THE BIGGEST GAMBLE IN HISTORY

We are little men serving great causes, but because the cause is great, something of that greatness falls upon us also.

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU, 1946

India means only two things to us – famines and Nehru.

American journalist, 1951

I

IN THE FIRST YEARS of freedom, the ruling Congress Party faced threats from without, and within. As rebels against the Raj the nationalists had been sacrificing idealists, but as governors they came rather to enjoy the fruits of office.As a veteran Madras journalist put it, 'in the post-Gandhian war for power the first casualty is decency'.[1] *Time* magazine commented that after independence was achieved, the Congress 'found itself without a unifying purpose. It grew fat and lazy, today harbors many time-serving office-holders [and] not a few black-marketeers'.[2] An influential Bombay weekly remarked that 'from West Bengal to Uttar Pradesh, along the Gangetic Valley, the Congress is split. The old glamour of the premier political organization is fading, factions are becoming more acute and the party's unpopularity is increasing.'[3]

There were party factions at the district level, as well as at the provincial level. However, the most portentous of the cleavages was between the two biggest stalwarts, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. These two men, prime minister and deputy prime minister respectively, had major differences in the first months following Independence. Gandhi's death made them come to gether again. But in 1949 and 1950 the differences resurfaced.

In character and personality Nehru and Patel were certainly a study in contrast. The prime minister was a Brahmin from an upper-class background whose father had also been a prominent figure in the nationalist movement. His deputy, on the other hand, was from a farming caste, and a descendant of a sepoy mutineer of 1857. Nehru loved good food and wine, appreciated fine art and literature and had travelled widely abroad. Patel was anon-smoker, vegetarian, teetotaller, and, on the whole, 'a hard task master with little time for play'. He got up at 4 a.m., attended to his correspondence for an hour and then went for a walk through the dimly lit streets of New Delhi. Besides, 'a grave exterior and a cold and cynical physiognomy [made] the Sardar areally tough personality'. In the words of the *New York* Times,hewas 'leather tough'.

There were also similarities. Both Nehru and Patel had a daughter as their housekeeper, companion and chief confidante. Both were politicians of a conspicuous integrity. And both were fierce patriots. But their ideas did not always mesh. As one observer rather delicately put it, 'the opposition of the Sardar to the leftist elements in the country is one of the major problems of political adjustment facing India'. He meant here that Patel was friendly with capitalists while Nehru believed in state control of the economy; that Patel was more inclined to support the West in the emerging Cold

War; and that Patel was more forgiving of Hindu extremism and harsher on Pakistan.[4]

In late 1949 Nehru and Patel had a major disagreement. In the New Year, India would transform itself froma 'dominion', where the British monarch was head of state, to a full-fledged republic. Nehru thought that when the governor generalship became a presidency, the incumbent, C. Rajagopalachari, should retain the job. 'Rajaji' was an urbanes cholar with whom the prime minister then got along very well. Patel, however, preferred Rajendra Prasad, who was close to him but who also had wider acceptance within the Congress Party. Nehru had assured Rajaji that he would be president, but much to his annoyance, and embarrassment, Patel got the Congress rank-and-file to put Prasad's name forward instead.[5]

The original date of Indian independence, 26 January, was chosen as the first Republic Day. The new head of state, Rajendra Prasad, took the salute in what was to become an annual and ever more spectacular parade. Three thousand men of the armed forces marched before the president. The artillery fired a thirty-one-gun salute while Liberator planes of the Indian air force flew overhead. Gandhi's India was announcing itself as a sovereign nation-state.[6]

Round one had gone to Patel. A few months later commenced round two, the battle for the presidency of the Indian National Congress. For this post Patel had put forward Purushottamdas Tandon, a veteran of the Congress from the United Provinces, indeed, from the prime minister's own home town of Allahabad. Tandon and Nehru were personal friends, but hardly ideological bedfellows, for the presidential candidate was 'a bearded, venerable orthodox Hindu . . . who admirably represented the extreme communalist wing of the [Congress] party'. He was, in sum, 'a personification of political and social anachronisms', an 'anti-Muslim and pro-caste Hindu who stood for 'the resurrection of a dead culture and along extinct system of society'.[7]

Nehru had previously criticized Tandon for his desire to impose Hindi on regions of India which did not know the language. He was particularly upset when his fellow Allahabadi addressed a conference of refugees and spoke of revenge against Pakistan. India, believed Nehru, needed the healing touch, a policy of reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims. The election of Tandon as the president of the premier political party, the prime minister sown party, would send all the wrong signals.

When the election for the Congress presidency was held in August 1950 Tandon won comfortably. Nehru now wrote to Rajagopalachari that the result was 'the clearest of indications that Tandon's election is considered more important than my presence in the Govt or the Congress . . . All my instincts tell me that Ihave completely exhausted my utility both in the Congress and Govt'. The next day he wrote again to Rajaji, saying, 'I am feeling tired out – physically and mentally. Ido not think I can function with any satisfaction to myself in future.'[8]

Rajaji now tried to work out a compromise between the two factions. Patel was amenable, suggesting a joint statement under both their names, where he and Nehru would proclaim their adherence to certain fundamentals of Congress policy. The prime minister, however, decided to go it alone. After two weeks of contemplation he had decided to exchange resignation for truculence. On 13 September 1950 he issued a statement to the press deploring the fact that 'communalist and reactionary forces have openly expressed their joy at Tandon's victory. He was distressed, he said, that the 'spirit of communalism and revivalism has gradually invaded the Congress, and sometimes affects Government policy'. But, unlike Pakistan, India was a secular state. 'We have to treat our minorities in exactly the same way as we treat the majority', insisted Nehru. 'Indeed, fair treatment is not enough; we have to make them feel that they are so treated. Now, 'in view of the prevailing confusion and the threat of false doctrine, it has become essential that the Congress should declare its

policy in this matter in the clearest and most unambiguous terms.'[9]

