

Congress Ministries at Work

(1946 April—1947 April)

With a preface by

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PREFACE

For the information of the public, it has been found necessary by the A. I. C. C. Office to bring out this brochure, reviewing the activities of the Congress Ministries in the various Provinces, since the resumption of office in April, 1946. This review has been made by Mr. K. Mitra of the Economics and Political Research Department of the A. I. C. C. Office and is based upon authoritative reports received at our own request from the Publicity Department of the various Congress Governments. In the following pages Mr. Mitra has endeavoured to place before the public only a bird's eye-view of the various important legislative and administrative measures which the Congress Governments have either adopted or which are under their active consideration with a view to implement the pledges made in the Election Manifesto and to meet the critical situation which the country is facing to-day. A careful perusal of the pages of this brochure will, I hope, convince the unprejudiced reader that the achievements of the Congress Ministries within such a short period of less than one year have not been inconsiderable and if he will compare dispassionately the gravity of the economic and political situation, then prevailing, with the improvements effected during these 12 months, he will, I am confident, have a better and more intelligent appreciation of the nature and extent of such achievements. In the introductory chapter Mr. Mitra has explained the circumstances which prevailed at the time of assumption of office and he has described the critical situation which the country was faced with, as a result of nearly

seven years of Adviser's autocratic régime and of the various repressive laws directed against the civil liberties of the people. Moreover, the country was also then faced with a most critical food situation and with an administration which had become corrupt due to the unrestricted powers it enjoyed in the matter of controls of essential commodities without any check of public opinion or any consideration of public interest or convenience. That some of the hardships consequent upon the retention of control are still weighing heavily upon the people is a matter of grave concern to the Congress Governments and every effort is being made to reduce these hardships by gradual removal of controls and if their retention for the time being is considered absolutely essential, to have them administered efficiently and equitably. Much of the criticism levelled against the Congress Governments is based upon insufficient knowledge, about the efforts that these Governments are making to rehabilitate the economic life of the people, which had been terribly upset by the exigencies of war and by the callousness of the Advisers' régime in neglecting to look after the needs of the civil population. This brochure, it is earnestly hoped, will help to dispel any such misgivings in the mind of the reader. It will also help him to appreciate in proper perspective the significance of the measures which the Congress Govts. are adopting to reconstruct the economic, social and cultural life of the people in accordance with the fundamental principles, so clearly enunciated in the Election Manifesto of the Congress.

But for the bold decision the Congress took in 1946 in accepting the responsibilities of office and the determination with which it has, in spite of all difficulties, persevered to ease the situation, the reader well may guess what the consequences would have been.

Many important and far-reaching political change

have taken place during the last 12 months and still more revolutionary political and constitutional changes are impending which will demand constant and anxious attention of the Provincial Governments. The country is passing through critical period in her fateful history and the revolutionary situation which is developing consequent upon the final transfer of power from British to Indian hands can only be successfully and advantageously faced, if the people rally round the Congress.

The country is fortunate, in having, during this critical period, popular governments in the provinces which must be fully supported in the maintenance of law and order and in the adoption of such measures which the exigencies of the situation may demand.

If this brochure helps the reader to a better understanding of the objectives, the Congress stands for, and to inspire in him the confidence about the ability of the Congress to guide the country through these critical times and to shoulder still heavier responsibility of office, which the transfer of power to Indian hands would entail, the following few pages will not have been written in vain.

JUGAL KISHORE

INTRODUCTION

The ban imposed on the All India Congress Committee in August 1942 having been removed by the Government in the month of August, 1945, a meeting of the Committee was held after 3 years in the month of September, 1945 in Bombay to consider the political situation. Amongst the many resolutions passed at this meeting there was one on the new proposals of the British Government and the elections to the legislatures. As the passing of this resolution led to the renewed activities in the parliamentary field, and eventually to the assumption of the office by the Congress Ministries, it would be appropriate to quote that portion of the resolution which deals with the decision to contest the elections. The resolution itself indicates the difficulties which the Congress had to face in contesting the elections but it was determined to fight the elections.

