

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-8
The People's Choice

Hotel Janpath
New Delhi, India
March 8, 1957

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

The elections are in full swing. "The world's biggest elections," I am frequently reminded, and indeed they are. Throughout all India, 193 million eligible voters are to cast 500 million ballots into three million ballot boxes to elect 500 MPs and 2900 MLAs from among 13,500 candidates. Voting, spread over 19 days, is taking place in 200,000 polling stations, where more than one million government officers are temporarily on election duty.

But the elections are also a small, private affair. I am thinking about an impoverished, illiterate peasant, tattered and barefoot, standing in the unfamiliar surroundings of a town schoolhouse, the polling station. There he is, with an uncertainty about how you give your name, and when you cast the ballot, and where you go to next, but there he is now also, stepping out from behind the canvas curtain, his vote cast, and the look of dignity and pride and satisfaction on his face.

Since I have been watching the balloting and talking to voters, I have become less convinced that the elections are about the Congress and the Communists and Nehru and the "socialist pattern of society" and the Second Five-Year Plan. The elections are mostly about the people of India. With freedom new and illiteracy widespread and communications poor and the general level of political awareness low, it's easy to say that India's democratic elections are in a rather primitive state. For some, there is confusion:

In the Punjab, the presiding officer of a polling station said he had to tell voters they didn't have to remove their sandals before entering the polling booth.

In a rural constituency near Lucknow, some blind and infirm voters who had to be helped to cast their votes asked the presiding officer to put their ballots "in Gandhi's box."

In Bombay state, a presiding officer, investigating a delay, found a woman praying before the ballot boxes. The boxes were red with flowers and kum-kum (cosmetic powder) she had offered. She explained that she was invoking "the power of the vote for a plentiful wheat crop."

In Madras state, ballot-counters found Rs 4 in coin and currency in one box, along with slips of paper giving suggestions for civic improvements.

In many places, ballot-counters find letters addressed to Nehru or local candidates, telling of personal, family or community problems and asking for help in solving them.

These rare instances carry to the extreme what seems to be a fact about these elections: that there is a great deal of popular trust in the ballot box. I can imagine that for the inarticulate, for the unsophisticated, for the millions who are never going to write a letter to the editor of raise Cain at City Hall or talk to their assemblyman, here, in the privacy of the polling booth, is where you show where you stand, what you respect and what you don't, and what you want for yourself and your community.

That's why I think that for many of these people voting is an act of faith, a tiny declaration of independence.

This is just a feeling I have, of course, an impression that you don't get from the politicians or the newspapers or even the city voters. It's a feeling you get when you see a family pile into a bullock cart and ride along dusty roads to the polling station, when you see the women of a village, their faces covered in shawls, their children saddled on a hip, walk along the paths through the sugarcane fields to the same destination. It's a feeling you get when you see them, men and women, squatting silently in a line before the polling station, waiting solemnly for their turn, when you see them hold the ballot so carefully, even reverently, and when they come out, smiling, hurrying to catch up with a neighbor. It looks an awful lot like democracy.

The over-all job of running the elections belongs to the central Election Commission, an independent government body carefully insulated from politics. The job of running the elections on the ground, though, belongs to the ranking civil servant in each district, the Deputy Commissioner, also known as the Collector or District Magistrate.

Meerut District in western Uttar Pradesh is in the flat green country, the wheat, sugarcane and mustard country, of the Ganges plain. Some 2.2 million people live in its 2000 square miles. Half of them are voters, entitled to elect three MPs and 15 MLAs, including three MLAs from the Scheduled Castes.

The Collector of Meerut District is a precise, fidgety man of 40 who gave the impression that he smiles only to relax his face. He said he had had the election on his mind for two months, but now, on the eve of the election, he was "absolutely, 100 per cent prepared, exactly like a military operation." More than 300 central and state government officers serving in his district---revenue officials, court registrars and school principals, mostly---had been assigned as presiding officers of polling stations, and 2500 of their subordinates would be polling officers and clerks to assist them. Each of these six- to eight-man teams would work as a troupe, travelling around the district to handle one polling station on each of the five days of balloting. With so many government servants busy with the election, normal administration of the district was already sharply curtailed and would be for two more weeks, and school children and college students were having a vacation.