Nehru felt that it was the responsibility of the Congress and the government to make the Muslims in India feel secure. Patel, on the other hand, was inclined to place the responsibility on the minorities themselves. He had once told Nehru that the 'Muslims citizens in India have a responsibility to remove the doubts and misgivings entertained by a large section of the people about their loyalty founded largely on their past association with the demand for Pakistan and the unfortunate activities of some of them.'[10]

On the minorities question, as on other matters of philosophy and policy, Nehru and Patel would never completely see eye to eye. Now, however, in the aftermath of the bitter contest for the Congress presidency, the older man did not press the point. For Patel knew that the destruction of their party might very well mean the destruction of India. He thus told Congress members who visited him to 'do what Jawaharlal says' and to 'pay no attention to this controversy'. On 2 October, while inaugurating a women's centre in Indore, he used the occasion of Gandhi's birth anniversary to affirm his loyalty to the prime minister. He described himself in his speech as merely one of the many non-violent soldiers in Gandhi's army. Now that the Mahatma was gone, 'Jawaharlal Nehru is our leader, said Patel. 'Bapu [Gandhi] appointed him as his successor and had even proclaimed him as such. It is the duty of all Bapu's soldiers to carry out his bequest . . . I am not a disloyal soldier.'[11]

Such is the evidence placed before us by Patel's biographer, Rajmohan Gandhi. It confirms in fact what Nehru's biographer (Sarvepalli Gopal) had expressed in feeling: that what forestalled 'an open rupture [between the two men] was mutual regard and Patel's stoic decency'.[12] Patel remembered his promise to Gandhi to work along with Jawaharlal. And by the time of the controversy over the Congress presidency he was also a very sick man. It was from his bed that he sent a congratulatory handwritten letter to Nehru on his birthday, 14 November. A week later, when the prime minister visited him at his home, Patel said: 'I want totalk to you alone when I get a little strength . . . I have a feeling that you are losing confidence in me.' 'I have been losing confidence in myself, answered Nehru.[13]

Three weeks later Patel was dead. It fell to the prime minister to draft the Cabinet Resolution mourning his passing. Nehru singled out his devotion to a 'united and strong India', and his 'genius in solving the complicated problem of the princely states. To Nehru, Patel was both comrade and rival; butto their compatriots he was 'an unmatched warrior in the cause of freedom, a lover of India, a great servant of the people and a statesman of genius and mighty achievement'. [14]

II

Vallabhbhai Patel's death in December 1950 removed the one Congress politician who was of equal standing to Nehru. No longer were there two power centres within India's ruling party. However, the prime minister still had to contend with two somewhat lesser rivals; the president of the Congress, Purushottamdas Tandon, and the president of the republic, Rajendra Prasad. Nehru's biographer says of Prasad that he was 'prominent in the ranks of medievalism'.[15] That judgement is perhaps excessively harsh on a patriot who had sacrificed much in the cause of Indian freedom. Nonetheless, it was clear that the prime minister and the president differed on some crucial subjects, such as the place of religion in public life.

These differences came to a head in the spring of 1951 when the president was asked to inaugurate the newly restored Somnath temple in Gujarat. Once fabled for its wealth, Somnath had

been raided several times by Muslim chiefs, including the notorious eleventh-century marauder Mahmud of Ghazni. Each time the temple was razedit was rebuilt. Then the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb ordered its total destruction. It lay in ruinsfor two and a half centuries until Sardar Patel himself visited it in September 1947 and promised help in its reconstruction. Patel's colleague K. M. Munshi then took charge of the rebuilding.[16]

When the president of India chose to dignify the temple's consecration with his presence, Nehru was appalled. He wrote to Prasad advising him not to participate in the 'spectacular opening of the Somnath temple [which] . . . unfortunately has a number of implications. Personally, I thought that this was no time to lay stress on large-scale building operations at Somnath. This could have been done gradually and more effectively later. However, this has been done. [Still] Ifeel that it would be better if you did not preside over this function.'[17]

Prasad disregarded the advice and went to Somnath. To his credit, however, his speech there stressed the Gandhian ideal of inter-faith harmony. True, he nostalgically evoked a Golden Age when the gold in India's temples symbolized great wealth and prosperity. The lesson from Somnath's later history, however, was that 'religious intolerance only foments hatred and immoral conduct'. By the same token, the lesson of its reconstruction was not to 'open old wounds, which have healed to some extent over the centuries', but rather to 'help each caste and community to obtain full freedom'. Calling for 'complete religious tolerance, the president urged his audience to 'try to understand the great essence of religion', namely, 'that it is not compulsory to follow a single path to realize Truth and God'. For 'just as all the rivers mingle together in the vast ocean, similarly different religions help men to reach God'.[18]

One does not know whether Nehru read the speech. In any case, he would have preferred Prasad not to go at all. The prime minister thought that public officials should never *publicly* associate with faiths and shrines. The president, on the other hand, believed that it should be equally and publicly respectful of all. Although he was a Hindu, said Prasadat Somnath, 'I respect all religions and on occasion visit a church, a mosque, a *dargah* and a *gurdwara*'.

Meanwhile, the growing Hindu tint of the Congress had led to the departure of some of its most effervescent leaders. Already in 1948 a group of brilliant young Congress members had left to start the Socialist Party. Now, in June1951, the respected Gandhian J. B. Kripalani left to form his Kisan Majdoor Praja Party (KMPP), which, as its name indicated, stood for the interests of farmers, workers and other toiling people. Like the Socialists, Kripalani claimed that the Congress under Purushottamdas Tandon had become a deeply conservative organization.

