

Political Leadership in West Bengal

A Comment

A M

MR MYRON WEINER deserves plaudits for his valuable psephological notes (Economic Weekly, Special Number, July 1959, pp 925-32). I am however afraid that most of his statistical conclusions are more courageous than tenable.

Is it really true that rural elements are increasing their political influence in West Bengal, and the trend is toward greater 'ruralization' of the political elite? Mr Weiner leans heavily on his table (see Table 1 below) showing the distribution of age and birthplace of 340 political leaders covered by his sample. "Fifty per cent of the sample born before 1900 came from villages, while 74 per cent of those born after 1920 were of village origin... The trend is thus toward more ruralization of the elite rather than less" (p 927, emphasis added).

Table 1: Age and Birthplace of 340 Political Leaders in West Bengal

	Calcutta and Towns		Villages	
	%	%	%	%
Born before 1900	50	50		
.. between 1900-1909	39	61		
.. " 1910-1919	29	71		
.. " 1920-1939	26	74		

One must beware of loose uses of expressions such as 'trend'. If, for example, Mr Weiner's sample had politicians of equal number from the four age-groups, there would have been some validity in his comparing the rural-urban mix of the politicians grouped by age (on the assumption that the sample was fairly representative). His table, however, is a percentage version of the distribution shown in Table II.

It will be seen that the number of politicians in the different age-

groups is uneven; there are 84 who were born before 1900 and only 57 born since 1920. Inter-group comparison is thus of restricted significance.

A more serious objection to accepting his contention is the bias inherent in the coverage. Mr Weiner specifically includes office-bearers of peasant organisations in his sample: no such privilege is accorded to executives of trade unions or similar urban-weighted organisations, 83 of the 408 Bengali leaders originally considered for the sample were from peasant bodies (and, therefore, one can presume, overwhelmingly village-born). Can it not be that between one-fifth and a quarter of the 340 individuals whose ages have been analysed belong to the latter organizations and were born in villages?

It is true that, this village-bias should affect the urban-rural distribution of all the age-groups, but since in the sample the group constituted by individuals born since 1920 is the smallest, the bias of an equal weight introduced from outside would be felt to a greater degree here than anywhere else. (It may even be that the age distribution of the officeholders in the peasant bodies is pronouncedly skewed in favour of the lower age-group. This is not a very unrealistic assumption, since 'activists', who are relatively young, usually dominate these organizations. The bias could have been countered if Mr Weiner had additionally introduced in the sample office-bearers of trade union

organizations, who are also relatively young, but are by and large urban-born.)

Mr Weiner remarks subsequently: "The trend in both the Assembly and in Parliament . . . is for more and more of the younger members to be rural-born. While only 56 per cent of the MLA's born before 1900 came from rural areas, 79 per cent of those born after 1920 are rural" (p 928). This is again claiming too much. If he had sorted out evidence from the results of the two general elections, and had demonstrated that the proportion of rural-born among the successful candidates under the age of, say, 40 is higher in the 1957 Assembly compared to the 1952 Assembly, he could have a better case. But the results of the 1957 elections by themselves are incapable of showing any trend; they represent a set of facts at merely one point of time.

The fact that in the 1957 Assembly, the proportion of the village-born is higher among those born since 1920 than among those born before 1900 may by itself have little significance. The following illustration shows that even where the proportion of the village-born goes up in the younger age-group compared to the older, that does not imply any increase in rural influence. The proportion of the old generation born in villages has gone down from 77.7 per cent of the total to 01.1 per cent as between situations A and B, while the proportion of the young generation born

	Situation A			Situation B		
	Total	Urban-born	Rural-born	Total	Urban-born	Rural-born
Born before 1900	90	20	70	90	35	55
Born since 1920	10	7	3	10	1	9
	100	27	73	100	36	64
			% of born			% of born
			77.7			61.1
			30.0			90.0
			73.0			64.0

Table II: Age and Birthplace of West Bengal Politicians

Born	Calcutta and Towns		Villages	Total
before 1900	42	42	84	
.. between 1900-1909	38	60	98	
.. " 1910-1919	29	72	101	
.. " 1920-1939	15	42	57	
	124	216	340	

increased from 30 per cent to 90 in rural areas has correspondingly per cent. But the over-all "rural-born" representation has actually declined from 73 per cent to 64 per cent.

