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THE SWATANTRA CONVENTION

In his Presidential address to the national convention of the Swatantra Party in Madras Mr Piloo Mody spoke of the need to "resurrect" the party. This is perhaps an exaggeration though, no doubt, it has not yet fully recovered from the electoral shocks of 1971-72. An element of defeatism dominates its psychology and, as Mr Mody pointed out, many party members are "tired of fighting" or are inclined to come to terms with "realities" by opting out of active politics. Such pessimism is not unnatural, given the scale of the Congress's electoral victories. But its persistence, despite the widespread "disenchantment with the Congress and its leadership" can only be explained in terms of a failure to define the party's rôle. The Swatantra Party's views on such issues as socialism and economic growth, and nationalization cannot be faulted. But they are not a monopoly of this party or an acceptable substitute for an alternative programme. Of what does its philosophy consist other than a rejection of Communism? On the nationalization of the wholesale grain trade, the future of Andhra Pradesh, the legislation on Aligarh Muslim University, the distribution of river waters, and the Constitution, the party has repeated its already well-known views. Mr M. R. Masani is opposed to unprincipled alliances with other parties but the Swatantra's electoral strategy in the forthcoming

elections in Uttar Pradesh and Orissa is by no means clear. Mr Kamaraj's presence on the dais during the inauguration of the convention seems to have caused some confusion on this point. But given the Congress (O)'s fear of being accused of prompting "grand alliances" an electoral understanding may not be on the cards.

Differences between Dr Hande and Mr Lobo Prabhu over the party's attitude to labour reflects yet another aspect of the party's confusion. The Swatantra Party does not like to be considered as the party of the rich. Yet it shies away from clarifying its attitude to labour, much as though labour and employers are two irreconcilable factors. Apparently this sort of ambivalence does not necessarily conflict with its decision to "participate actively in the struggle for justice for workers in farms, factories and offices". On matters of foreign policy the party is predictably anti-Communist. This is unexceptionable so far as it goes, which is not very far. It does not take into account the global developments which have made such an attitude wholly inadequate. No doubt the Indo-Soviet treaty is a piece of excess baggage which New Delhi could well have done without. But the Swatantra Party's criticism that it is "making our armed forces the garbage can for obsolete Soviet weaponry" weakens its claim to be taken seriously.

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