As it happened, the formation of the KMPP strengthened Nehru's hand against Tandon. The Congress, he could now say, had to move away from the reactionary path it had recently adopted and reclaim its democratic and inclusive heritage. In September, when the All-India Congress Committee met in Bangalore, Nehru forced a showdown with Tandon and his supporters. The rank and file of the party was increasingly concerned with the upcoming general election. And, as a southern journalist pointed out, it was clear that the AICC would back the prime minister against Tandon, if only because 'the Congress President is no vote-getter'. By contrast, 'Pandit Nehru is unequalled as a vote-catcher. On the eve of the general elections it is the votes that count and Pandit Nehru has a value to the Congress which none else possesses'.[19]

That indeed, is what happened in Bangalore, where Tandon resigned as president of the Congress, with Nehru being elected in his place. As head of both party and government, 'Nehru could now wage full war against all communal elements in the country'.[20] The first battle in this war would be the general election of 1952.

III

India's first general election was, among other things, an act of faith. A newly independent country chose to move straight into universal adult suffrage, rather than – as had been the case in the West – at first reserve the right to vote to men of property, with the working class and women excluded from the franchise until much later. India became free in August 1947, and two years later set up an Election Commission. In March 1950 Sukumar Sen was appointed chief election commissioner. The next month the Representation of the People Act was passed in Parliament. While proposing the Act, the prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, expressed the hope that elections would be held as early as the spring of 1951.

Nehru's haste was understandable, but it was viewed with some alarm by the man who had to make the election possible. It is a pity we know so little about Sukumar Sen. He left no memoirs and few papers either. Born in 1899, he was educated at Presidency College and at London University, where he was awarded a gold medal in mathematics. He joined the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in 1921 and served in various districts and as a judge before being appointed chief secretary of West Bengal, from where he was sent on deputation as chief election commissioner.

It was perhaps the mathematician in Sen which made him ask the prime minister to wait. For no officer of state, certainly no Indian official, has ever had such as tupendous task placed in front of him. Consider, first of all, the size of the electorate: 176 million Indians aged twenty-one or more, of whom about 85 per cent could not read or write. Each one had to be identified, named and registered. The registration of voters was merely the first step. For how did one design party symbols, ballot papers and ballot boxes for a mostly unlettered electorate? Then, sites for polling stations had to be identified, and honest and efficient polling officers recruited. Moreover, concurrent with the general election would be elections to the state assemblies. Working with Sukumar Sen in this regard were the election commissioners of the different provinces, also usually ICS men.

The polls were finally scheduled for the first months of 1952, although some outlying districts would vote earlier. An American observer justly wrote that the mechanics of the election'presenta problem of colossal proportions'.[21] Some numbers will help us understand the scale of Sen's enterprise. At stake were 4,500 seats – about 500 for Parliament, the rest for the provincial assemblies. 224,000 polling booths were constructed, and equipped with 2million steel ballotboxes, to make which 8,200 tonnes ofsteel were consumed; 16,500 clerks were appointed on six-month contracts to type and collate the electoral rolls by constituency;about 380,000 reams of paper wereused for printing the rolls; 56,000 presiding officers were chosen to supervise the voting, these aided by another 280,000 helpers; 224,000 policemen were puton duty to guard against violence and intimidation.

The election and the electorate were spread over an area of more than a million square miles. The terrain was huge, diverse and – for the exercise at hand – sometimes horrendously difficult. In the case of remote hill villages, bridges had to be specially constructed across rivers; in the case of small islands in the Indian Ocean,naval vessels were used to take the rolls to the booths. A second problem was social rather than geographical: the diffidence of many women in northern India to give their own names, instead of which they wished to register themselves as A's mother or B's wife.Sukumar Sen was outraged by this practice, a 'curious senseless relic of the past', and directed his officials to correct the rolls by inserting the names of the women 'in the place of mere descriptions of such voters'. Nonetheless, some 2.8 million women voters had finally to be struck off the list. The

resulting furore over their omission was considered by Sen to be a 'good thing', for it would help the prejudice vanish before the next elections, by which time the women could be reinstated under their own names.

Where in Western democracies most voters could recognize the parties by name, here pictorial symbols were used to make their task easier. Drawn from daily life, these symbols were easily recognizable: a pair of bullocks for one party, a hut for a second, an elephant for a third, an earthenware lamp for a fourth. A second innovation was the use of multiple ballot boxes. On a single ballot, the (mostly illiterate) Indian elector might make a mistake; thus each party had a ballot box wit hits symbol marked in each polling station, so that voters could simply drop their paper in it. To avoid impersonation, Indian scientists had developed a variety of indelible ink which, applied on the voter's finger, stayed there for a week. A total of 389,816 phials of this ink were used in the election.[22]

Throughout 1951 the Election Commission used the media of film and radio to educate the public about this novel exercise in democracy. A documentary on the franchise and its functions, and the duties of the electorate, was shown in more than 3,000 cinemas. Many more Indians were reached via All-India Radio, which broadcast numerous programmes on the constitution, the purpose of adult franchise, the preparation of electoral rolls and the process of voting.[23]

IV

It is instructive to reflect on the international situation in the months leading up to India's first general election. Elsewhere in Asia the French were fighting the Viet-Minh and UN troops were thwarting a North Korean offensive. In South Africa the Afrikaner National Party had disenfranchised the Cape Coloureds, the last non-white group to have the vote. America had just tested its first hydrogen bomb; Maclean and Burgess had just defected to Russia. The year had witnessed three political assassinations: of the king of Jordan, of the prime minister of Iran and of the prime minister of Pakistan, Liaqat Ali Khan, shot dead on 16 October 1951, nine days before the first votes were cast in India.

Most interestingly, the polls in India were to coincide with a general election in the United Kingdom. The old warhorse Winston Churchill was seeking to bring his Conservatives back into power. In the UK the election was basically a two-party affair. In India, however, there was a dazzling diversity of parties and leaders. In power was Jawaharlal Nehru's Indian National Congress, the chief legatee and beneficiary of the freedom movement. Opposing it were a variety of new parties formed by some greatly gifted individuals.

