

## The Thrill of the 1937 Elections



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The year 1937 was, in a way, a turning point in my life. I was 11 years old and not expected to know much about or be interest in politics. Yet the happenings of that year created in me, an interest that normally would have arisen when I was many years older.

Early that year, India held its first general election to its eleven provincial Assemblies: Bombay, Madras, Bengal, United Provinces, Punjab, Central Provinces, Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Sind and North West Frontier Province. This was under the Government of India Act of 1935, which granted 'Autonomy' to the provinces. This Act created two new provinces, Sind and Orissa, and made Burma, an Indian province until then, a separate country.

My young mind soaked up these developments, particularly elections, despite the fact that I lived in Alwar, a Princely State that was outside the ambit of the limited democratic process that was being gradually introduced in British India since 1909. Moreover, in any case, I was far below the voting age. So, there was no question of my voting in these elections. Incidentally, even in the areas where elections were held only a small fraction of the adult Indian population had the right to vote. This was limited to people who immovable property, or who were income-tax payers, or had passed the matric (Class 10) examination.

My interest in these developments was aroused, by my father and a teacher. My father had a deep emotional attachment to the leaders of the freedom movement. He had developed this love fourteen years earlier, as a student at Allahabad

University, in United Provinces. He would often narrate to his family us stories of his association there with Jawaharlal Nehru, who was then the leader of the youth. As a result, I read Nehru's autobiography just after it was published in 1936, when I was just 10 years old!

In 1937, my father was the Honorary Secretary of the Alwar Public Library. All the leading newspapers and magazines meant for the Library were delivered initially to our home. This also allowed me to read about the elections in British India and get interested in them.

At school, our History and Geography teacher, Mr. Abdul Shakoor Quereshi, was a die-hard nationalist. Instead of restricting himself to the course material, he would often devote an entire class period to tell us about what was going on in British India. When the election process got on the way, he took a few days off. Dipping into his meagre savings, he travelled at his own cost to nearby provinces, and personally talked to the voters there.

When he came back, he told us students the stories of his trip in inspiring words. "I shall vote for Gandhi, for none else," he heard some villagers saying. In the newspapers, I read about Nehru's hurricane election tours through the length and breadth of the country, using all modes of transport, aeroplane, train, automobile, bicycle and even bullock cart. Quereshi Sahib made it real by telling us that he had seen Nehru arriving on a bicycle to address a village meeting.

The love for India that Quereshi Sahib fired in me has remained with me ever since. When

Partition came, he himself chose to migrate to Pakistan. I often wonder what he did in Pakistan with his own immense love for India and his admiration for its leaders. Fifty-two years later, in 1999, I attempted to trace him out when I visited Pakistan, but I could not get any information about him.

The election results were thrilling. As they started pouring in, I would often sit with a map of India and a newspaper so that I could better understand the parts of India to which that day's results related. And that is how I started developing an all-India perspective and a sense of belonging to a large country.

Every time a Congress candidate won, I was excited, as he defeated a British lackey, whom we used to call a 'toady *bachcha*' (kid). I particularly remember the joy when Nehru's sister, Vijay Laxmi Pandit, defeated Lady Kailash Srivastava, wife of Sir J. P. Srivastava. He was an industrialist, a confirmed British loyalist, and rabidly anti-Congress. I remember that the couple was often caricatured in cartoons in the nationalist press. (Later, during the Second World War, Sir J. P. Srivastava was the Food Member of the Viceroy's Council, equivalent to the Food Minister now, and was associated with the infamous Bengal Famine of 1943).

To our minds then, a Congressman was an epitome of suffering and sacrifice who had no interest other than to drive British out and make India free. In Princely Alwar, the defeat of pro-British candidates had yet another aspect. Though technically independent, the State was under the rule of an Englishman as Prime Minister, after the British had exiled the Maharaja.

After all the results were declared, we noted with great satisfaction that Congress had won in six out of the eleven provinces, including the far-off Muslim dominated North West Frontier Province. Some time later, the Congress was declared a majority party in two more provinces, raising the number to eight.

Then, we started waiting for Congress leaders to become ministers in the provinces where the party had won. Initially, we were disappointed, as the Congress leadership declined to take up ministerial responsibility. But after getting

certain assurances from the British Government, they took up the offices. There was immense joy all over the country; it looked like a dream come true. Eight out of eleven provinces, including the great cities of Bombay and Madras under Congress rule. It seemed as if more than half of India had already become free!

The people in the rest of India, which was either under non-Congress pro-British governments or in Princely India, started looking for the day when they would also be emancipated in the same way.

The governments in the Congress ruled provinces would now for direction not to the Viceroy but to Mahatma Gandhi or other leaders such as Nehru or Subhas Bose. Many of the persons who took office were not famous then but later became great administrators and diplomats in free India. They included Govind Ballabh Pant, Vijay Laxmi Pandit, K. N. Katju, C. Rajagopalachari, B. G. Kher, K.M. Munshi, and Morarji Desai. Dr. Khan Sahib, elder brother of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as the Frontier Gandhi, was the Congress Premier of North West Frontier Province.

The dream was short-lived. Soon after declaration of the Second World War in Sept 1939, all the Congress Governments resigned in protest, as the Viceroy dragged India into the War without consulting them. Among most of us, it led to a feeling of reversion to square one. Jinnah rejoiced and made his Muslim League celebrate, all over India, the exit of Congress regimes as a 'Day of Deliverance' from Hindu rule. And he followed it up by adopting in March 1940, a resolution at Lahore for the creation of Pakistan.

The thrill brought about by the 1937 elections soon became a sad and a distant memory. There was a state of lull during the War years (1939-1945) except for a few months' interlude in 1942 on account of the 'Quit India' movement and three weeks in 1943, on account of Gandhiji's fast in captivity in the Aga Khan Palace in Poona. The rest is history. ❖