

Letter from Calcutta

## Gains Cancelled by Losses

"[F we have not succeeded in defeating the Congress, neither has the Congress been able to push back the democratic movement in West Betagal"—this is how the Communist Party of India sums up its performance in its post-election assessment. Indeed no more definite conclusion is possible with Congress having added 5 seats to its 1957 strength of 152 in the Vidhata Sabha, and C P I gaining 4 to take its total to 50. But the Praja Socialist Party lost heavily—it won only 5 seats this time against 21 it held in the Assembly just dissolved. Whether this is indicative of greater polarisation in West Bengal's politics is the big question, but no firm answer can be given without a detailed study of voting trends.

A constituency-wise analysis shows that Congress lost 53 of the seats it won at the last election, but wrested 51 constituencies from the Opposition. C P I lost to Congress 22 seats it held, but almost made up by taking 20 seats away from the Congress. These figures also support the "no change" conclusion.

Neither the Jan Sangh nor Swatantra got a single seat—for which the West Bengal Communist Party congratulated itself "in view of the fact that the forces of communalism and extreme right had made some headway in other parts of India". Although humbled by reverses in Calcutta, C P I proudly points out that :

(a) The United Left Front (ULF) sponsored by it gained 81 seats against 62 in 1957, excluding in both cases the PSP which opted out of the alliance. The Front also hopes to get the support of several more Independents.

(b) CPPs share of votes polled rose from 17.82 per cent in 1957 (when it contested 103 seats) to 24.00 in 1962 (143 seats).

(c) The U L F won 12 out of the 36 Lok Sabha seats, a gain of two.

### Left Reverse in Calcutta

No reference is made by C P I to Calcutta in this assessment. The 26 seats in the city and suburbs returned only eight Congressmen in 1957 but 14 in 1962. PSP lost all

4 seats it held, and the Communist strength was reduced from 10 to 7. It is noteworthy that polling was heavy-- 66.19 per cent against 48.62 per cent in 1957, Shri Atulya Ghosh, West Bengal Pradesh Congress Chief, speaking at a Congress post-election rally claimed a three per cent swing in Calcutta in favour of the Congress (42 to 45.7 per cent) and five per cent swing away from the United Left Front (49.7 to 44.5 per cent). The balance of two per cent lost by C P I went presumably to the parties in between, mainly PSP, which stayed out of the alliance in (his election).

More detailed analysis is necessary before any firm conclusions can be drawn about the Left reverse in Calcutta. But there is no explaining away the reverse. There were undoubtedly several marginal seats subject to change with even one per cent swing in polling either way. It is also true that the 1962 elections have been indecisive in the case of at least three constituencies where the Congress margin was between 300 and 500 votes. But the Congress gain of six seats in Calcutta is a spectacular success all the same.

### China Policy or Complacency ?

How far did C P I's China policy lose its votes? Several papers seemed to think that this was the decisive factor in the Calcutta reverses, where the sophisticated voter is expected to take some note of larger political issues. Secondly—as C P I itself admits---there was an unwarranted complacency on its part with regard to Calcutta. Its election campaign started long after Congress had launched its. Thirdly, the slogan of "alternative Government" reacted against it, some hold, by frightening away the voter who was not averse to voting Communist to register his protest but was unwilling to see power pass into its hands.

Another fact that stands out is the Left gain in West Bengal districts. In Cooch-Bihar, Congress won all seven seats in 1957 but only one this time while the Forward Block won five and C P I one. In Murshidabad, an almost 100 per

cent Congress district in 1957, R S P took three, C P I and P S I<sup>3</sup> one each, three more going to Independents. In Nadia, 10 out of 11 seats were held by Congress, but its share has come down to six in the present election. C P I won two seats there, gaining a foothold for the first time. Two seats were taken by Independents, one a dissident Congressman. The sixth seat went to P S P.

In Howrah and 24-Parganas, however, the Congress position has improved. In Howrah, Congress gained nine against four in 1957, C P I lost two out of the four it held, Forward Bloc shed two out of five, and PSP failed to get any at all. In 1957, Congress lost 50 per cent of the seats in 24-Paraganas but gained 33 out of 42 in this election. C P I lost six of the 14 seats it held.

The picture that thus emerges is of gains in one area being cancelled out by losses in others. No theory—at least none advanced so far—quite explains the upsets. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that both Congress and C P I worked hardest in each other's strong-holds to the neglect of the areas they thought were "safe", and which they imagined did not need quite so much nursing.

