

FUTURE OF THE SWATANTRA PARTY

by

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All the opposition parties in the Parliament fared badly in the recent elections. To this Swatantra Party has not been an exception. In this article it is proposed to examine the future of the Party in the light of prevailing circumstances. At the outset, I must make it clear that what I write hereafter is in my personal capacity and not as the General Secretary of the Party.

Some people have suggested that as a result of its recent debacle it would perhaps be better to wind up the Party. On mature consideration, however, one could not help coming to the conclusion that the Party must not only continue, but must be revitalised to face the challenge of times. It will be called upon to face additional responsibilities. The people of India are bound to look to it for guidance before long. The defeat which the Party suffered has nothing to do either with the principles or the programme of the Party. To my mind, it is entirely due to a wrong image of the Party in the minds of the public. From this point of view it would be improper to seek any understanding, merger or alliance either with the Organisation Congress or with the Jan Sangh and other parties in opposition, whose images are equally distorted. The Party will have to stand on its own legs, revitalise itself and build up a strong organisation once again at the grass-roots level.

The Party will have to take certain steps immediately to improve its image, particularly to create a mass appeal without necessarily giving up its principles. It is now obvious that the people of India, by and large, have given a clear mandate for centerist policies, i.e. neither extreme leftism nor rightism. In spite of this, it would neither be advisable nor practicable for the Parliamentary system in the country to continue for long with one monolithic party. Responsible centrist opposition is called for to maintain balance in the Parliament and to prevent Ruling Party, having absolute majority, to ride rough-shod as it pleases.

The Swatantra Party's role in Parliament from now onwards will be two-fold viz. (i) constructive criticism and (ii) selective co-operation. Where the ruling party's proposed measures are obviously calculated to improve the lot of the masses, as a responsible opposition, the members of Swatantra Party would support such measures. At other times, constructive criticism will be the obvious answer. Outside the Parliament, the members of the Party at the State, District and Unit levels will have a very important role to play in the process of educating the public in various matters as also rendering service to effectively meet public grievances.

I have already indicated earlier that if Swatantra Party is to perform its legitimate role and grow as a responsible opposition in and out of Parliament, it has no other alternative but to project a centerist image without necessarily giving up its principles. Let me illustrate this point by a few practical examples. The Swatantra Party's future stand on certain economic and political issues like the bank nationalisation, the abolition of the privy purses, the growth of the public sector and the ceiling on agricultural lands is quite obvious. For very valid reasons, the Party opposed all these measures. However, the electorate and the public in their wisdom have decided to support all the four. Having discharged its initial responsibility, of educating the public regarding the pit-falls of such measures, the Party has no other alternative but to respect the public opinion. From this point onwards, the Party's role should be to consider ways and means whereby these matters, which have become a foregone conclusion, should be used in the best interests of the public. For instance, it would be no use the Swatantra Party demanding a reversal of the process of Bank Nationalisation. It must make constructive

suggestions as to how best the nationalised banks should now work in the interest of different sections of the community. Similarly it would be futile to demand abolition of the existing public sector units. The Party's responsibility now would be to suggest the best possible measures to be taken for maximising the profitability and productivity of the public sector industrial concerns. Similarly, it is impossible in the foreseeable future to abolish legislation regarding ceiling on agricultural lands. Yet, the Party can play a very important role in suggesting ways and means of maximising the productivity of small pieces of agricultural lands by intensive cultivation on the lines of those in Japan and Formosa. On the question of Privy Purses, the Party must strive to bring about an honorable understanding between the Government of India and the Princes whereby the question could be amicably settled with dignity and self-respect on both sides, and without tampering with the Fundamental Rights under our sacred Constitution.

On the other hand, in matters which have not become final and conclusive, like the proposal for amending the Constitution to abolish the Fundamental Rights, the Party must intensively pursue the educational process in the Parliament and among the masses. Such educational process would involve educating the small farmer about the need for safeguarding his small farm and the hut; of instructing the office clerk and the peon of the dangers facing his provident fund, life insurance policy, the superannuation fund, etc. The process of education at all times must necessarily be constructive, honest and persuasive.

Among other steps which the Party will have to take in the process of re-organization, a few may be enumerated. The General Council, the National Executive and other offices at the State, District, and Unit levels must be filled by dedicated people selected from among small businessmen, shopkeepers, agriculturists, , professionals, administrators and enlightened trade union leaders. A considerable amount of decentralisation and autonomy at the State, District and Unit levels will be required to build up a grass-root organization. As long as basic principles and programmes of the Party are adhered to, a considerable amount of autonomy would be needed to revitalize the Party.

Equally necessary it will be to see that, at various levels, the Party's working is self sufficient. In the past the process of pumping money from the top has done serious damage of various levels of Party's organization. It has made the lower cadres of the Party invariably look forward to the Centre for financial assistance. There has been very little effort to be self sufficient and self reliant. There has been considerable amount of exploitation and waste of resource. All this has prevented the independent growth of the different cadres of the Party.

Within the framework of the Party programme, it would be advisable to concentrate attention only on a few items and put them prominently before the public. I would suggest the following :

- (i) We must emphasize the need for massive rise in employment by creating millions of job opportunities, particularly through higher production. This should be done without introducing any "Isms" or useless, controversy of public v/s. private sector.
- (ii) We must emphasize the need for a gigantic programme of public works, particularly road building, throughout the length and breadth of the country which would create a vast employment potential and at the same time strengthen the infra-structure.
- (iii) The need for protecting the farmer's right to the small farm and the small house, and equally the right of the small man to his personal property.
- (iv) Stabilisation of prices to prevent hardship to the masses.

- (v) The need to ensure stable prices for the agriculturists.
- (vi) Promotion of National Integration.
- (vii) Restoration of law and order.

It is essential that at State, District and Unit levels attempt must be made to organize the "Youth" through the newly created Youth Wing of the Party. This alone can help us to build up the necessary link between the leadership of the Party and the masses which the party has sadly lacked during the last 10 years of its existence. It has been rightly said that the Swatantra Party is a Party of generals and no soldiers.

An important matter which must engage attention of the Youth Wing will be to clearly appreciate and effectively deal with the problems of the Youth. With the tremendous increase in the number of young voters, no political party can afford to ignore their problems. In order to effectively deal with such problems, it is most essential to identify them. This would need a considerable amount of research and investigation. Among the more important problems facing the Youth in urban and rural areas which the Party can hope to effectively deal with are (1) unemployment, (2) vocational guidance, (3) cheap housing, (iv) difficulties of securing admissions in schools and colleges for deserving boys and girls, (v) the need for recreational centres particularly in urban areas, (vi) provision of educational assistance like term fees, books, etc., and (vii) arrangements for apprenticeship facilities in factories and offices.

In conclusion, a matter which cannot be over-emphasized is the alienation of the Muslim and other minority voters towards practically all the opposition parties during the recent elections. Shrewd political observers have pointed out that overwhelming majority of the votes of the Muslims, the schedule classes and tribes and other minorities went only to the Ruling Congress Party. It is very important to sit down and carefully consider this major problem which involves loss of credibility among a large percentage of voters. The basic causes for this phenomena must be carefully identified and every effort made to ensure a more balanced distribution of such votes between the Ruling and the opposition parties.