Prominent among parties of the left were J. B. Kripalani's KMPP and the Socialist Party, whose leading lights included the young hero of the Quit India rebellion of 1942, Jayaprakash Narayan. These parties accused the Congress of betraying its commitment to the poor. They claimed to stand for the ideals of the old 'Gandhian' Congress, which had placed the interests of workers and peasants before those of landlords and capitalists.[24] A different kind of critique was offered by the Jana Sangh, which sought to consolidate India's largest religious grouping, the Hindus, into one solid voting bloc. The party's aims were well expressed in the symbolism of its inaugural meeting, held in New Delhi on 21 September 1951. The session began with a recitation from the Vedas and a singing of the patriotic hymn 'Vande Matram'. On the rostrum, the party's founder, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, sat along with other leaders, behind them a

white background [with] pictures of Shivaji, Lord Krishna persuading the remorse-striken Arjunato take up arms to fight the evil forces of the Kauravas on the battle-field of Kurukshetra,Rana Pratap Singh and of an earthen deepak [lamp], in saffron. From the Pandal was hung banners inscribed with 'Sangh Shakth Kali Yuge', adictum taken from [the] Mahabharata, professing to tell the people who attended the convention that in the age of Kali there was force only in [Jana] Sangh.[25]

The imagery was striking: taken from the Hindu epics but also invoking those Hindu warriors who had later fought the Muslim invader. But who, one wonders, represented the evil enemy, the Kauravas? Was it Pakistan, the Muslims, Jawaharlal Nehru or the Congress Party? All figuredas hate objects in the speeches of the Sangh's leaders. The party stood for the reunification of the motherland through the absorption (or perhaps conquest) of Pakistan. It suspected the Indian Muslims as a problem minority, which had 'not yet learnt to own this land and its culture and treat them as their first love'. The Congress Party was accused of 'appeasing' these uncertainly patriotic Muslims.[26]

S. P. Mukherjee had once been a member of the Union Cabinet. So had B. R. Ambedkar, the great Untouchable lawyer who, as the Union's law minister, helped draft the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar had resigned from office to revive the Scheduled Caste Federation in time for the election. In his speeches he sharply attacked the Congress government for doing little to uplift the lower castes. Freedom had meant no change for these peoples: it was 'the same old tyranny, the same old oppression, the same old discrimination. . .' After freedom was won, said Ambedkar, the Congress had degenerated into a *dharamsala* or rest-home, without any unity of purpose or principles, and 'open to all, fools and knaves, friends and foes, communalists and secularists, reformers and orthodox and capitalists and anti-capitalists' [27]

Still further to the left was the Communist Party of India. As we have seen, in 1948 many activists of the CPI had gone underground to lead a peasant insurrection that they hoped would fructify into a countrywide revolutionary upsurge on the Chinese model. But the police and in some places the army had cracked down hard. So the communists came overground in time to fight the election. The Telengana struggle, said the party's general secretary, had been withdrawn 'unconditionally'. A temporary amnesty was granted and the militants put away their arms and went seeking votes. This abrupt change of roles produced dilemmas no text by Marx or Lenin could help resolve. Thus a woman communist standing for a seat in Bengal was not sure whether to wear crumpled saris, which would certify her identity with the poor, or wash and iron them, to better appeal to the middle-class audience. And a parliamentary candidate in Telengana (where the peasant revolt had been at its most intense) recalled his confusion at being offered a drink by a senior official: he said 'yes', and gulped down the offering, only to be hit by a 'reeling sensation' in his head as it turned out to be whisky rather than fruit juice.[28]

The election campaign of 1951–2 was conducted through large public meetings, door-to-door canvassing, and the use of visual media. 'At the height of election fever', wrote a British observer, 'posters and emblems were profuse everywhere – on walls, at street corners, even decorating the statues in New Delhi and defying the dignity of a former generation of Viceroys'. A novel method of advertising was on display in Calcutta, where stray cows had 'Vote Congress' written on their backs in Bengali. [29]

Speeches and posters were used by all parties, but only the communists had access to the airwaves. Not those transmitted by All-India Radio, which had banned party propaganda, but of Moscow Radio, which relayed its programmes via stations in Tashkent. Indian listeners could, if they

wished, hear how the non-communist parties in the election were 'corrupt stooges of Anglo-American imperialists and oppressors of the workers'.[30] For the literate, a Madras weekly had helpfully translated an article from *Pravda* which called the ruling Congress 'a government of landowners and monopolists, a government of national betrayers, truncheons and bullets', and announced that the alternative for the 'long-suffering, worn-out Indian people was the Communist Party, around which 'all progressive forces of the country, everyone who cherishes the vital interests of his fatherland, are grouping'.[31]

Adding to the list (and interest, and excitement) were regional parties based on affiliations of ethnicity and religion. These included the Dravida Kazhagam in Madras, which stood for Tamil pride against northIndian domination; the Akalis in Punjab, who were the main party of the Sikhs; and the Jharkhand Party in Bihar, which wanted a separate state for tribal people. There were also numerous splinter groupings of the left, as well as two Hindu parties more orthodox than the Jana Sangh: the Hindu Mahasabha and the Ram Rajya Parishad.

