

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

The second general elections which were due in 1957 for reconstituting the House of the People and the State Legislative Assemblies were duly completed before the end of March, 1957, except for the Union territory of Himachal Pradesh and part of the Kangra District of Punjab. In the latter areas it was physically impossible to take the poll along with the rest of the country as parts of the constituencies in these areas were still snow-bound. The poll had accordingly to be adjourned in these areas until such time as the snow melted sufficiently for the poll to be taken.

The second general elections were less of an adventure or novelty as compared to the first when even the most optimistic people had felt doubtful as to how far a large country which had only just attained its independence and had yet to settle down to a democratic form of government could successfully carry through a country-wide programme of democratic elections based on adult suffrage. The task was complicated enormously by a large percentage of the teeming millions of the population being still lamentably backward in literacy and by the complete lack of any previous experience of elections in many areas which formerly formed part of "princely" India. The unqualified success of the first general elections and the satisfaction they gave to the country at large in general and the political parties in opposition in particular were a pleasant surprise and the adventure was acknowledged at home and abroad as a remarkable act of faith nobly conceived and efficiently implemented. Between 1952 and 1957 a large number of bye-elections as also three other general elections to State Legislative Assemblies were successfully held, namely, in PEPSU, Travancore-Cochin and Andhra. It was confidently expected, therefore, that the second general elections of 1957 would also pass off smoothly and efficiently. An element of grave uncertainty was, however, introduced by the considerable redrawing of the political map of India as a consequence of the highly controversial reorganisation of the States in 1956, only a few months before the general elections were due; and at one stage, it became rather doubtful whether it would be physically possible to rush through the necessary legal and administrative measures to enable the elections to be held in due time. Influential sections of public opinion were more or less convinced that it was an impossible

task and that the elections would have to be postponed by a year or so and the life of the legislatures extended accordingly by an amendment of the Constitution.

The Election Commission set its face strongly against any proposals for the postponement of the general elections and decided to hold them duly in case it was humanly possible to do so. The Commission considered that it would be setting up a very bad precedent indeed if, merely because of certain temporary though formidable difficulties, the country was forced to amend its Constitution and extend the terms of the very first legislative bodies that had been set up under it. The Commission's efforts to turn public opinion in support of its view eventually succeeded and the Government and Parliament took all necessary steps to expedite the legal and administrative measures which made it possible to hold the elections in due time. Strenuous and all-out efforts were called for on the part of the entire election machinery at the Centre and in the States, however, and it is gratifying to record that every one concerned spared no efforts to achieve the seemingly impossible task.

The election law and the machinery had been stream-lined during the intervening years in the light of experience so far gained so that the shortcomings noticed in the first general elections could be avoided. A remarkable improvement which was effected was that the entire period of the poll was reduced to just over a fortnight which compares very well indeed with 17 weeks required for the poll in the general elections of 1951-52. The declaration of election results was also considerably expedited. Public confidence in the election machinery had also grown enormously in the intervening years between the two general elections and this was one of the most important factors which materially contributed to the smoothness and peaceful nature of the second general elections.

The system of democratic elections based on adult suffrage that has been evolved and developed in the country has proved a complete success and it has indeed proved to be a model which has been largely adopted in many other countries which in spite of their backwardness in literacy have decided to extend the franchise in a liberal measure to their citizens.

With the rapid increase in the percentage of literacy and in the light of further experience to be gained in the coming years, it is inevitable that further improvements and changes would be effected in the future in the system of elections in this country until the very highest standards of democratic elections have been achieved.