“The announcement that general elections will be held for the Central and Provincial Assemblies has been made in a manner and in circumstances which arouse suspicion. The sudden dissolution of the legislatures in some provinces has emphasised the hostility of the present governmental authorities to even the possibility of popular government in the meantime, and is totally indefensible.”

“Further, free and fair elections are hardly possible when several organisations, like the Congress Socialist Party, the Forward Bloc and Kisan organisations are still under ban, when thousands are still held in detention without trial, or are undergoing sentences of imprisonment in connection with political activities; when in many

places public meetings cannot be held without previous permission of the authorities; and when many persons are labouring under disqualifications arising out of their conviction for political offences."

"It has become notorious that the present Government in India is responsible for the widespread corruption that prevails in the country, for the gross mismanagement of the food and cloth problem, and for the supreme tragedy of the Bengal famine. Yet it is declared that, pending elections and for many months at least, this incompetent and corrupt administration shall continue its misrule. The proposals of the British Government, become, in this context, still more significant indications of their desire to hold on to power in India as long as they possibly can and with all the means and methods at their disposal."

"In spite of the handicaps that the Congress will labour under, as related above, and in order to demonstrate the will of the people, especially on the issue of the immediate transfer of power, the A. I. C. C. resolves that the forthcoming elections be contested, and directs the Working Committee to take all necessary steps in this behalf. The Committee is confident not only that the people will respond to the call of the Congress on this vital and urgent issue, but will also, with the added strength and assurance that the past years have given them, carry the struggle for the independence of India to a successful issue in the near future."

The A. I. C. C. also authorised the Working Committee to issue an election manifesto to enable the public and the electorate to know what the Congress stands for. The following quotation from the Election Manifesto will give the reader an idea of the pledges the Congress made to enable him to judge as to what extent the Congress Ministries have implemented their pledges:

"The Congress has stood," it said, "for equal

rights and opportunities for every citizen of India, man or woman. It has stood for the unity of all communities and religious groups and for tolerance and good-will between them. It has stood for the freedom of each group and territorial area within the nation to develop its own life and culture within the larger frame work."

"It has stood for the rights of all those who suffer from social tyranny and injustice and for the removal from them of all barriers of inequality." "The Congress has envisaged a free democratic state with the fundamental rights and liberties of all its citizens guaranteed in the constitution. The constitution, in its view, should be a federal one with autonomy for its constituent units, and its legislative organs elected under universal adult franchise." The Manifesto stated the Fundamental Rights which the Constitution should provide for. There was also a definite programme of revitalising the economic life of the country completely exhausted by 200 years' imperialist exploitations and relief for the peasant and the worker.

Though the Congressmen themselves had no misgivings about the results of the elections, the sweeping success of the Congress in the elections was beyond the expectations even of the optimist and unmistakably demonstrated the increasing hold the Congress had on the public mind. The Government and the reactionary groups must have been terribly disillusioned by these sweeping successes as they imagined that six years of unexampled repression had disintegrated and demoralised the Congress and inspired fear in the public mind against supporting the Congress.

In the Provincial Assembly Elections out of 1585 seats the Congress captured 923 of which 303 were uncontested. The total votes polled were more than 19 million. Out of 151 seats reserved for the scheduled castes the Congress Scheduled Caste candidates won 36

seats unopposed, and 105 seats contested with 2182.2 thousand votes. Election results fully proved the unrepresentative character of the Scheduled Castes Federation of Dr. Ambedkar. It could get only two seats with a fourth of the votes polled by the Congress Scheduled Caste candidates. Among the Muslim voters, while the League polled 4.5 million, the Non-League parties polled 1.5 million. This at once demonstrated the weakness of the claim of the Muslim League to be regarded as the sole political organisation of the Muslims. What was still worse for the Muslim League, in the North West Frontier Province while Congress Muslim candidates returned to the Legislature were 19, the number of successful League nominees was only 17. This was an effective reply to Mr. Jinnah's theory of two nations and Pakistan.