The leaders of these parties all had years of political service behind them. Some had gone to jail in the nationalist cause; others in the communist cause. Men like S. P. Mookerjee and Jayaprakash Narayan were superb orators, with the ability to enchant a crowd and make it fall in line behind them. On the eve of the election the political scientist Richard Park wrote that 'the leading Indian parties and party workers are surpassed by those of no other country in electioneering skill, dramatic presentation of issues, political oratory, or mastery of political psychology'.[32]

Some might celebrate this diversity as proof of the robustness of the democratic process. Others were not so sure. Thus a cartoon strip in *Shankar's Weekly* lampooned the hypocrisy of the vote-gathering exercise. It showed a fat man in a black coat canvassing among different groups of voters. He told an emaciated farmer that 'land for peasants is my aim'. He assured a well-dressed young man that 'landlords' rights will be protected'. At one place he said that he was 'all for nationalization'; at another he insisted that he would 'encourage private enterprise'. He told a lady in a sari that he stood for the Hindu Code Bill (a reform aimed principally at enhancing the rights of women), but said to a Brahmin with a pigtail that he would 'safeguard our Ancient Culture'.[33]

V

These varied parties all had one target: the ruling Congress. Its leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, had just survived a challenge to his leadership of the party. With the death of Vallabhbhai Patel he was also the dominant presence within the government. But he faced problems aplenty. These included angry refugees from East and West Pakistan, not yet settled in their new homes. The Andhras in the south and the Sikhs in the north were getting restive. The Kashmir question was, in the eyes of the world, still unresolved. And Independence had not as yet made any dent in the problems of poverty and inequality: a state of affairs for which, naturally, the ruling party was likely to be held responsible.

One way of telling the story of the election campaign is through newspaper headlines. These makeinteresting reading,notleast because the issuesthey flag have remained at the forefront of Indian elections ever since. 'MINISTERS FACE STIFF OPPOSITION' read a headline from Uttar Pradesh. 'CASTE RIVALRIES WEAKEN BIHAR CONGRESS', read another. From the north-eastern region came this telling line: 'AUTONOMY DEMAND IN MANIPUR'. From Gauhati came this one: 'CONGRESS PROSPECTS IN ASSAM: IMPORTANCEOF MUSLIM AND TRIBAL VOTE'. Gwalior offered 'DISCONTENT AMONG CONGRESSMEN: LIST OF NOMINEES CREATES

WIDER SPLIT'. A Calcutta headline ran: 'W. BENGAL CONGRESS CHIEF BOOED AT MEETING' (the hecklers being refugees from East Pakistan). 'NO HOPES OF FREE AND FAIR ELECTION', started a story datelined Lucknow: this being the verdict of J. B. Kripalani, who claimed that state officials would rig the polls in favour of the ruling party. And the city of Bombay offered, at three different moments in the campaign, these more-or-less timeless headlines: 'CONGRESS BANKS ON MUSLIM SUPPORT'; 'CONGRESS APATHY TOWARDS SCHEDULED CASTES: CHARGES REITERATED BY DR AMBEDKAR'; and 'FOURTEEN HURT IN CITY ELECTION CLASH'. But there was also the occasional headline that was of its time butemphatically not of ours -notably the one in the *Searchlight* of Patna which claimed: 'PEACEFUL VOTING HOPED [FOR] IN BIHAR'.

Faced with wide-ranging opposition from outside, and with some dissidence within his own party, Jawaharlal Nehru took to the road – and on occasion the plane and the train as well. From 1 October he commenced a tour which a breathless party functionary later described as comparable to the 'imperial campaigns of Samudragupta, Asoka and Akbar' as well as to the 'travel[s] of Fahien andHieun Tsang'. In the space of nine weeks Nehru covered the country from end to end. He travelled 25,000 miles in all: 18,000 by air, 5,200 by car, 1,600 by train, and even 90 by boat.[34]

Nehru kicked off his party's campaign with a speech in the Punjab town of Ludhiana on Sunday 30 September. The choice of venue was significant: as was the thrust of his talk, which declared 'an all-out war against communalism'. He 'condemned the communal bodies which in the name of Hindu and Sikh culture were spreading the virus of communalism as the Muslim League once did'. These 'sinister communal elements would if they came to power 'bring ruin and death to the country'. He asked his audience of half a million to instead 'keep the windows of our mind open and let in fresh breeze from all corners of the world'.

The sentiment was Gandhi-like, and indeed Nehru's next major speech was delivered in Delhi on the afternoon of 2 October, the Mahatma's birthday. To a mammoth crowd he spoke in Hindustani about the government's determination to abolish both untouchability and landlordism. Once more he identified communalists as the chief enemies, who 'will be shown no quarter', and 'overpowered with all our strength'. His 95-minute speech was punctuated by loud cheers, not least when he made this ringing declaration: 'If any person raises his hand to strike down another on the ground of religion, I shall fight him till the last breath of my life, both at the head of the Government and from outside.'

Wherever he went Nehru spoke out strongly against communalism. In S. P. Mookerjee's native Bengal he dismissed the Jana Sangh as the 'illegitimate child of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha'. To be sure, he touched on other themes as well. In Bihar he deplored the 'monster of casteism'. In Bombay he reminded his audience that a vote for Congress was also a vote for its foreign policy of principled neutralism. In Bharatpur and Bilaspur he deplored the impatience of his left-wing critics, whose ends he shared but not their means: as he put it, 'we can build the edifice of Socialism brick by brick only'. In Ambala he asked the women to cast off their purdahs and 'come forward to build the country'. In many places he expressed his admiration for the best among his opposition: for men such as Ambedkar, Kripalani, and Jayaprakash Narayan, who had once been his colleagues in the party or in government. 'We want a number of [such] men with ability and integrity', he said. 'They are welcome. But all of them are pulling in different directions and doing nothing in the end'. He was particularly sorry to find himself in opposition to the Socialist Party, which, he said, 'contains some of my old intimate friends whom I admire and respect'. These sentiments were not shared by his daughter, Indira Gandhi, who in her own speeches alleged that the socialists were funded by

American dollars.[35]

