

A Calcutta Diary

## The Politics of Successful Men

THERE is a story that the Prime Minister once spoke to Dr B C Roy thus before the elections. "Look, why is it that the only Bengali M p's I ever want to hear are all Communists? Can't you get some intelligent men to represent the Congress in Parliament?"; The compliment to the Communists was deserved as was the criticism of the general run of Bengali Congressmen. It is some time since the West Bengal Congress ceased to matter in the national context. The cause- or the effect was that good men, who will be defined in a moment, either kept away from politics or joined parties other than the Congress. By good men is meant here those who have succeeded in their own right in some other department of life than politics, Congress politics to be precise. In recent years the Congress Party has been dominated by manoeuvrers with a few good (in the ordinary sense now) men here and there who stuck on to the old party out of sheer habit. Intriguers remain, the duds are still there, but there are a few men in the Congress now who can claim some title to recognition besides the fact that they are 25 years of age and, for medical purposes, not mentally unsound.

Dr Roy himself represents this other breed of politicians. Many may think that the loss to medicine consequent upon his return to politics is greater than the gain to politics, but there is no denying that he was an immensely successful physician. Of him at any rate it could not be said that out of office, he would be sitting all day on a hard bench in some public park. He remains in office because he can afford to walk out of it at any time. This, which indeed was the tradition of Bengali politics before its sorry decline, makes a bigger difference than many realise. Having made a mark in some other sphere of life, you speak in politics with greater confidence; you may also be above petty temptations.

Shankar Das Banerjee, the new Speaker of the West Bengal Assembly, is another example. Everybody agrees that he has made an excellent Speaker, and so he has.

The reason, I suggest, is that he was successful at the bar before coming into the Congress. He can refuse to be bullied by the Congress Party whip, even by the Chief Minister. A not wholly frivolous additional reason why he has been able to manage the House so well is his relative fluency with the English language. (You would be surprised how effective it still is with Members who never went to school or went to school but never left it with a school leaving certificate.) The basic fact is Banerjee's success in his profession.

A new Minister, Siddhartha Sankar Roy, has also made something of an impression. Again, the reason is that he had done reasonably well as a barrister-at-law before becoming a Minister. He had been inside a club, been asked to parties, seen life as it is lived by "gentlemen". Another Minister, Bimal Sinha, is not a new-comer, but he too belongs to this category. He had walked on carpets with his shoes on even before entering Writer's Buildings. He is also a serious student of economic and does not have to get his speeches written by ghosts. All this makes him able, generous, tolerant and ungreedy

Undemocratic? Government by the privileged? No root in the masses? None of these accusations would be wholly wrong. It is possible to argue that these gentlemen have no place in a democracy. Sinha frankly belongs to a feudal family. So, probably does Shankar Banerjee. On the other hand, if success in politics is not to mean the success of only those who have failed in everything else\* even elementary "examinations at school, there is much to be said for attracting such men to politics. Kings have been known in history to stand by the people against the aristocracy. It is not impossible that those describable as imperfect demerats can do a little more for democracy than the former tram conductor. Such a one, incidentally, was the Chief Minister's rival in the last elections and polled only 540 votes fewer than Br Roy).

In varying degrees, every gov-

ernment has its own class character, and it will not be entirely beside the point to contend that Dr Roy's Government has been of some advantage to a class that could not have hoped to profit from say, a government headed by Dr P C Ghosh or Mohammed Ismail. In the latter event, the advantages would have gone to the latter's own classes, and it is perfectly legitimate to argue that the latter classes deserve more in a democracy. These possibilities, however, are capable of exaggeration^ and by and large Bengali politics may have gained from its recent acquisitions from among successful men.

Two more considerations remain. One, whether these "successful" politicians can be successful politicians. Two, whether their stay in politics will not be as short as an Indian summer is said to be. The answer to the second will depend largely on that to the first. Men successful in medicine or law may get fed up with the party managers necessary animals, but animals still. Ami success in politics has often to be bought at a juice. The men We have been discussing may do either of two things: to pay the price or not to pay the price. The latter will mean that they will be out of politics before long; the former will mean that the advantages of having them in politics will be gone, and chances are that the post-corruption "successful" man will be a greater danger.

My own bet, very small, is on the possibility that Ashok Sens and Shankar Banerjees (the former is the foremost example- of successful men in politics) will prove to have been very temporary intruders in the Congress Party, just passengers. The party managers will not have them if they remain themselves sahibs in khadi. They will change their clothes? A thorough conformity, a closer proximity to the norm of Congressmen may he insisted upon. Those who will do the insisting will be entitled to claim that they have taken the country nearer to democracy. Hut what a democracy it will be!

—Flibbertigibbet

July 16.



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