Two days before the polling was to begin in the northwest corner of the district, the presiding officers met in Meerut city for a final orientation. There was a question-and-answer period on election law, the rights and limitations of candidates and their polling agents,

the polling station set-up and operation, and disposal of ballot boxes and electoral rolls after polling. Later there was a practice session on sealing the 10-inch cube ballot boxes in the way prescribed by the illustrated guide book provided by the Election Commission. It was a serious, business-like session.

On "D-day minus one," to use the Collector's term, the individual polling teams loaded their bed rolls, the ballot boxes and sacks of other polling paraphernalia into chartered buses and headed off toward the schoolhouses, village halls and roadside tent-sites where the polling stations (and their temporary living quarters) would be established. When they arrived, villagers and townspeople came to help arrange the necessary tables and desks and chairs, hang the canvas curtains to make polling booths, and put up the bamboo railings to make passageways leading to the polls.

On polling day in the middle-schoolhouse in the town of Baghpat, the polling team got up at six. The polling agents of the candidates began showing up before seven, and when they all assembled---one or two each for the three MP candidates and the four MLA candidates---the presiding officer conducted the sealing of the ballot boxes with as much ceremony as you'd expect at the coronation of a king.

He lined up the metal boxes. Seven. He held one aloft. Nothing in it. He rapped it smartly with his knuckles. It didn't even crack. With the election symbol of the first candidate pasted on the inside and his symbol and name pasted on the outside, the ballot box was sealed with wire and string and sealing wax. The other six boxes were prepared the same way, and all were placed on tables behind the curtains. They were ready for business.

Meanwhile, outside, the candidates' workers were setting up their outposts in the street, not closer to the polls than 100 yards, the required distance. As voters came along, or were brought along, they stopped at one of these outposts to get an official identity slip and have their names checked off the still-to-vote list.

There were a couple dozen men and women waiting at the school compound gate at 8:30, when the constable, on signal, let them into the schoolyard. The men formed one line, the women another, and the voting began.

Once a voter came to the head of the line, he handed his unofficial identity slip to two polling clerks, who checked against the electoral roll by asking his name, his father's name and his age, and noting his sex. If the village watchman or revenue collector seated there raised no objection to the voter's identity, he was handed an official identity slip and directed to the next stop.

Showing the slip to the next two polling officers, the voter had his name checked off the roll again, got his left index finger marked with a spot of indelible ink (to mark him as having voted), and was handed a ballot, 2½" by 4" or so, and bearing only a serial number and the words "Legislative Assembly." The polling agents seated nearby looked him over---this was their chance to challenge his identity.

The voter then gave his identity slip to the guard at the first polling booth and stepped inside the booth, behind the curtain. There

he placed the ballot into the box of the candidate of his choice. If he could read the name, good. If he couldn't, there were the symbols---the pair of yoked bullocks of the Congress, the sickle and ears of grain of the Communists, the cart and the camel of the independents.

Coming out of the booth, the voter got his identity slip back and carried it on to another table, where two more polling officers took the slip, checked his name off the roll, and gave him a ballot for the "House of the People." The guard let him into the second booth, where he voted the same way for the MP candidate of his choice. Coming out, he had his finger checked to make sure there was an ink spot, and that was it, out he went, on his way.

Once a blind man came in, clutching his identity slip. "Sir!" he called out loudly. Led by the presiding officer to each booth in turn, he whispered the names of the candidates he wanted to vote for, and the presiding officer guided his hand to the proper box.

During the eight hours of polling in Baghpat, about 800 of the 1300 persons listed on the electoral roll turned out to vote. Most of the day, it took a half-hour's wait in line and about five minutes to vote. All day the streets were busy with people coming and going. The people seemed to have a quiet purposefulness about them, as if the important thing was the election, not the political contests.

