

Swatantra's flawed experiment

SEETHA

As the decade-long economic reforms process gets hopelessly stuck in the quagmire of Indian politics, it is but natural to hark back to the only Indian party that genuinely believed in an open economy — the now defunct Swatantra Party. It is ironic indeed that the party which put up a stiff fight against Nehruvian socialism should be nowhere on the scene when India is finally proceeding (albeit haltingly) along the path it had championed way back in the 1960s.

So what went wrong with the Swatantra Party, which was founded by such stalwarts as Rajaji and Minoo Masani and boasted of several big names like N G Ranga, K M Munshi, Piloos Moody, H M Patel, V P Menon? Was it ahead of its time? Or was the strategy adopted by its leaders

wrong? This book by the late H R Pasricha, once a member of the party's national executive and president of its Delhi unit, is an insider's account of the rise and fall of the party. Though the book has been published two decades after the author's death (and 25 years after it was written), its relevance remains undiminished as the country looks around for a party which will steer the economy in the right direction.

It's not a pretty picture Pasricha paints, and it is to the credit of the Rajaji Foundation and the Swatantra Party, Maharashtra, that they both collaborated in publishing the book. Pasricha's pen spares no one, not even Rajaji and Masani as he hints that they let their egos get the better of them. For despite the high-sounding ideals of the party, and the stature of its leaders, it was not free from the petty squabbles, ego clashes and at-

H.R. Pasricha
The Rajaji Foundation
Pages: 190
Price: Rs 150

THE SWATANTRA PARTY Victory in Defeat



tempts at personal aggrandisement. None of these grants of Indian politics thought it fit to build up a strong and effective organisation and concentrated exclusively on fighting elections. This, according to Pasricha, is what finally did the party in, after being in existence for 15-odd years.

Nor does the book show the Indian business community in very good light. Despite the Swatantra Party taking up their cause, India's industrialists (barring the Tatas, Khatanas and the Indian Iron group) were quite cold to the party. Pasricha laments: "They were too busy

cultivating the rulers, buying their favours with plentiful supply of black money." It'll be interesting to know if today, India Inc. is ruling not having nurtured the Swatantra Party as it watches politicians play political football with the economy. Interestingly, in the early 1960s, the company law permitted open contributions by joint stock companies to political parties. It was Masani who lobbied hard to get it prohibited. Only to find that business houses contributed generously to Congress coffers even as they referred opposition parties to the law banning political contributions!

ical contributions!

Pasricha chronicles how Nijalingappa, Raj Narain and George Fernandes made a mess of the Grand Alliance against the Congress as a result of which the opposition was decimated in the 1971 elections. He recounts Masani's reluctance to let the Swatantra Party join the Grand Alliance and Rajaji's insistence about going ahead. The book also details how the triumvirate of Piloos Moody, Madhu Mehra (of Hindustani Andolan fame) and Manu Amersy wrecked the party. N G Ranga comes out in extremely poor light as Pasricha recalls his abject volte face after the 1971 elections when he called Mrs Gandhi's victory as the March revolution and supported the 25th amendment which drastically curtailed the right to property.

The 21 Principles of the party bring out its horror of statism

and its unwavering faith in the power of the individual. The Principles hit out against state interference in business and opposes the move to change the ownership pattern of land in the rural areas. But unlike the libertarians of today, it believes the state has a strong role to play in meeting the basic needs of the people — food, water, housing and clothing — though not through subsidies or state control. The most interesting principle is the 21st one, which "allows freedom of opinion to its members on all matters outside the fundamental principles of the party," something which the highly centralised parties of today would do well to emulate.

The book rambles a great deal and can be quite a painful read. But it's worthwhile to bear with it, because it is a fascinating treasure trove of information about Indian politics from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, peppered with interesting anecdotes showing senior leaders in unflattering light and valuable annexures.

Other books

DIKSHA AT ST MARTIN'S...

Siddharth Chowdhury, Penguin
156 pages/Price: Rs 145

This is a compilation of short stories that have previously appeared in literary supplements of leading newspapers. The inside cover flap says the book is 'required reading for bibliophile, the cinephile and the paedophile'. Sounds exotic? Hardly. Chowdhury tries very hard to take avant-gardism to new heights — lots of four-letter words. Sadly, the effort mostly crumbles in an amateurish heap. To be fair, his ideas do have a spark. But the *diksha* has to wait — Chowdhury has to grow up first.



GOD ON GOD

Scott MacGregor, Penguin India
166 pages/Price: Rs 195

God on God, by Scott MacGregor, may seem to be the theological equivalent of Maggot's Two Minute noodles, but be warned: simple need not mean simplistic. Structured as a series of interviews with 'God', MacGregor's 'interviewer' poses a range of questions from a layman's perspective. While entertaining reading (see the sections 'Education and New Revolutions', 'Heaven and Hell', 'The End is Near?', and 'Mayhem and Mammom'), this book is definitely Judeo-Christian in perspective. If briefly is the soul of wit, then *God on God* is definitely full of divine *chutpah* — but you'll be richer for it.

the decision will get access to the 2.2-million-tonne Raasi Cement capacity and the 1-million-tonne Visaka Cement capacity. Both plants are located in Andhra Pradesh. Industry sources said India Cement was seeking a price of close to \$100 a tonne, which could put the acquisition cost at around Rs 1,700 crore.

VSNL to get 30% off

official said. With incoming calls being five times the outgoing calls, VSNL may have got a good deal here. On outgoing calls, VSNL will get Rs 6 a minute for calls to the US, Rs 14 for calls to the Gulf and Rs 9 for calls to any other place in the world. This is same for other ILD operators.

Telecommunications analysts, however, pointed out that VSNL had to give more than what it got. "The agreement is more or less in line with what BSNL had offered VSNL three

months ago. For BSNL, the gains made on the outgoing revenue share are expected to compensate the firm for the Rs 2 per minute loss on the incoming calls. The new arrangement between BSNL and VSNL will be applicable with retrospective effect from August 1.

Unhappy landings

non-availability of the ILS Cat III A version, has now decided to withdraw it. "We are going to issue a notice to all airlines, stating that the ILS Cat III A system is fully operational," P S Nair, airport director at the Indira Gandhi International airport, said. An ILS Cat III A system allows for landing with a decision height lower than 30 metres but not lower than 15 metres and a runway visual range not less than 200 metres. The international airport's Runway 28 is the only one in the country with this version.

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Printed & Published by Avila Unkar on behalf of Business Standard Ltd from 3rd & 4th floor, Building H, Paragon Condominium, Opp Century Mills, P B Marg, Worli, Mumbai - 400 013, and printed at MID-DAV Multimedia Ltd, 156-D, J Dadajee Road, Tardeo, Mumbai 400 034. EDITOR: T N Ninan
REGD NOS.: TV/MS(C)/1343, TECH/47-325/MB/2002, WB CC 259, KL/EK/409, DL-21038/98, RNI NO. 66308/96