

"A political party is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Therefore the attitude 'my party right or wrong' is as unworthy of credence as that older slogan 'my country right or wrong'," observed Mr. M.R. Masani, General Secretary of the Swatantra Party, today in Ahmedabad in the course of a discussion on the limits of party politics in a free society. Mr. Masani was delivering an address on "Party Politics in India" at the Harold Laski Institute here.

While urging the necessity of political parties and regretting his inability to go all the way with Jayaprakash Narayan in the direction of non-party democracy, which might result in a one-party dictatorship, Mr. Masani stressed the need to combat the tendency of political parties throughout the world to dominate the mind and life of the individual by laying down the law in regard to all spheres of life. On the other hand, there was the need to tighten up discipline in all parties in this country, where token acceptance of a party's creed was too often accompanied by behaviour at variance with it.

In a backward and predominantly illiterate country, it was natural that organisation should count for more than ideology and that the strength of the machine should decide elections. Thus, the Swatantra Party's principles and policies had evoked widespread response but its limited resources in the way of funds and workers had prevented its message from reaching millions of voters.

Discussing the factors that may determine whether or not a particular party would make the grade in the General Elections in 1967, the speaker said that, with political power and economic patronage combined in the hands of the ruling party, only an Opposition party which was accepted by the people as morally superior to that in office could hope to win the people's confidence. Otherwise, all its talk of corruption in the ruling party and all its promises to provide good government would meet with scepticism. No amount of money, local influence, or caste solidarity would enlist the support of the electorate unless the image of a party in the minds of the electorate was that of one made up of good men and true animated by a genuine desire to serve the country and working hard for the cause.

Mr. Masani felt that the following measures would help in creating such an image:

- (i) Candidates for Parliament and Assembly should be chosen provisionally four years ahead of the next General Elections and be finally nominated a year before the elections in the light of experience. Mr. Masani welcomed Mr. Nehru's advocacy of this practice, which he himself had been advocating during the last two years.
- (ii) The quality and credibility of the party's candidates in terms of competence and integrity would be decisive. Hence men of dubious character should be ruled out despite their attractiveness on grounds of caste, local influence or financial resources.
- (iii) The building up of a cadre of intelligent and loyal workers through and round whom the organisation could be built up at grassroots level should be given priority over the enrolment of large numbers of 25 naive false members.
- (iv) The social basis of the party must be broad-based, including farmers, industrial and agricultural workers, artisans, shopkeepers, women and youth.
- (v) The maintenance of a high level of discipline and rectitude and the purging of elements guilty of indiscipline and malpractices.
- (vi) The collection of small contributions from a large number of middle-class and poor people in place of reliance on large contributions from a few with means.

"I am aware," said Mr. Masani, "that there are intelligent people, honest

in their own personal lives, who believe that, in a backward country like ours, condoning casteism, indiscipline and mishandling of funds helps in building a party. I am deeply convinced that, quite apart from moral considerations, this approach is even pragmatically unsound."

"The gulf between the professions and the practice of a large number of members of all parties is creating a corroding cynicism among increasing numbers of people who begin to feel that all politicians are crooks, and such disillusionment can easily destroy democracy in India in the coming years," observed the speaker.

Turning to the ideological pattern of the party system in India, the speaker deplored the use of labels like 'Left' and 'Right' which every student of political science knew had become meaningless in the world of today. "There can be nothing more reactionary," observed Mr. Masani, "than the communist ideology, with its belief in totalitarian control of every aspect of life and the complete servitude of the people, and yet it is labelled 'Leftist' along with democratic socialist elements. There can be nothing more progressive and radical than the philosophy of the Swatantra Party with its stress on individual liberty, the dignity of the human personality and the assertion of the Fundamental Rights in the Constitution, and yet it is often described as 'Rightist'!"

Analysing the ideological content of the Swatantra Party's programme, Mr. Masani said that, while there was room in the Party for those who wished to conserve what was best in the country's history and traditions, it was essentially a programme of Liberalism and Gandhism. The belief in ordered progress through minimum government and the fullest measure of individual liberty was the essence of Liberalism and the core of Gandhiji's philosophy.

The missing element in Indian democracy was an effective opposition. Because of the system of election and the multiplicity of Opposition parties, the recent elections had failed to fill that vacuum. In the absence of Proportional Representation, the wishes of the electorate had been distorted and a minority government, which had not obtained more than 45 per cent of the popular vote at the Centre and in all but four States, was today ruling throughout the country with inflated majorities. Since there was little hope of the ruling party, which benefitted from this inequity, agreeing to electoral reform like the introduction of the list system or the Alternative Vote, the only solution for democratic opposition parties was to arrive at understandings designed to eliminate inter-oppositional contests. For the failure to achieve this in 1962, the Swatantra Party at least could not be blamed for it was the only Opposition party that fought vainly to bring about such an adjustment.

Not for publication:

M. R. Masani
(M. R. MASANI)