In mid-afternoon the Collector came tearing up in a jeep, followed by a truckful of steel-helmeted policemen. He had set up a "camp headquarters in a central location" so that he could observe polling throughout the area. Everything was going "absolutely, 100 per cent perfect."

Toward closing time there was a rush of late voters. All who made the school compound by closing time, 4:30, were permitted to vote, and the station remained open for them until nearly six. With the last ballot cast, the polling agents gathered around and the presiding officer, with a little less ritual this time, sealed the slits of the ballot boxes, sealed the electoral rolls and left-over ballots in envelopes, and turned everything over to a committee of election supervisors and police for delivery to the Collectorate in Meerut city.

That night the polling team slept again in the schoolhouse. The next day they were to break camp and move on to their next polling station in another part of the district.

I have watched polling in other constituencies in Uttar Pradesh and the Punjab and Delhi. On the part of those who arranged for the election---the Election Commission and men like the Collector---there seemed to be great care taken to insure efficiency, impartiality and convenience to the voters. Instructions were explicit, contingencies were provided for, the personnel and materials needed were provided for, the system of checks of ballots was based on strict accountability, and the number of polling stations was generally greater than last time, so that some voters had a shorter trip to the polls and less congestion when they got there.

On the part of those conducting the polling---the presiding officers and polling officers and clerks---there was a noteworthy degree of competence, uniformity, conformity to the law and election procedure, a serious-mindedness, and patience toward voters in explaining to them

the procedure and demonstrating how to cast the ballot.

On the part of party workers, it looked like a case of city slickers and country bumpkins. In the city, where impersonating a voter is easier than in the countryside, polling agents were by no means slow to challenge a voter whose identity they had any doubts about, and they generally kept election officials and each other close to the letter of the law. The outside workers assigned to bring the voters to the polls operated systematically and even aggressively on occasion. In some constituencies there was open violation of the regulation against providing voters with a free ride to the polls.

In rural areas, where people know their neighbors and impersonation is less likely, the polling agents had less to do, and they looked it. They appeared generally not concerned with keeping an eye on voters or officials. As one polling agent explained, he was there "to see that there is no disturbance," a job which eight constables were there to see to.

All in all, however, there seems to be a high degree of confidence that the election was on the level. (An election contest could be tipped by an inside job of ballot-stuffing or -removal by someone in the official party, or by the outside job of paying voters to bring their ballots with them outside the polling station, then sending a voting accomplice to the polls to "cast" all the bought ballots. In most cases, simple bribery and impersonation is pretty risky.) The fact is that there is no serious talk about irregularities, as far as I can tell.

I had hoped to be able to go around and try to find out why people vote for a certain candidate, or against one. I was prepared to get the short answer ("He's an honest man") more often than the long answer (the appeal of the candidate in the whole matrix---social, cultural, religious, economic, political---of the voter's mind). But there were, in addition to my ignorance and ineptitude, other obstacles in the way, including my being mistaken for "a presiding officer," "a missionary" and "a Russian." The best I can do is relate some impressions.

One impression is that the voter, in considering whom he'll vote for as MLA, is less concerned about party affiliation than I had imagined would be the case. "He is a good man" or "I know him" or "He has made sacrifices for the people" or "He will try to help us" was often the first reason given to the question "Why did you vote for him?" Voters told me they were supporting an ex-Communist-turned-independent or an ex-independent-turned-Jan Sangh or an ex-Congressman-turned-independent without suffering from the sense of confusion that the parties (and to a lesser extent, the candidates themselves) go through.

"Yes, the Congress has made independence and the Five-Year Plan," a motor mechanic in the town told me. "But the lower Congress workers are no good." What was wrong with the Congress candidate, the sitting MLA? "We are angry because he has done nothing for us. One time the people came to him on the roadside and demanded a little irrigation ditch. He did not get it for them." Would his candidate get it for them? A quick wag of the head---he didn't know. "He sacrifices everything for the people." How? "He has no wife or family, only living by himself. He visits people and helps them..."

