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OVER TO YOUTH

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TOMORROW BELONGS TO THE YOUNG

by

Minoo Masani

(Minoo Masani retired from active party politics in 1971 after forty years of public service in Parliament as Mayor of Bombay, as Ambassador in Brazil, as Chairman of the U.N. Sub-Commission on Discrimination and Minorities. He is even better known, however, as the author of India's all-time bestseller, that inspiring book for children, Our India)

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These are great days. Everything is on the move. After a year and a half of stagnation in an atmosphere laden with timidity and craven fear, the Indian people breathe freely again. There was a somewhat irritating slogan one used to see on buses and boardings which has suddenly come alive: "The Nation is on the move"! The Emergency has been lifted and we are back again to normal times. Let us rejoice.

It is natural that, in such a situation, the young folk in our country who have played such a notable part in the election campaign that has just concluded should ask themselves the question as to what kind of country they are to live in during the coming years and decades.

I retired from party politics in India in 1971 after forty years devoted to such activity which started in the Nasik Road Central Prison in 1933 during the days of the struggle for Independence with drafting the programme of the Congress Socialist Party along with my friend Jayaprakash Narayan. In 1959, I joined with Rajaji in establishing the Swatantra Party. When I was asked some time back by a friend whether I would

not consider starting a new party, my reply was that I had done my bit: "Do bacche bas". It was for young people to start a new movement, a new party, I said, and for us of my generation to stand back and be content with guiding and encouraging them.

DARK DAYS:

Then came the Declaration of Emergency on 26th June, 1975. There followed some very dark days when national leaders like Jayaprakash and Morarji Desai and others, along with perhaps a lakh or more, were detained without trial. The people were stunned, but there was very little visible resentment or opposition. It appeared as if the people were cowed by this authoritarian take-over.

As the Editor of a little monthly called Freedom First, I refused to go along with the way in which most Editors of newspapers and periodicals bowed to the pre-censorship that was then imposed. I refused to accept the position that the Rule of Law which even the British during their rule in this country had never to their credit abrogated, had come to an end. I had faith in our Courts of Law. I therefore suspended publication and appealed to the Bombay High Court to strike down the arbitrary decision of the Censor. My faith in the judiciary was vindicated, first by a single judge and then on appeal by a Division Bench of the Bombay High Court. I was thus able to publish most of what the censor had banned and since then I was left alone to write as I pleased without let or hindrance.

These dark days are now over and I rejoice that the courageous men at the helm of daily newspapers like the Statesman and the Indian Express who refused to bow the knee to the insolent demands of the Ministers of Information and Broadcasting have managed to see their papers survive and not be taken over or silenced like some others.

WHY THE ELECTION ?

There has been a great deal of speculation as to why the Prime Minister should have suspended her authoritarian rule and called for General Elections to Parliament. There has been much scepticism about her motives. That "the Devil knoweth not the mind of man" is an old maxim of British equity. How then can one speculate as to what goes on in the mind of a woman ? The fact remains that, whatever her motive, Mrs. Gandhi did permit a free and fair election without rigging - a thing that few dictators have been known to do - and for this final act which has ended her chequered career we should be grateful.

My own guess is that Mrs. Gandhi was wise enough to see what lay ahead of her if she did not end her authoritarian rule and try to get back a measure of legitimacy. There is an old limerick which runs as follows:

"There was once a lady from Riga,
Who went for a ride on a tiger,
They returned from the ride
With the lady inside
And a smile on the face of the tiger".

It would appear to me that Mrs. Gandhi decided to jump off the back of the tiger of authoritarian rule before it devoured her. Unfortunately, she did this very belatedly. She miscalculated and she missed the bus.

Let us be clear that the result of the election is not a victory of the Janata Party. It is a rejection of dictatorship. Wherever the brutalities of the regime were felt, as in the North, the people reacted. Where, as in the South, these brutalities did not travel all the way from the capital, the electorate still voted for the Congress Party.

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO YOUTH:

When, as a young man, I wrote my little book "Our India" for children in 1940, I had expressed the view

that the future belongs to youth and they alone can solve the country's problems. I then wrote:

"Do this, do that - and India will be a paradise of plenty. Which is all very well, but who is going to get all this done, you wonder. Yes, who ?..... My answer, in case you'd like to know, is 'You'. Yes, you, Young Sir, and you, Little Lady, you alone can fit together the odd pieces. You alone can make a lovely picture out of them. After all, this is your country, and if you don't who do you think will ?"

The years that have passed have only confirmed this feeling. It is time those of us who fought for Independence under Gandhiji's inspired leadership should stand back and let younger people take over. Perhaps in the hurly-burly of the sudden short election campaign, this transition could not adequately take place but it should do so in the coming months and years.

For the past few years, there has been a general impression that young people of today are apathetic, materialistic and selfish, that they only care for their own careers and for having a good time and cannot be bothered with the problems of the nation as were the young people of our youth like Yusuf Meherally, Achyut Patwardhan, Ashok Mehta, Jayaprakash and others as of my generation. That was only natural because to us young men fighting foreign rule came naturally. Participating in public affairs when one's country is free is another matter. Also, the example set by the older generation was not an inspiring one. Now, however, that we have realised that freedom is not only to be won but vigilant defended by each succeeding generation if it is to last. It is to be hoped that young men and women in this country will from now on

participate more fully in national affairs.

SO MUCH TO DO:

There is so much to be done. Under Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership we so badly mismanaged our country's affairs that a great deal of the dream that I dreamt in "Our India" of all the wonderful things we would do when the wicked British left and we Indians took over control of our country still remains unfulfilled.

Mrs. Gandhi has made her contribution, no doubt an unintended one, by arousing anger against oppression and reviving the country to freedom. Let us not lose this adventitious benefit. Public memory is short. If we in the next few years do not use our freedom more purposefully than we did under Nehru during the first decades of freedom, we may once again hear the meretricious cry go up: 'Let us have a strong man to rule us'.

GRASSROOTS ACTIVITY:

That does not mean that all young men and women should join a political party. Parties are only a small part of political life in a free society. The essence of democracy is grassroots action and vigilance, which has made democracy in Switzerland and the United States as strong and virile as it is. In India the political parties have floated on top, with very little infra-structure below. That infra-structure can come from the existence of thousands of voluntary associations of citizens to deal with particular problems. Let me give one or two examples. There is the Wild Life Association. There are the associations for the purification of the environment. Consumer Associations are another variety of the same kind of voluntary effort. In Bombay there is the Civic Trust. I myself am Honorary Secretary of the Leslie Sawhny Programme of Training for Democracy which has by now trained over four thousand five hundred young men and women in active citizenship. Recently

in Bombay, faced with a threat to their homes from proposed legislations, a Committee for the protection of Tenants in Greater Bombay has come into existence. This has been called "voluntarism" which is the biggest bulwark against the arrogation of authority by those in Government and the danger of Statism which in the end lead to authoritarianism. "That Government is best" Gandhiji used to say, "which governs the least."

Can the generation who constitute the readers of Youth Times do better for the country than we of our generation did ? I would, if I may, like to put this challenge to them, and I would like to see them win it.