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PRELIMINARY ROUNDS

BOMBAY, like Oxford, has an established reputation as the home of lost causes. Will it live up to its reputation? Or, will it prove to India and the world that it is a city whose mood and temper are not properly understood or appreciated? In the 'thirties, Bombay ousted Calcutta as the political nerve-centre of the country. It became the mouthpiece and stronghold of Congress, although it was not the headquarters of that mighty political organisation. In the brief interlude during the war, the twilight period in which the Communists emerged as a powerful political party, Bombay basked in the reflected glory as its GHQ.

The war ended, The British withdrew from the sub-continent. India was partitioned. Congress became the Party in power, True to its traditional sympathy for the weak, the 'have-not' and the forgotten man, Bombay turned away from Congress at the moment of its greatest glory. It began to espouse the cause of the Socialist Party, who had seceded from Congress as early 1948. It now takes pride as the headquarters of the Socialist Party, the only serious rival of Congress, in the coming elections. Bombay does not deserve its bad reputation. It does not remain the home of lost causes for long. It backed Congress. And Congress won, though it took some years for it to win its goal. It is now backing the Socialist Party. And both Bombay and the Socialist Party are now consoling each other that it will not be long before the cause and the Party Bombay espouses forge ahead.

Mr Nehru combines his dual role of a national statesman and a party leader with remarkable finesse. He is now on a countrywide election tour. From New Delhi he has appealed to the people that means are as important as the end. This is a constant theme in his election speeches, whenever and wherever he speaks. He appeals to the voter to exercise his right with judgment and discrimination. He is too proud to beg for votes for him or for Congress. He has assumed the responsibility of educating the voter. In his capacity as a political teacher he warns the voter of his duty to keep the wider national viewpoint always in mind in making his choice. To the political parties he appeals to light the elections on a clean and democratic basis. This is in conformity with Mr Nehru's constant endeavour to consolidate national unity. He has not succeeded in his efforts. But the ugly demonstrations in Bombay are reminders of the need for decency and fair play in lighting the elections. The battle must, and should, be closely fought. But it must be fought cleanly and without bitterness.

Mr Nehru is anxious that the election should be fought on national, and not on narrow party issues. But he cannot forget that he is also the leader of Congress. And he is too experienced a politician not to catch the mood and temper of his immediate or wider audience. A lesser politician might have been seduced by the great ovation Bombay

gave him. But when he was addressing the mammoth gathering in Chowpatty last week, he knew he was speaking in a city which was the stronghold of the Socialist Party, the most powerful rival of Congress. He also knew that the Socialist Party had formed an electoral alliance with Dr Ambedkar, the leader of the Scheduled Castes Federation. In his public speech in Bombay, Mr Nehru was at his best as a party leader. He knew the strength, as well as the weakness of the electoral partnership between Mr Jayaprakash Narayan and Dr Ambedkar. What has Mr Narayan got that Mr Nehru has not? Mr Nehru is as much a Socialist as the leader of the Socialist Party. Why, then, does he still lead Congress? Because, Mr Nehru added, he can translate the basic principles of Socialism more easily through Congress, which has a well-organised party machinery, than through the Socialist Party which is widely suspect in the country for its lack of experience,

Mr Nehru was on firmer ground in his rebuttal of the criticism of his foreign policy. Dr Ambedkar is opposed to India's foreign policy. There is evidence that Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, the Socialist Party's expert on foreign policy, agrees with Dr Ambedkar's line of criticism. Mr Nehru had little difficulty in puncturing the arguments of the two learned doctors. It would be unfair to Mr Jayaprakash Narayan not to credit him with sufficient political sense not to realise that the Socialists cannot hope to win votes as advocates of a close alliance with Anglo-American Powers. No self-respecting nation can barter away its moral or political freedom for promises of aid in food, money, and men. It is time that Mr Narayan warned his enthusiastic colleagues and his partners in the marriage of convenience not to rub the voter the wrong way.

Not satisfied with revealing the apparent, contradictions in the electoral alliance between Mr Narayan and the former Law Minister, Mr Nehru launched a determined attack on the political rivals of Congress. He accused them of having no positive policy or programme. He warned them that they could not win the elections on a negative policy. There is force in the criticism that the only thing common among the rivals of Congress is their

united cry to oust Congress from power, although the Socialists can legitimately retort that they have a policy and a programme. Mr Nehru has hinted how Congress will fight the elections. It will appeal to the voter that it has a clear-cut policy; that, it has the men and the machinery to carry out its programme; that, its opponents are either unpractical dreamers or fascists masquerading as political revolutionaries.

Though dispirited by the structural reforms in Congress, and by Mr Nehru's assumption of Congress leadership, the Socialists have staged a remarkable come-back. There is no room for doubt now that they are prepared, and able, to give a close fight to Congress. In Bombay they are contesting all except reserved seats for both Parliament and the Assembly. In many other States, they will give a tough fight to Congress. They have yet to formulate their election slogans. But it is by now clear that they will light the elections on the issue that Mr Nehru does not represent Congress, that Congress is only interested in exploiting him in winning the elections, that he will be thrown overboard after the elections have been won. There is considerable truth in this. This is the suspicion which is widely entertained. It is certainly good tactics to warn the voter of a possible political fraud that Congress is trying to perpetuate. It is clever of Dr Ambedkar to appeal to Mr Nehru to join him and the Socialists, and to quit Congress when he is a political misfit. This is an election slogan which may catch votes.

Dr Ambedkar must realise that it is bad generalship to waste ammunition on targets which he is not likely to hit. Even if he does not realise this, his electoral partnership should dissuade him from harping on his criticism of Mr Nehru's foreign policy. It is ridiculous to believe that either he or the Socialists could convince the voter that India's future lies in an alliance with the Anglo-American Powers. It is not a little strange that neither Dr Ambedkar nor the Socialists have yet realised a trump card that they hold in the former Law Minister. He was the sponsor of the Hindu Code Bill. It was dropped because Congress-dominated Parliament was unwilling to accept equal rights for women. The

Ambedkar-Narayan electoral partnership could woo women voters by reminding them that it champions women's right to divorce and to property. Even a cursory glance at census figures shows the importance of the women's vote in the coming elections. They can make or mar the chances of a party. And it is certainly worthwhile to remind women voters that by voting Congress back to power they would be voting a party of social reactionaries.

Mr Jayaprakash Narayan is a stark realist. He did well in dropping the Praja Party like a hot potato. In Dr P. C. Ghosh and Acharya Kripalani it has two eminent political leaders. But no political party, aspiring to seize power, can be expected to form a coalition with an organisation which can provide only two more seats to the combination. With the Scheduled Castes Federation, the position is different. It cannot boast of any politician of all-India fame, except its leader, Dr Ambedkar. But the scheduled castes have reserved seats in Parliament, as well as in State Assemblies. And chances are that the members of Dr Ambedkar's party will win a majority of these seats from candidates put up by Congress. This political calculation on which Mr Narayan has formed his alliance with the Federation is likely to return good dividends to him and his Party in the coming elections.

If the Congress cry is that the Socialists cannot win the elections on a negative policy of defeating it in the elections, the Socialists can equally adopt the slogan that Congress cannot win the elections by telling the voters that the Socialists have no administrative experience. Both the major political parties are fighting the elections on a policy of negation. Meanwhile, the emergence of a considerable number of independent candidates reflects the prevailing political confusion. It is symbolic of the political mood of the country, which is disappointed that Congress has lost its revolutionary zeal, but is suspicious of the permanent bias to the Left of the Socialist Party. But this, as one of Kipling's characters would remind the *memsahab*, is a different story altogether.