

Birth pangs of socialist unity

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DESPITE the belated attempts of Mr Raj Narain, a former chairman of the Samyukta Socialist Party, to scuttle the move for a merger of his party with the Praja-Socialist Party, there is every indication of a merger coming through.

The pro-merger elements in the SSP, led by the party's general secretary, Mr George Fernandes, and the former chairman, Mr S. M. Joshi, are determined not only to see the merger through by August 31, the deadline fixed for this purpose at the Patna session of the party, but also to utilise this opportunity to have a showdown with the faction led by Mr Raj Narain.

The pro-merger elements in the PSP have not forgotten the role Mr Raj Narain and his close associates in U.P., particularly Mr Ram Sewak Yadav and Mr Prabhunarin Singh, played at Varanasi in 1964 when a brief spell of honeymoon between the two parties was shattered with the majority of the PSP leaders walking out of the joint convention.

Dissensions

The loss was primarily of the PSP. It not only lost its chairman, Mr S. M. Joshi, but a large number of important followers in U.P. and Bihar, including Mr Karpoori Thakur, who is now the SSP chairman.

The PSP was never able to get over the setback it suffered as is evident from its subsequent showing in the General Election of 1967 and in March 1971. At one stage some of its leaders, including its chairman, Mr N. G. Goray, nurtured the hope of surviving in the shadow of the New Congress through what was described on the eve of the last elections as a "meaningful dialogue."

But they were soon to be disillusioned when on the question of sharing seats its claims were rejected outright by the New Congress as exaggerated.

The keen desire now for a merger with the SSP with which they had had some preliminary discussion in August last year, therefore, is a reaction to this disillusionment with the New Congress.

At the same time its leaders do not want to be out-manoeuvred as in 1964. They have gone about the preparations for the proposed merger in a more cautious and calculated manner. It was on their insistence that a negotiating committee prepared a joint merger draft

on the basis of the Patna resolution of the SSP.

They also ensured that the merger should take place only after the draft is approved and adopted by the national committees of the two parties separately. Even that will not be enough. The internal dissensions between the pro-merger and the anti-merger factions within the SSP must first be sorted out amicably.

In the SSP too, the desire for merger is the result of the disillusionment of a section of its leadership with the politics of anti-Congressism. They now feel that their party's image was tarnished by the alliance with parties ideologically opposed to it. This had led to the reverse it suffered in the last elections.

But more important than this disillusionment is the continuing struggle for power within the party ever since the death of Mr Rammahobhar Lohia, who was the unquestioned leader so long as he lived. Among the many claimants to his pre-eminent position in the party, Mr Raj Narain has proved the most dogged and ruthless.

His opponents accuse him of adopting the questionable method of bogus membership. But there is no gainsaying the fact that over the years he has managed to control the party machine, whoever may be the chairman or the general secretary.

At present Mr Raj Narain holds no important office, except the membership of the National Executive, and yet the key post of the chairmanship of the party's Parliamentary Board is held by his close lieutenant, Mr Ram Sewak Yadav.

Reverses

For Mr Raj Narain a merger with the PSP would naturally mean a considerable dilution of his own power. He is, therefore, averse to a merger and would leave no stone unturned to sabotage it. He fired his first salvo early this week when he insisted that the PSP must first accept anti-Congressism as an article of faith and withdraw its ministers from the New Congress-backed Governments in West Bengal and Kerala.

He questioned the authority of the general secretary, Mr George Fernandes, to enter into any agreement and defied the latter's directive to the U.P. unit not to hold its conference in Allahabad this weekend.

This is just the beginning of the resistance that Mr Raj Narain will put up against a merger. But if he

cannot avoid it, he would like to have it on his own terms, which obviously imply unconditional acceptance of him as the supreme leader. In the 33-member National Executive, his following is evenly matched with the pro-merger elements, now led by Mr George Fernandes.

Much will depend on which side the chairman, Mr. Karpoori Thakur, throws his weight. So long as he was the Chief Minister of Bihar he was known to be more on the side of Mr Raj Narain. Probably hoping to survive as the Chief Minister with the help of the PSP support, he agreed to join the merger talks. But the PSP was not willing to support him at the head of the Samyukta Vidhaya Dal Government. He had to resign. Now that he is free and is no more concerned with staying in power, he may, according to some pro-merger leaders in the SSP, throw his lot on their side.

Pressure

Their idea seems to be not merely to secure a majority in the National Executive meeting here next weekend, but to isolate Mr Raj Narain. They are determined to bring about the merger even if in the process the party is split and Mr Raj Narain leads an important faction out of it.

Why is Mr Raj Narain so opposed to the merger with the PSP? The answer lies in the links he has developed with the Old Congress leadership. Particularly in his home State of U.P. after the reverses suffered by both parties in the elections, a section in the Old Congress hoped to combine with the SSP and the BKD to emerge as an independent political force at least in U.P. and Bihar. Mr Raj Narain, who has never thought much of the PSP leadership, still seems to be trying to steer the SSP to yet another alliance and ultimate merger with what is left of the Old Congress in U.P. and Bihar. A merger with the PSP, a much smaller party in these States, may not serve his purpose.

Among other important leaders of the SSP, Mr Madhu Limaye has kept himself comparatively quiet about these developments. He, along with Mr Raj Narain and Mr George Fernandes, brought about the party's electoral alliance with the Old Congress, the Jan Sangh and the Swatantra Party on the eve of the elections.

In fact he used to justify the alliance on the ground that as a consequence his party had prevented a purely rightist alliance coming into being. But after his own defeat in Monghyr and the general debacle suffered by the alliance all over the country, he probably realises the mistake.

While he is stated to be not very enthusiastic about the merger, he is not opposed to it. He sees in it the possibility of a third force emerging in Bihar provided some younger Bihar leaders of the Old Congress, like Dr Ram Subhag Singh and Mrs Tarkeshwari Sinha, ignored and overruled in their own party, lend a helping hand.

Compulsion

It is premature to think that there will be a move from the Old Congress to the proposed Socialist Party after the merger between the SSP and the PSP. But with dissensions in the Old Congress and disillusionment with the old leadership some accretion to the new Socialist Party may follow in due course.

All these calculations do not, however, take into account the basic compulsion of self-survival for the leaders of the two parties, on the one hand, and the survival of a socialist party as a political force in the country, on the other.

The pressure for a united Socialist Party has been building up from the ranks of both parties for some time, and it is so great now that no leader can withstand it without losing his own position.

Memorandum
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