

Electoral reform

Readers' reaction - II

AMONG the voting reforms suggested by Mr Shakhder is that 50 per cent of the seats in the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assembly should be reserved on the basis of proportionate votes by the political parties. In this connection, it would be interesting to know that the present constitution of West Germany has adopted this system, under which half the candidates are determined on the basis of proportionate votes secured by the parties. This method is likely to reflect the true will of the people better than in our present system where the number of seats secured by a party does not reflect it. In order to discourage the formation of small parties, the West German Constitution has also stipulated that only those parties which receive at least five per cent of the votes or three direct seats (there are 496 seats for the Bundestag, the German parliament) have the right to proportionate representation. Sri Lanka, which has drastically changed its constitution recently, has also gone in favour of proportionate seats for political parties. If a member deserts his party, he automatically loses his seat and the party nominate a successor. This is mainly to curb defection.

Mr Shakhder has expressed the fear that the proportionate representation might throw up new problems like the iron grip of party bosses. In order to reduce this, the primary system of elections as adopted in the US, under which people participate in the selection of candidates, must be considered. If democracy means government of the people, for the people, there is no better way than to adopt a system under which these very people have a say in the nomination of candidates. Under our present system, it is difficult for the few party bosses to judge the merits of all the candidates in the few weeks' time at their disposal. It is usual to find that many deserving candidates are left out in favour of non-deserving but influential candidates whose claim for selection is their ability to act as stooges or yes-men of the party bosses or raise resources by any means fair or foul. As we have noticed, there is a fight among the party bosses themselves to have their yes-men nominated. Readers must be quite aware that the split in our national parties have occurred several times on just this count.

In order to eliminate such trumped up candidates, Mr Shak-

der has suggested raising of election deposits. Simultaneously, it should also be made compulsory that those who are not sponsored by the present recognised parties should prove that they enjoy at least five per cent backing. Primaries held for selection of party candidates should be made use of in the same way to ascertain the popularity of independent candidates also. In the US primary, the ballot is printed at State expenses and the States have made it mandatory for the parties to nominate candidates.

Mr Shakhder has strongly suggested that the State help in the election campaign of candidates. It is necessary that the State must print and distribute the bio-data of every candidate in a prescribed manner. In order to check the electoral roll, the State must inform the voters by post about their roll number and the booths where they could cast their votes well in advance.

All said and done, the biggest question is whether the government in power will ever carry out the necessary reforms or not. The present set-up is a big opportunity for them to collect funds for their party (and also for themselves). While Mr Shakhder has done a commendable job in suggesting necessary reforms, some thinking is also necessary on the question of universal adult franchise. Although the framers of our constitution were motivated by the highest principles of democracy when they opted for universal adult franchise, the time has come when a large percentage of the intelligentsia is having second thoughts on the subject.

While literacy and commonsense need not be equated, ability to read certainly helps a great deal in making a discriminating choice and leads to a better understanding of the issues. Wisdom may not be the exclusive prerogative of the literate, but knowledge at least is.

Another point which must be stressed is that a country having 65 per cent illiteracy cannot, under any circumstances, progress as fast as desired. The principle of "vote only for the literate people" would act as a strong incentive for the illiterate voters to educate themselves. This by itself would be a big achievement. It would also encourage the candidates to take active interest in the literacy programme as it will enable them to influence a larger number of voters.

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