One Communist worker told your correspondent that for the first time since 1952, young men were attracted to the Congress election apparatus in a big way, giving it the vitality and energy that it lacked. This view is supported by Shri Atulya Chosh's claim at a post-election rally at the Maidan of a massive upsurge of Congress sentiment among the youth.

### Atulya Ghosh Now Dominant

At the time of writing, Congress Party leaders are meeting at Digha, the new sea-side resort. Dr Roy has been anxious to popularise. The discussions are reportedly taking place on the composition of the future Cabinet. Instead of speculating on their outcome, it will be more profitable to note the basic fact that the elections have brought an accession of strength to Shri Atulya Ghosh. While Dr Roy's to-

uring presence saves the legislative party the trouble of choosing a new leader, at least for the present, there is no doubt that Shri Ghosh commands majority support. It may be retailed that he was keen on entering the Vidhan Sabha this time. relinquishing his safe Lok Sabha seat He was, however, persuaded not to do so by the Congress High Command. No one need doubt, however that the Cabinet, to he constituted will reflect Shri Ghosh preferences even more than before,

By and large, the elections in West Bengal were peaceful, and excitement was markedly less than five years ago. The latter is difficult to understand in the context of the heavier polling in Calcutta, and several other neighbouring districts. May he, the voter is getting better oriented to the democratic process and needs less cajoling or bullying to turn up at the booth. Another indicator of increased electoral sophistication is the widespread use of cartoons, the most effective of which were the large multi-coloured, hand-drawn efforts by young Left artists. Police excesses during the food movement of 1957 were recalled, among others to stir up feelings against the ruling party while Congress posters harped on West Bengal Communism's ties with big-brother Mao. Besides the cartoons, large way-side hoardings — a novel technique — were employed for Dr Roy's campaign in the Chowringhee constituency. These hoardings were not the work of tyros but of seasoned professionals in whose work enthusiasm was less evident than expertise. In the Baraset constituency, a number of leading writers, stage and film artistes "spontaneously" rallied to Professor Kabir's cause, to give performances at election rallies. Some of these were known for their Left persuasion, which caused many brows to rise at their Baraset doings. *Swadhinata*, the Communist Party organ, felt sufficiently provoked to attack them, insinuating that the patronage which is within Professor Kabir's powers to disburse explained the deviation.

A Major " Scandal " ?

The tame 1962 elections brought to light only one major "scandal". It was alleged that Law Minister Asoke Sen had acquired a certain Calcutta property at a price much lower than its market value for

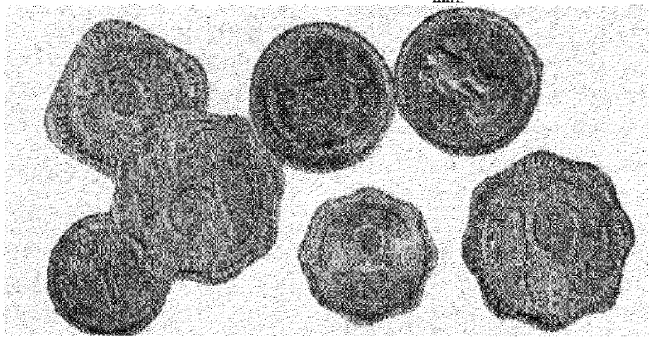
extra-monetary considerations shown to the seller The intriguing part of this "exposure" was that it was widely believed to have been, inspired by certain leading Congressmen who did not want to see Shri Asoke Sen re-elected. In fact, it is reported that Shri Asoke Sen's running mates for Assembly seats were extending their support in diverse ways to the Communist aspirant, Snehungshu Acharyya. For a time it did look as if the Law Minister might loose but eventually he did muster a not too impressive lead of 30,378 votes.

The Congress performance in West Bengal has the appearance of a success, if not the actual substance thereof. No re-thinking on policies would seem, therefore, to be obligatory. The Communist- Party in the State, however, will seriously attempt to draw appropriate lessons from the debacle in Calcutta.

Whether the dominant pro-China faction in the West Bengal Committee will now yield to the growing rank and file pressure against its policies remains to be seen. The absence at this juncture of Ajoy Chosh, removed by death from the General Secretaryship in the pre-election weeks, will be keenly felt. It is also unfortunate that Shri S A Dange should have lost his Lok Sabha seat in the prestige fight with Congress his departure from the Parliamentary scene in the nation's capital will limit his effectiveness in intra-party politics on the national plane.

Postelection afterthoughts in Communist circles in Calcutta show every evidence of confusion and demoralisation, A situation like this has been known in Communist history to favour extremism. This constitutes the real danger to the party's future.

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