In the course of his campaign Nehru 'travelled more than he slept and talked more than he travelled'. He addressed 300 mass meetings and myriad way side ones. He spoke to about 20 million people directly, while an equal number merely had his *darshan*, eagerly flanking the roads to see him as his car whizzed past. Those who heard and saw Nehru included miners, peasants, pastoralists, factory workers and agricultural labourers. Women of all classes turned out in numbers for his meetings. Sometimes there was a sprinkling of hostiles among the crowd. In parts of northern India Jana Sangh supporters shouted out at Nehru's rallies that he was not tobe trusted because he ate beef. Coming across a group of communists waving the hammer and sickle, Nehru asked them to 'go and live in the country whose flag you are carrying'. 'Why don t you go to New York and live with the Wall Street imperialists?' they shot back.[36]

But for the most part the people who came to hear Nehru were sympathetic, and often adulatory. This summation by a Congress booklet exaggerates, but not by very much:

> [At] almost every place, city, town, village or wayside halt, people hadwaited overnight to welcome the nation's leader. Schools and shops closed: milkmaids and cowherds had taken a holiday; the kisan and his helpmate took a temporary respite from their dawn-to-dusk programme of hard work in field and home. In Nehru's name, stocks of soda and lemonadesold out; even water became scarce . . . Special trains were run from out-of-the-way places to carry people to Nehru's meetings, enthusiasts travelling not only on foot-boards but also on top of carriages. Scores of people fainted in milling crowds.[37]

The independent press provided many instances of the popular mood. When Nehru spoke in Bombay, a procession, mainly of Muslims, marched to Chowpatty to the accompaniment of pipes and cymbals. It was headed by a pair of bullocks and a plough (the Congress symbol). Everywhere, crowds started collecting from early morning for talks scheduled for the afternoon; almost everywhere, barricades were broken in 'the enthusiasm to catch a glimpse of Mr Nehru'. After he finished his speech in Delhi, Nehru was met as he came off the dais by a famous wrestler, Massu Pahalwan, who offered him a gold chain and remarked, 'This is only a token. I am prepared to give my life for you and the country. The media was much taken with a Telugu-speaking woman who went to listen to Nehru speak in the railway town of Kharagpur. As the prime minister lectured on she was consumed by labour pains. Immediately, a group of fellow Andhras made a ring around her: the baby was safely delivered, no doubt while the mid wives had an ear cocked to hear what their hero was saying.

The extraordinary popular appeal of the Indian prime minister is best captured in the testimony of the confirmed Nehru-baiter D. F. Karaka, editor of the popular Bombay weekly, the Current. He was in the vast crowd at Chowpatty beach, one of 200,000 people gathered there, many standing in the sea. Karaka noted – no doubt to his regret — 'the instant affinity between the speaker and his audience'. This is how the editor reported Nehru's speech:

> He had come to Bombay after along time, he told them. Many years.
>
> He paused and looked at them with that wistful look he specialises in. In that pause, ominous for his political opponents, a thousand votes must have swung in his favour.
>
> Yes, he felt a personal attachment to the city.
>
> Pause.

Two thousand votes. It was like coming home. Pause.

Five thousand votes.

In Bombay he had passed some of the happiest moments in his life. Yes, the happiest.

Five thousand votes . . .

He remembered those great moments so vividly. And some of the saddest moments too – the sad, hard days of the [freedom] struggle.

Ten thousand votes for the Congress.

Pause. 'By looking at the people who have struggled together with me in the fight for freedom, I derive freedomand strength,' he said.

The affinity was complete.

Twenty thousand votes!

Pause.

A deep, sorrowful, soulful look in the fading twilight hour; with the air pregnant with emotion . . . He told the gathering that he had taken upon himself the role of a mendicant beggar. Amidst cheers, he said: 'If at all I am abeggar, I am begging for your love, your affection and your enlightened co-operation in solving the problems which face the country'.

Thirty thousand votes were sure for Nehru.

Pause.

Astir in the audience. A tear on the face of the man or woman sitting on the beach or standing on the shore.Two tears, a sari-end wiping them gently off awoman's face. She would give her vote to Nehru no matter what anyone else said. Memories of Gandhi came back to the people – the days when Nehru stood beside the Mahatma. Nehru . . . was the man he left to us as his political heir.

Fifty thousand votes! a hundred thousand! Two hundred thousand![38]

The crowds were moved by Nehru; and he, in turn, was moved by them. His own feelings are best captured in a letter he wrote to one who with both delicacy and truth can be referred to as his closest lady friend, Edwina Mountbatten:

> Wherever I have been, vast multitudes gather at my meetings and I love to compare them, their faces, their dress, their reactions to me and what I say. Scenes from past history of that very part of India rise up before me and my mind becomes a picture gallery of past events. But, more than the past, the present fills my mind and I try to probe into the minds and hearts of these multitudes. Having long been imprisoned in the Secretariat of Delhi, I rather enjoy these fresh contacts with the Indian people . . . The effort to explain in simple language our problems and our difficulties, and to reach the minds of these simple folk is both exhausting and exhilarating.
>
> As I wander about, the past and the present merge into one another and this merger leads me to think of the future. Time becomes like allowing river in continuous motion with events connected with one another.[39]

VI

One place even Nehru didn't get to was the *tahsil* of Chini in Himachal Pradesh. Here resided the

first Indians to cast votes in a general election, a group of Buddhists. They voted on 25 October 1951, days before the winter snows shut their valleys from the world. The villagers of Chini owed allegiance to the Panchen Lama in Tibet, and were ruled by rituals administered by local priests. These included *gorasang*, a religious service to celebrate the completion of a new house; *kangur* zalmo,a ceremonial visit to the Buddhist library at Kanam; *menthako*, 'where men, women, and children climb hills, dance and sing'; and *jokhiya chug simig*, the interchange of visits between relatives. Now, although they didn't as yet know it, was added a new ritual, to be performed at five-year intervals: voting in a general election.[40]

Polling began in the UK general election on the same day, although there the first voters were not Buddhist peasants in a Himalayan valley but 'milkmen, charwomen and all-night workers returning home from work'.[41] However, in those small islands the results of the election were known the following day – Labour had been swept out of power and Winston Churchill returned as prime minister. In India, the first voters had to wait months, for the rest of the country did not go to the polls until January and February 1952.

