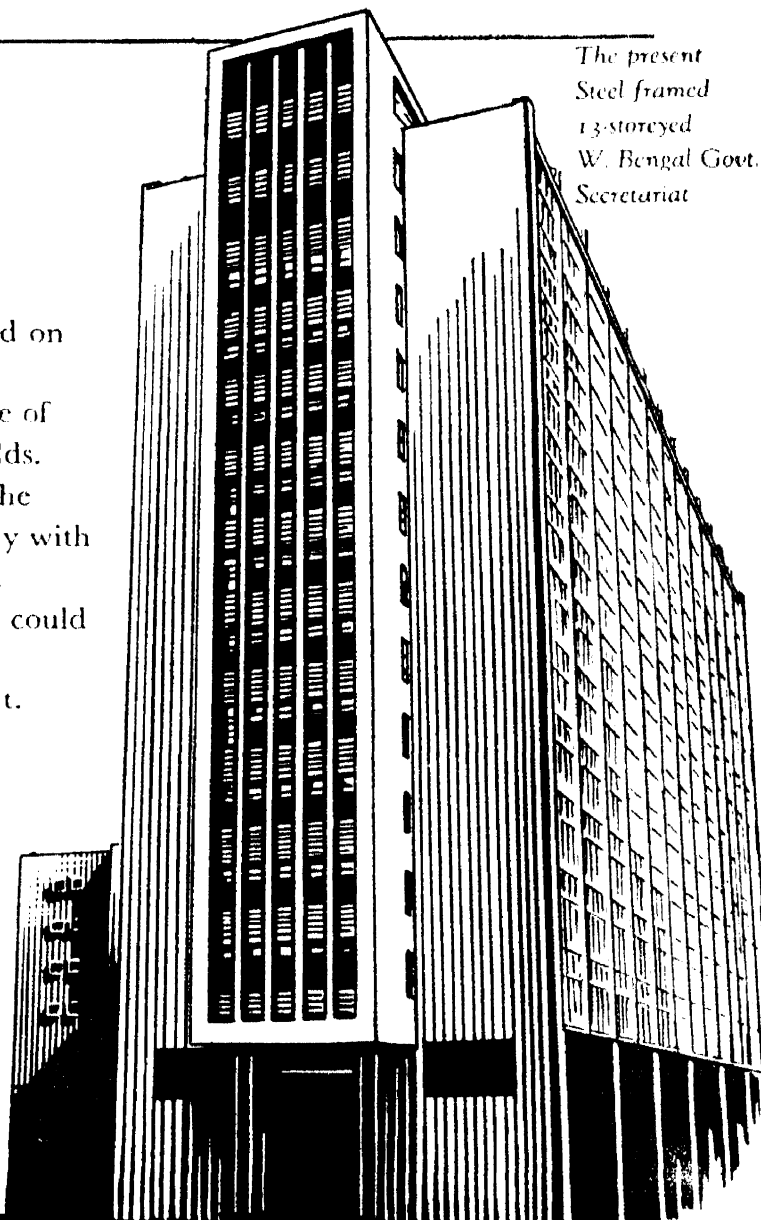
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