

3721

Role of Swatantra

Dear Friend,

Three to four months before Rajaji passed away, I had the privilege of having a long and friendly talk with him about what should be the role of the Swatantra Party in the political situation as it existed then in the country.

After hearing me patiently and giving me some valuable advice as to how to function as the General Secretary, he told me that "our main task should be to keep the Party flag flying by carrying the Party's message everywhere in India. Let us not give up our work even if we are defeated in the elections for sooner or later, people will realise that India's salvation lies only through the Swatantra policies".

It is only a year and a half since Rajaji left us and in the meanwhile, so much has happened in the country on the political and economic scene. I have made an attempt to review the situation as I see it and I am also giving below a few suggestions as to what I think should be the role of the Swatantra Party.

Political Situation

A revolutionary situation exists in the country today. People are fast losing their faith in democracy. There is seething discontent and anger all over the country. Students and young people are in revolt. They are fed up and disgusted with all political parties and politicians. There is craving for a change in their minds but most of them have come to the conclusion that it is not possible for them to bring about this change by adoption of constitutional means, as the Government only understands and respects violence and strength. This has been witnessed in Gujarat and is happening elsewhere in India.

The communists are the only active and effective group in the country today. They are much better organised than the rest of the political parties. Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan, a staunch anti-communist, is the only person who is making a sincere effort to direct and channelise people's discontent and anger in a constructive and non-violent fashion. He is however handicapped because of ill health and a lack of support from the intelligentsia of the country.

So far as other non-communist Opposition Parties like the Swatantra, Congo and the Jan Sangh are concerned, I have frankly come to the conclusion that we have missed the bus. We have ceased to lead and inspire people. The opposition also has lost all credibility. Despite the clear writings on the wall, it refused to come together and provide the people with a genuine alternative to the Congress. In its anxiety to protect its own imaginative spheres of influence, it has compromised with principles at every step; its record during the last elections in UP proves that.

Mrs. Gandhi is exploiting our weakness very cleverly with the help of big money collected through smugglers, black marketeers and hoarders. This, along with the exclusive control of news media and government resources, she has made it impossible for anyone without the backing of big money, to win elections.

It is well nigh impossible to win elections against a Party which is prepared to go to any length to compromise all principles, codes, ethics and norms of democratic behaviour to retain itself in power.

The Congress has got loyal men infiltrated into all the Parties including the C.P.M. The Congress has mastered the art of buying out Opposition leaders and workers through blackmail and other means. We are now left groping in the dark as to what we should do next :

✓ Shall we unite and merge with each other -- parties like the Congo, the Swatantra, the Jan Sangh ; the BKD and Utkal Congress : There are many in our own party who feel that we should not waste any more time but work for a merger of these parties with a common programme and get ready for the 1976 elections.

My own personal view, as I have said earlier is, "we have missed the bus as far back as 1970, when , instead of going to the people with a common programme, we succumbed to the blackmail of the SSP, encouraged by a weak Congress President and could-not-care-less attitude of Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee of the Jan Sangh. The result was a miserable so-called "Grand Alliance" which framed the empty slogan of Indira Hatao and we all fell flat on the ground. Any attempt to merge at this moment will only be a futile exercise of putting old wine in new bottle. These are abnormal times, requiring abnormal remedies and we should be prepared to adopt them. There is no question of sacrifice as we have nothing to lose except our mean and petty egos. If we do not accept this, we will be wiped out by forces that are tired of old faces, old methods and gimmicks and who have seen through the game.

Besides, where is the unity among the Opposition today ? Every party is hopelessly divided among and pulling in different directions. We constantly quarrel among ourselves for tickets, funds and positions in the Party. How do we propose to achieve this miracle of unity in the larger interest of serving India and the cause of democracy ? We will make a mess of it and we will be fully exploited by the Congress.

✓ In my mind, if the merger is to take place, then, the only way to bring it about is to dissolve all the Parties and give birth to a new party with a completely new look, programme and leadership. This is the only way we will be able to generate confidence in the minds of the people. There are many who will oppose this move and will raise the bogey "Time is running out," and "we cannot afford to waste time and wait any more". And, therefore, they will press for an immediate merger. It will only be an expedient and not bring about unity of hearts and minds for the sake of India.

#### The Role of Swatantra

✓ When Rajaji said that the Swatantra Party's flag must be kept flying at any cost, he was sincere and he was right. We may have failed to attract the masses due to our own organisation and other failures like not being able to project a better image for our Party. But let us understand one thing -- that our strength lies in the soundness of our principles and policies. The future of the Swatantra Party may look bleak today but the future of the Swatantra principles and policies cannot be anything but bright. Sooner or later, India will have to choose between Marx and Gandhi. Swatantra philosophy is basically

Inspired from the sons and soil of this country and an unwavering faith in an individual's ability to surmount all obstacles to achieve progress in material and spiritual spheres. This is what Gandhiji and Rajaji stood for. Today, more than ever, we have to work hard and sacrifice everything for these values.

What Can We Do ?

Shall we continue as we are ? We have nothing more to offer except good words, good advice and an honest and sensible criticism; but people have lost faith in words. If we decide therefore to continue as we are, pinning our faith on words, we will only be hastening the day of complete liquidation of the Party and all that it stands for.

If we merge with other parties and start working for the Parliamentary elections, we will not succeed because of the following reasons :

1. We will not be able to bring about a unity of mind and heart as that unity will be a forced one and not a spontaneous one.
2. The Ruling Party will exploit our weakness and we will only be accused as having indulged in the futile exercise of putting old wine in new bottles.

✓ There is however one other alternative -- what I have suggested - and that is to work for the dissolution of all the parties and then form a new Party with a new programme and a new leadership. Even here I do not think it will be smooth sailing, and it will be far too late before a new Party comes into existence.

#### Let Us Suspend Election Oriented Politics

1. We must suspend election-oriented politics for a few years and let us convert Swatantra into an organisation dedicated to the service of the people of India to defend democracy, to eradicate corruption and black marketing in both the public and private sectors.

Today, the things that are uppermost in the minds of the people and particularly the young people and students are the menace of corruption and high prices. Let us draw up a programme of action to fight this menace and let us go to the people with this programme. Let the people know that the Swatantra Party and the Swatantra members are more interested in keeping the Ashoka Chakra flying and not getting votes on the ST&R symbol. They have lost faith in all political parties and leaders. Let us be different from other parties and other people. The moment we announce that we are not going to fight any elections, all those who have joined the Party only to secure tickets will leave the Party leaving the field clear for dedicated workers who are with the Party for ideological reasons. We must understand that basically all the corruption in the public and political life in the country is mainly due to elective politics. The anxiety of politicians to retain their positions of power or to acquire political power has compelled them to sacrifice all principles and values and therefore the human material that has come into the body politics of this country mainly for these reasons cannot think in terms of serving India and serving democracy. The only hope therefore lies in a Renaissance movement which can be initiated by all of us.

Gandhiji had realised this long ago and advised Congressmen to dissolve the Congress and start serving the people. The Congressmen did not accept his advice and they succeeded in creating the mess. If we believe in Gandhian values, as they are eternal values, let us accept his advice today in so far as our Party is concerned and let us start serving India or else we will go down in course of time.

I suggest we should call our General Council meeting at which we may invite all our State level office bearers and place our views before them and finally take a firm decision.

I suggest we appoint a committee to chalk out a programme of action. We should consult stalwarts like Shri Jayaprakash Narayan, Shri Minoo Masani who can help us to finalise this programme of action. This is the time for action and sacrifice and we should set an example by taking a lead in this matter.

Madhu Mehta

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