The highest turnout, 80.5 per cent, was recorded in the parliamentary constituency of Kottayam, in present-day Kerala; the lowest, 18.0, was in Shahdol in what is now Madhya Pradesh. For the country as a whole, about 60 per cent of registered voters exercised their franchise, this despite the high level of illiteracy. A scholar from the London School of Economics described how a young woman in Himachal walked several miles with herfrail mother to vote: 'for a day, at least, she knew she was important'.[42] A Bombay-based weekly marvelled at the high turnout in the forest districts ofOrissa, where tribals came to the booths with bows and arrows. One booth in the jungle reported more than 70 per cent voting; but evidently Sukumar Sen had got at least some things wrong, for the neighbouring booth was visited only by an elephant and two panthers.[43] The press highlighted the especially aged: a110-year-old man in Madurai who came propped up on either side by a great-grandson, a 95-year-old woman in Ambala, deaf and hunchbacked, who still turned up to vote. There was alsothe90-year-old Muslim in rural Assam who had to return disappointed after being told by the presiding officer that 'he could not vote for Nehru'. A nonagenarian in rural Maharashtra cast his vote for the Assembly election, but fell down and died before he could do the same for Parliament. And there was a vindication of Indian democracy in the electoral roll of Hyderabad, where among the first who voted was the Nizam himself.

One place in which there was especially brisk polling was Bombay. Delhi was where the rulers lived, but this island metropolis was India's financial capital. It was also a very politically aware city. Altogether, 900,000 residents of Bombay, or 70 per cent of the city's electorate, exercised their democratic right on election day. The workers came in far greater numbers as compared to the fashionable middle class. Thus, reported the *Times of India*, 'in the industrial areas voters formed long queues long before the polling stations opened, despite the particularly cold and dewy morning. In contrast to this, at the WIAA Club [in Malabar Hill], which housed two polling stations, it appeared as if people straggled in for a game of tennis or bridge and only incidentally to vote'.

The day after Bombay went to the polls it was the turn of the Mizo hills. With regard to both culture and geography there could not have been a greater contrast. Bombay had a great density of polling stations: 1,349 in all, packed into just 92 square miles; the Mizo, a tribal area bordering East Pakistan and Burma, required a mere 113 booths spread over more than 8,000 square miles of territory. The people who lived in these hills, said one scribe, 'have not known any queues hit her to except those in battle arrays'. But they had nonetheless 'taken a strong fancy' to the exercise, reaching their booths after walking for days on 'perilous tracks through wild jungles, camping at night on the

way amid song and community dances around the fire'. And so 92,000 Mizos, who 'have through the centuries decided an issue with their arrows and spears, came forward to give their decision for the first time through the medium of the ballot'.

An American woman photographer on assignment in Himachal Pradesh was deeply impressed by the commitment shown by the election officials. One official had walked for six days to attend the preparatory workshop organized by the district magistrate; another had ridden four days on a mule. They went back to their distant stations with sewn gunny sacks full of ballot boxes, ballots, party symbols and electoral lists. On election day the photographer chose to watch proceedings at an obscure hill village named Bhuti. Here the polling station was a school-house which had only one door. Since the rules prescribed a different entry and exit, a window had been converted into a door, with improvised steps on either side to allow the elderly and ailing to hop out after voting.[44]

At least in this first election, politicians and the public were both (to quote the chief election commissioner) 'essentially law-abiding and peaceful'. There were only 1,250 election offences reported. These included 817 cases of the 'impersonation of voters', 106 attempts to take ballot papers out of a polling station and 100 instances of 'canvassing within onehundred yards of a polling station', some of these last offences doubtless committed unknowingly by painted cows.[45]

VII

Polling for the general election ended in the last week of February 1952. When the votes were counted, the Congress had won comfortably. The party secured 364 out of 489 seats in Parliament and 2,247 out of 3,280 seats in the state assemblies. As critics of the Congress were quick to point out, the first-past-the-post system had produced a far from representative result. More than 50 per cent of the electorate had voted for non-Congress candidates or parties. For Parliament as a whole, Congress had polled 45 per cent of the vote and won 74.4 per cent of the seats; the corresponding figures for the states were 42.4 per cent and 68.6 per cent. Even so, twenty-eight Congress ministers had failed to win a seat. These included such men of influence as Jai Narayan Vyas, in Rajasthan, and Morarji Desai, in Bombay. More striking still was the fact that it was a communist, Ravi Narayan Reddy - hewho drank his first glass of whisky during the campaign — who achieved the largest majority, larger even than Jawaharlal Nehru s.

One of the more notable defeats was that of the Scheduled Caste leader B. R. Ambedkar. Opposing him in his Bombay constituency was an obscure milkman named Kajrolkar. The gifted Marathi journalist P. K. Atre popularizeda slogan which went:

> Kuthe to Ghatnakar Ambedkar,
> Aani Kuthe ha Lonivikya Kajrolkar?

which, roughly translated, means:

> Where is the (great) constitution-maker Ambedkar
> And where the (obscure) butter-seller Kajrolkar? [46]

Yet, in the end, the prestige and hold of the Congress, and the fact that Nehru made several speeches

in Bombay, carried Kajrolkar to victory. As one wag remarked, even a lamp-post standing on the Congress ticket could have been elected. Or, as apolitical scientist more dispassionately put it, the election was won on 'Nehru's personal popularity and his ability to express the aspirations of a newly independent India in a vivid and forceful manner'.[47]

