

MRM

11.90 *thru. this day*
31/7

2924

July 30, 1973

Mr. Masani

You will recall our earlier discussion of Karnik's idea of convening a meeting of leaders of various political parties and also those belonging to no Party. We shelved the idea as both of us felt that it would lead to nothing, particularly in view of the strong party vested interest, in regard to individual identities, policies, etc. I continue to hold the same view.

Meanwhile the country has started burning. The economic situation today is so bad that even essentials like bread and biscuits are no longer available and a person who manages to obtain a loaf of bread considers he has achieved something great for the day. The same is the story with every other commodity whether it be Dalda or oils. I understand that yesterday some shops in Lalbaug were looted. This has however been blacked out for obvious reasons.

There can be no question that the kind of explosion you and I knew would happen in the next few years is round the corner.

What do we do?

Looking at the political picture the people have lost confidence in the ruling party and have no confidence in any of the opposition parties. To them all are thieves, all are scoundrels, and none are to be trusted. Thus getting together either through a merger or even the formation of a new party in the unlikely event of the other opposition parties agreeing to dissolve to enable this to happen may not lead anywhere as people would still describe the new party as old wine in a new bottle as according to them ~~it~~ would contain the same old rascals, the same old bandicoots and the same old defectors and the like. Again in this situation what do we do?

I have been mulling over this for many weeks now and one of the things that has been recurring to me is the possibility of people trusting a group of eminent people who forswear electoral politics, promise to devote their energies to creating the circumstances for improving the economic conditions on the one side and for strengthening democratic institutions on the other.

They would be willing to trust any group which says "we shall not ourselves put up candidates for we are not a political party in the accepted sense of the term and yet we shall function like a political party organisation". The only difference being instead of putting up candidates ourselves we shall when elections come give our support to specific candidates. This is what Dr. Faridi did in 1967 when the Majlis-e-Mushawarat announced that irrespective of party labels they would extend support to individual candidates who in their view had the right approach to the Muslim question.

The only time such a group would get into the electoral arena would be at the time of Presidential elections when it shall support a candidate and ask all those MLAs who were helped to win with its support to vote for such a candidate. This is of course in the long run.

But immediately what the people need is to look up to any institution or organisation of individuals who will give them some kind of leadership. What

we need today is not an alternative political party but an alternative leadership and an alternative leadership can only come from those who have either not soiled their image in the political arena like yourself and Mr. Dandekar for example or ^{from} people like Palkhiwala, Hidayatullah, J.R.D. Tata who have never been involved in Party politics.

What I have specifically in mind is as follows:

That leading individuals from different walks of life from all over the country who have an established reputation get together and decide that with the politicians failing the country they as citizens have to come forward to do what they can to save the people of India from total disaster and get together to form a National Citizens Front.

- (a) to provide a forum for all honest Indians to get together in the country's interest;
- (b) which will do what Gandhiji wanted when he advised the Congress to convert itself into a service organisation;
- (c) consisting as it should be of people at the helm of affairs in industry, trade, business and profession it would be in a position to influence policies at their levels on the one hand and to compel government to sit up and take notice of the views and expressions of the Front on the other.

Hitherto non-party organisations have sprung up by the dozen but have generally fallen by the wayside or continue a precarious existence as drawing room affairs simply because they lacked teeth.

The National Citizens Front should not merely give opinions but should be in a position to organise itself in a manner as to drive home those opinions or policies in a manner as to be taken very seriously by those in authority. For example take the present economic situation. The National Citizens Front could do as follows:

It could first decide what ought to be done by government by industry, trade and by consumers.

Having decided what is to be done it will get various organisations of industry, trade and business and consumers to put forth to the government those aspects of policy as concerns them. In this they have the backing of the National Citizens Front.

The consumers would be organised to protest and resort to all constitutional forms of agitation to make the government, and particularly the elected representatives responsive to their point of view.

Coming as it does from a body which is not interested in power it will become very difficult for those in authority and even for the legislators to discredit and pin labels on the Front.

The Front would have a fully staffed national secretariat who will direct operations and the secretariat will establish close coordination with organisations of industry, trade, business and labour and consumers. It should go about organising the Front at all levels from the village and taluka and to the city and state levels with the single purpose of doing whatever is pragmatic and best for the people.

The above is a rough idea of what I have been thinking. I suggest that as

quickly as possible a meeting be convened in Bombay of leading citizens from various walks of life to discuss this project and to see if it has any merit in it. It has to be done under independent auspices like the ISP. Or two or three of you for example yourself, Palkhivala and may be a person like Hidayatullah or Shelat could convene a meeting. Expenses for such a meeting could be shared between the ISP and the AEI.

A list of names is attached to give you an idea of the kind of people I have in mind.

I shared these thoughts with K.H. Subramanian who is in complete agreement with the basic idea. We could either discuss it at the DRS discussion on the 2nd or if you feel that it is futile to bring this up then, a few of us (yourself, Dandeker, Cooper, K.H. Subramanian, Deshpande and I) could meet to discuss the possibilities.