Thus Mr Weiner is not entitled to his 'trend' conclusion in regard to Assembly membership solely on the

basis of the results of the 1957 elections. His obiter dictum about the 'trend' in Parliamentary representation is still less valid. What can one make of such sweeping statements as "... the legislature is already under rural control, rural representation in Parliament is increasing and it is likely that rural influence will continue to increase" (p 928, emphasis added), when only a few paragraphs back he was admitting that "78 per cent of the seats [in Parliament] are rural, but only 41 per cent of the seats are held by rural born members"?

Also, too much must not be made of the fact that the state legislature is already under 'rural control'. Where nearly 80 per cent of the constituencies are rural, it is hardly surprising that rural-born members constitute a majority in the legislature. This is as much true for India as a whole as for West Bengal, and will, one can imagine, also be true for any country with universal adult suffrage and preponderance of rural population. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that Mr Werners table on page 929 would suggest that the proportion of rural-born representation is somewhat less than the proportion of rural constituencies. Contrary to what Mr Weiner maintains, this implies that at the present moment there are actually some 'town' people representing 'country' people. The following table, derived from Mr Weiner's table, makes this pretty obvious:

	% of Rural Constituencies	% of Rural-born Members	(2) as % of (1)
Congress	86	71	82.8
Communists	50	56	112.0
Socialists	61	72	118.0
Marxists Left	75	64	85.3
Total	77	68	88.3

The first column shows the proportion of rural to aggregate constituencies won by each political group, and the total below the line is the percentage of rural constituencies in the total number of constituencies covered by the sample. Column (2) gives the percentage of the rural-born to the total number of members returned by the different parties, and the last column sums up, again in percentage version, the lag or lead in the proportion of rural-born MLA's vis-a-vis the proportion of rural constituen-

cies. As can be seen, while 77 per cent of the constituencies covered by the sample are rural, only 68 per cent of the members returned were born in villages.

The impression is confirmed by a comparison of the number of rural constituencies and the number of rural-born members covered by the sample:

	No of Rural Constituencies	No. of Rural-born Members	(2) as % of (1)
Congress	116	95	81.9
Communists	19	20	105.3
Socialists	11	13	118.2
Marxists Left	9	7	77.8
Total	155	135	87.1

155 rural constituencies have returned only 135 rural-born members. The rural-born would appear not to have been able to hold on to their own even in the rural constituencies.

This brings us to Mr Weiner's further statement: "By all measurements, Congress is the most rural party in West Bengal" (p 928, emphasis added). If the epithet 'most rural' refers to the characteristic of having the most influence in rural areas, obviously the Congress, which won roughly 70 per cent of the seats in the rural constituencies, can claim the distinction. But it is possible to bring a different point of view in judging rural roots. Of the seats won by the Congress, 86 per cent are from rural constituencies, but only 71 per cent of the successful Congress candidates are rural-born. (See table in

column 1) 21 of the successful Congress MLA's in rural constituencies (or 18.1 per cent) were born in urban areas. Let Mr Weiner compare this with the performance of the other parties. It would seem that village-born Communists and Socialists have not only been able to fill the full quota of the rural constituency seats won by these groups, but, in addition, they have also been successful in winning some urban seats. It is therefore debatable whether the Congress can be regarded as the most rural party by all measurements.

Rubber Chemicals Plant

AN ORGANIC Chemicals Plant is soon to be erected at Rishra, near Calcutta, by the Alkali & Chemical Corporation of India Limited. The plant, which is estimated to cost Rs 2 crores, will produce a range of industrial organic chemicals including accelerators, antioxidants, retarders and other auxiliaries required by the rubber industry. Its annual capacity of 2,200 tons, will make the country self-sufficient in rubber chemicals for a considerable period. The yearly saving in foreign exchange will be about Rs 1 crore.

The plant is being designed and constructed in India largely by Indian technicians. Technical assistance and research information are being provided by the Dyestuffs Division of Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd. I C I will also provide experts to supervise the starting-up of the plant. Indian management staff will be specially trained and will take charge when the plant is in operation.

THE UNITED COMMERCIAL BANK LTD.

Head Office : CALCUTTA

PAID-UP CAPITAL
Rs. 2,00,00,000

RESERVE FUND
Rs. 1,48,00,000

OUR

RECURRING DEPOSIT SCHEME

REGULAR MONTHLY DEPOSIT

OF	Rs. 10	Rs. 100	Rs. 500
Will grow to :			
in 46 Months.	Rs. 500	Rs. 5000	Rs. 25000
in 86 Months.	Rs. 1000	Rs. 10000	Rs. 50000

Chairman
G D BIRLA

General Manager :
S. T. SADASIVAN

UCO-9/59