

A Calcutta Diary*Democracy, their Democracy*

USING other words, Nehru has laid it down that when the Congress wins an election, or by-election, it proves how wisely the people have chosen and that, when the Congress loses an election, or by-election, it shows how freely and fairly the Congress Government conducts elections. Satisfaction is thus pre-assured. The West Bengal Congress recently had both kinds of satisfaction. It lost the Burdwan Assembly seat to the Communists, Cooch Behar to the Forward Bloc, and the Burdwan Lok Sabha seat to an Independent with Communist support — proving how honest the elections were. It won Siliguri, conclusively demonstrating how popular the Congress is. The ruling party's satisfaction is not all deceit.

It is true that the elections are by and large free and fair. It is also true that the people of West Bengal, like those in the rest of the country, would rather be ruled by the Congress than any other party. What the people are considering increasingly necessary is that the ruling party should be reminded every now and again that the people do not wholly accept the Congress version of the country's progress and that, Chinese aggression or no, the Communist Party of India, though divided, has a useful role to play. The diversity of popular choice! In last month's by-elections means no more and no less.

In the House

Having thus dismissed the electoral results, I decided it might not be a bad idea to go and have a look at the West Bengal Assembly where the elected ones talk their heads off. (The last time I went there was a long time ago.) The experience was worth the two hours I spent there. As of men or women, look is important; and the physical appearance of the Assembly was only the first of one's disappointments. The garden, once lovely, is a shambles. As one walked up the stairs one looked for the sentry that would demand to see one's pass. Not having one, I thought I would look for the office that would issue me one. My companion, an accredited correspondent, said, "Don't

bother about a pass; nobody checks them any more". He was right. Passless in the Assembly, I waited for the proceedings to begin.

It was impossible not to think of the same Assembly before Independence. Yes, here it was where one had heard Syamaprosad Mookerjee, Fazlul Huq, Shasheed Suhrawardy and — the greatest of them all — Tulsi Goswami, about the last of the Mohicans. It was impossible not to remember the elegance and urbanity of the Assembly of those days. There was Sir U P Singh Roy, there was Gahznavi, there was Nalini Ranjan Sarker in his immaculate dhoti, and there was the European Group. In the background were fierce animosities, racial and communal and political. Yet nobody forgot his manners. Sa rat Bose, a good hater, never failed to say "Hello" to a European Member.

All Very Different

On that Monday recently it was all very different. Apart from Tanm Kanti Ghosh, who is a bit of a Narcissist, almost nobody was elegantly dressed. No fine cars rolled un; no beautiful women in the Visitors' Gallery. Very little English was heard, except in the middle of Bengali sentences; and our legislators of old would have been ashamed of both the Bengali and the English. (Yes, one immediately remembered, Kiron Sankar Roy was also a member of the same Assembly once, whose Bengali, spoken or written, has not been improved since very frequently.) The very atmosphere was different, so different that one did not have the time to think whether it was a difference for the better.

Meanwhile the Speaker came. Poor man. He did not have a chance. There was uproar in the House; and one did not even know what it was all about. It is possible that the acoustics of the House are not un to mark; it seems equally possible that even those who created the uproar did not know what the uproar was about. A Congress Member who first raised his voice and threw up his hands seemed very

proud of his performance. He turned to the Press Gallery on his way out — perhaps for a cup of tea to comfort his throat — and said, without saying it, "Now, what do you think of that?"

Rather Distressing

The Speaker tried to say something about Kennedy and some other people who had died or been killed when the House was not in session. He said it badly enough, in terms of composition and delivery; but the House was worse. The only heart-warming thing was the reference to Shaheed Suhrawardy; perhaps rightly, he has not many admirers in this country. Yet his mention was entirely right and proper. There was only one protesting voice or two. I did not forget the Great Calcutta Killing nor the Bengal Famine; but I also remembered the memorable speech in which he referred to the streelaras and ragamuffins of the pavements of Calcutta. One felt one was witnessing some of them right there on Monday.

In bad manners there is not much to choose between the Congress and the Opposition; this was the saddest discovery. It has to be added, with sorrow, that some of the women members behave in a way their mothers would not have been proud of. It is impossible to blame this party or that; the pattern of your behaviour is to a large extent set by your adversary. He raises his voice; you have to, to be heard at all.

I took leave as the Health Minister was making a prepared statement about infectious diseases in the districts of West Bengal. Without deriving the slightest solace from the reflection, I thought to myself that I was unfair in comparing an unrepresentative Assembly of old with a representative one of our democratic days. That slang, those manners, those clothes, yep, they represent the country as my Tulsi Goswami is and B P Singh Roy never did. I suppose I am not a good enough democrat, as I have in my time been told that I am not a good enough patriot. Well, to each his own, I suppose,

—Flibbertigibbet