On the eve of the polls Sukumar Sen suggested they constituted 'the biggest *experiment* in democracy in human history'. A veteran Madras editor was less neutral; he complained that 'a very large majority [will] exercise votes for the first time: not many know what the vote is, why they should vote, and whom they should vote for; no wonder the whole adventure is rated as the biggest *gamble* in history'.[48] And a recently dispossessed maharaja told a visiting American couple that any constitution that sanctioned universal suffrage in a land of illiterates was 'crazy'. 'Imagine the demagoguery, the misinformation, the dishonesty possible', said the maharaja, adding, 'The world is far too shaky to permit such an experiment.'[49]

Sharing this scepticism was Penderel Moon, a Fellow of All Souls College, and an ex-ICS man who had chosen to stay on in India. In 1941, Moon had spoken to the graduating students of Punjab University about the unsuitability of Western-style democracy to their social context. Now, eleven years later, he was the chief commissioner of the hill state of Manipur, and had to depute election officers and supervise the polling and the counting. As the people of Manipur went to the polls on 29 January, Moon wrote to his father that 'a future and more enlightened age will view with astonishment the absurd farce of recording the votes of millions of illiterate people'.[50]

Just as sceptical as the All Souls man was the *Organiser*, a weekly published by the revanchist Hindu group, the RSS. This hoped that Jawaharlal Nehru 'would live to confess the failure of universal adult franchise in India'. It claimed that Mahatma Gandhi had warned against 'this precipitate dose of democracy', and that the president, Rajendra Prasad, was 'sceptical about this leap in the dark'. Yet Nehru, 'who has all along lived by slogans and stunts, would not listen'.[51]

There were times when even Nehru had second thoughts about universal franchise. On 20 December 1951 he took a brief leave of absence from the campaign to address a UNESCO symposium in Delhi. In his speech Nehru accepted that democracy was the best form of government, or self-government, but still wondered whether

> the quality of men who are selected by these modern democratic methods of adult franchise gradually deteriorates because of lack of thinking and the noise of propaganda . . . He [the voter] reacts to sound and to the din, he reacts to repetition and he produces either adictator or a dumb politician who is insensitive. Such a politician can stand all the din in the world and still remain standing on his two feet and, therefore, he gets selected in the end because the others have collapsed because of the din.

This was a rare confession, based no doubt on his recent experiences on the road. A week later Nehru suggested that it might be better to have direct elections at the lower levels – say within the village and district – and indirect elections for the highest levels. For, as he put it, 'direct election for such a vast number is a complicated problem and the candidates may never come into touch with the electorate and the whole thing becomes distant'.[52]

Nehru had an unusual capacity – unusual among politicians, at any rate – to view both sides of the question. He could see the imperfections of the process even while being committed to it. However, by the time the final results were in, and the Congress had emerged as the unchallenged party of rule, the doubts in Nehru's own mind had disappeared. 'My respect for the so-called

illiterate voter', he said, 'has gone up. Whatever doubts I might have had about adult suffrage in India have been removed completely.'[53]

The election itself also comprehensively set to rest the doubts of the newAmerican ambassador to India, Chester Bowles. This representative of the world's richest democracy assumed his post in Delhi in the autumn of 1951. He confessed that he was 'appalled at the prospect of a poll of200 million eligible voters, most ofwhom were illiterate villagers'. He 'feared a fiasco', even (as the *Madras Mail* put it), 'the biggest farce ever staged in the name of democracy anywhere in the world'. But a trip through the country during polling changed his mind. Once, he had thought that poor countries needed a period of rule by a benevolent dictator as preparation for democracy. But the sight of many parties contesting freely, and of Untouchables and Brahmins standing in the same line,persuaded himotherwise. He no longer thought literacy was atest of intelligence, no longer believed that Asia needed a 'series of Ataturks' before they would be ready for democracy. Summing up his report on the election, Bowles wrote: 'In Asia, as in America, I know no grander vision than this, government by the consent of the governed.'[54]

A visiting Turkish journalist focused on the content of the election rather than its form. He admired Nehru's decision not to follow other Asian countries in taking 'the line of least resistance' by developing 'a dictatorship with centralisation of power and intolerance of dissent and criticism'. The prime minister had 'wisely kept away from such temptations'. Yet the 'main credit', according to the Turkish writer, 'goes to the nation itself; 176,000,000 Indians were left all alone with their conscience in face of the polling box. It was direct and secret voting. They had their choice between theocracy, chauvinism, communal separatism and isolationism on the one side; secularism, national unity, stability, moderation and friendly intercourse with the rest of the world on the other. They showed their maturity in choosing moderation and progress and disapproving of reaction and unrest.' So impressed was this observer that he took a delegation of his countrymen to meet Sukumar Sen. The chief election commissioner showed them samples of ballot boxes, ballot papers and symbols, as well as the plan of a polling station, so that they could work to resume the interrupted progress of democracy in their own country.[55]

In one sense the Turkish journalist was right. There were indeed 176 million heroes; or, at least 107 million – those among the eligible who actually took the trouble to vote. Still, some heroes were more special than others. As the respected Lucknow sociologist D. P. Mukerji pointed out, 'great credit is due to those who are in charge of this stupendous first experiment in Indian history. Bureaucracy has certainly proved its worth by honestly discharging the duties imposed on it by a honest prime minister.'[56]

The juxtaposition is important, and also ironical. For there was a time when Nehru had little but scorn for the bureaucracy. As he put it in his autobiography, 'few things are more striking today in India than the progressive deterioration, moral and intellectual, of the higher services, more especially the Indian Civil Services. This is most in evidence in the superior officials, but it runs like a thread throughout the services.'[57] This was written in 1935, when the objects of his derision had the power to put him and his like in jail. And yet, fifteen years later, Nehru was obliged to place the polls in the hands ofmen he would once have dismissedas imperialist stooges.

In this respect, the 1952 election was a script jointly authored by historical forces for so long opposed to one another: British colonialism and Indian nationalism. Between them these forces had given this new nation what could be fairly described as a jump-start to democracy.