Though at the time when the decision to contest the elections was made by the A. I. C. C. it was not originally contemplated that the Congress would accept office, but the march of events after the elections left no alternative to the Congress except to shoulder the responsibilities of office in the provinces when they had the absolute majority.

The deteriorating food situation threatened a famine on an all India scale unless it was checked by mobilising public opinion in favour of austerity measures and by inducing the producers to release their stocks of grain. The advisers' régime which had lost the confidence of the people either in their intention to check corruption and black marketeering or in their ability to avert famine, could not meet the situation unless it was replaced by a popular government. The events that followed the assumption of office justified the faith of the public and the famine was averted. The Congress Premiers assured the people that not a single individual would be allowed to starve for want of food and have creditably

succeeded in carrying out their assurance. Moreover, the political situation was also undergoing a change for the better. The announcement by the British Government of their decision to send a Cabinet mission to India to enter into fresh negotiations with the representatives of the people was couched in such a language that it became almost impossible for the Congress to reject it outright. Consequently the Congress was left with no other alternative except to accept office and to carry on the administration till it was found impossible to extend their co-operation to the British Government in the administration of the country. Events have so far justified the wisdom of the Congress in the steps it had taken either in forming an Interim Government or in carrying on the Provincial Administration.

The Congress Ministries took office at a time when conditions were admittedly abnormal. It was not a question of merely picking up the threads which were suddenly broken in 1939 after a brief spell of office for a little over 2 years. Much water had flowed down the bridge since. And 1946 was not 1939. A prolonged global war had left scars on almost all the sectors of nation's life. While on the one hand the economic structure had almost wholly collapsed, the rigours of an irresponsible administration had brought about a feeling of intense exasperation and frustration among the people. The average man looked forward to a period of freedom from not only wants but also from restraints.

It has to be realised that a brief period of a year is all too short to bring about a millennium specially in the economic field. The problems in this sphere are all intricate and not unoften of a global character. Economic progress has to be planned. Planning requires thought and discussion. The year that has closed has necessarily been a year of planning. Considerable time has been given to finding ways and means, drafting

and introducing legislations and setting up the machinery to implement them. The efforts of the Ministries have been hampered times without number by communal strifes and the persistence of a heightened type of corruption, a legacy of war-time inflated business and bureaucratic régime. Besides, the slow moving administration and service personnel could hardly keep pace with the dynamics of popular government.

Still, as the following pages will show in detail, there has been a change in the atmosphere. Immediately on assuming office the Ministries restored civil liberties and tried successively to remove the barriers which impeded the free flow of normal political life. The Ministries have eased the Food Situation by a successful drive for procurement and increased production and by checking corruption and black-marketeering. As agricultural efficiency depends on a sound land tenure, effective steps have been taken to remove the intermediaries between the tiller of the soil and the State and to introduce suitable tenancy legislation. Agricultural Departments have been reshuffled and irrigation policies have been re-oriented. Distribution of agricultural loans, seeds and manures have been popularised—there has been a drive for resuscitating the dying village industries and crafts with a view to relieve the pressure on land and to raise the standard of living. To aid the industries, big and small, efforts are being made to generate cheap electricity through hydro-electric plants. Possibilities are being explored to make the villages self-sufficient in the matter of cloth by stimulating the hand spinning and handloom weaving. Each of the Ministries is pursuing with a crusading spirit the programme of liquidating illiteracy, drunkenness, untouchability and exploitation either in fields or factories. Producer-cum-consumer co-operatives are being developed to eliminate the middleman. Last but

not the least, autonomous village administrative units are being built up, because the independence of the individual's personality and judgment demands decentralisation of power both political and economic.