A hakim, a doctor outside those known as "practitioners of modern medicine," said he was not going to vote for a certain sitting MLA. "He is a proud fellow," he said. "Once he won the seat he no longer heard us. One time he rode into one of the villages on an elephant. The villagers came to garland him. They asked him, 'Tell the driver to let you down. We want to garland you.' He said, 'No. If you want to garland me, come up here!' He is a proud fellow who has done nothing these five years." Whom would the hakim vote for? "The young man. He is a good boy, well qualified, with education and good behavior."

Other things being equal, however, it seems that the Congress' national prestige helped a Congress candidate. A young mother, a refugee from Pakistan, told me she voted for the Congress because "they gave me a house and food," that is, she was a beneficiary of the Government's refugee-rehabilitation program. Although she had just come from the polling station, she could not name any of the candidates, including the Congressmen.

A young lawyer ranked the MLA candidates in his constituency according to their personal ability. The Communist was first, the Congressman was second, and the others were of no account. Whom would he vote for? "For the Congress. Shanti (the Communist) is my colleague. I love him. But I cannot vote for the Communist programme. For what I feel about the way India must grow, Congress is the only party."

In general, it seemed, voters found great difficulty in relating what the candidates and their supporters had told them during the campaign. In some cases it was a matter of voters being unable to express themselves in narration, but in other cases it was likely that the campaigners hadn't made much of a dent.

Among the usually subsurface factors that impinge on a voters' decision is caste, now officially on the way out as a discriminatory element in Indian life. For me it is very difficult to find out anything significant about caste, or to ask what you might call a "caste question." Hackles rise, the chill sets in.

A young law student who was serving as interpreter one afternoon finally burst out, "These people aren't telling you anything about why they're really voting the way they do! "Look!" he said, and he ran through my list of candidates. "The Congressman is a Jat (a large agricultural sub-caste in the area). The Praja Socialist is a Jat. The independent is a brahmin. The Jan Sangh is a Jain. Now, the Jats are very populous here---you watch them vote for their own sub-caste! The brahmins will vote for their independent, and they'll vote for this Jan Sangh MP candidate---he's a brahmin too."

I was quite impressed with this analysis. The only thing is that according to the results of the polling, the brahmin MLA candidate was elected by a huge majority, with the obvious help of a lot of Jat voters. Now I am wondering if the Jats, in "forsaking" the Jat candidates, voted for the brahmin because he represents traditional leadership. Is caste a factor? And how do you tell a factor from a dependable factor?

On other matters---age, sex, education, family, occupation---I got few satisfactory indications. Tentatively, it seems safe to say that

education is respected, that "good family" is a considerable advantage, and that there is little stated objection to candidates on account of their being young or old or female. "Service" and "sacrifice" are prized, but the old, pre-Independence, agitational kind of "sacrifice" is giving way, in the minds of some voters, to a new, post-Independence, constructive kind of "service."

Non-voters were hard to find. It's a bit unpatriotic not to vote. The usual explanation---"The Congress will win, anyway"---is more sheepish than cynical.

What is going on in these elections? I think it's a little bald to say that the Indian people, having won their independence, are again electing their representatives.

I am impressed by the great gap that separates the leaders of this nation and the mass of people whom they lead. In a sense, the elected representatives of India are not thrust up from the people and given powers by them to govern them, the theory of parliamentary democracy and the Constitution of India to the contrary notwithstanding.

On the contrary, the elected representatives of India are the representatives of the top-most leaders who extend them downward to the people. I have the feeling, for example, that the average MP is by far closer to Nehru than he is to his constituents.

But there is nothing sinister about this. The happy thing is that the leaders of India seem firmly dedicated to touching the people with their ideals and hopes and expectations, to lift them up to a higher level, a fuller life. Isn't that pretty rare in the world these days?

There is an occasional person who says, "Universal suffrage is a mistake in our country. It's like giving a loaded pistol to a child!"

Maybe. So they are an "uninformed electorate"! So they don't know the issues! So what? For now, it's enough that they can vote, that they've been asked for their vote, that they want to vote, that they are electing representatives, that they are beginning to take a hand in governing themselves.

Politics may be complex, and government may be difficult, but freedom is easy.