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WHAT IS WRONG WITH OUR OPPOSITION ?

By

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It has been suggested that of all the attributes of Parliamentary Democracy, none is more basic than an effective Opposition. The truth of this is borne out by the experience of all the countries of the world. An awareness of the importance of Opposition is shown by the fact that about two years ago a new journal of high standing came into existence entitled Government and Opposition in order to undertake a study of how the Opposition was doing in various parts of the world. In totalitarian countries, there is no freedom because there is no functioning opposition. As Kossygin, with his mordant sense of humour, said to Ted Heath during his last visit to England : "It is less fun to be in Opposition in some countries than in others" !

An effective Opposition has two roles to perform. First, the Opposition should act as a vigilant critic of Government's policies and actions and, by focussing attention on their mistakes and misdeeds, act as a corrective to wrong policies and arbitrary action by those in authority. Secondly, the Opposition should offer itself as an alternative government as and when the people give it the necessary mandate on a dissolution of Parliament or at the time of the next General Elections.

To what extent does India such an Opposition ? The answer is that, to a large extent, it does not. The opposition parties in Parliament do, to a large extent, perform the functions of vigilant critics. They have debating talent in their ranks which is superior to that possessed by the Treasury Benches and, since the General Elections at the beginning of this year, they have managed to keep the Congress Government on the defensive. They have, however, signally failed to offer the country an alternative Government.

The reasons for this state of affairs are not far to seek. They lie in the fact that those who sit in Opposition to the Government of the day in the Union Parliament are not only divided but splintered into many Parties and groups. There is no "the Opposition", but several oppositions. Some of these groups and parties have little in common with others, with the result that the Congress Government is able to play off one group against another and balance itself, though somewhat precariously, between them. Thus, for instance, there is little in common between the Swatantra Party to which I belong and the two Communist Parties.

We are democrats; they are totalitarians. We are nationalists; they are not.

Today, the Swatantra Party is the leading Opposition in the House of the People with 45 members. The Jan Sangh comes next with 30, and the two Communist and Socialist parties along with the DMK follow. So long as one party does not make a big stride forward and outpace the others, it will unfortunately be true that the country will not be able to see an Opposition Front Bench that can act as a "shadow cabinet."

Can all these Groups not form a United Front to replace the present Government? This is a question that has already been answered by developments since the last General Elections. It is true that, during the first Session of Parliament, it was possible for all the Opposition Groups including the Communists to achieve a kind of operational unity which enabled me to act as de facto leader and spokesman of the united Opposition on such issues as election of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker and the election of the President and Vice-President of the Republic. During the Budget Session, which commenced in May, however, ideological issues came up which very soon divided the opposition. On broad matters of international policy, the Opposition found itself divided into two groups - the non-Communists, who stood for a firm stand against Chinese Communist misbehaviour and diplomatic indignities, and the Communists who urged appeasement of Mao Tse-Tung's bandit regime. Similarly, the non-Communist Opposition wanted India to play an objective and impartial peace makers' role in the dispute in West Asia, while the Communists lined up behind Russia and China in a one-sided and partisan attitude.

On economic issues, the configuration was often different, with the Swatantra Party leading the fight for individual liberty, competitive free enterprise and a reversal of the disastrous policies that have brought the country to its present state of bankruptcy, while the Communists and, to a large extent, the Socialists, were engaged in egging on the Government to move faster down the slippery slope into the mire of Statist collectivism.

This situation constitutes a real threat to the future of democratic institutions in the country and strenuous efforts need to be made to remedy it. The task is difficult. There is what may be described as the Democrat's Dilemma. Every day that the Congress Government continues in office, persisting in its disastrous economic and international policies, the country drifts

given the country deserve. As General Secretary of the Party, I have been warning for many years against shortcomings in the behaviour of some functionaries of the Party at State and District level. These warnings were not heeded and the disappointing electoral results in Gujarat, Rajasthan and elsewhere have proved the validity of these warnings.

The policies of the Swatantra Party are undoubtedly what the country needs and are widely accepted but what is not so widely accepted is the capacity of the Party to deliver the goods. To some extent the good work that is being done by the Swatantra-led coalition government in Orissa, under the wise leadership of Mr. P. N. Singh Deo, may be expected to act as a corrective. At the same time, the recruitment and training of a cadre of devoted and dedicated young Party Workers is the crying need. "Cadres decide everything", said Lenin. He was unquestionably right on this point.