

OF LIBERALISM AND LIBERALISATION

S.V.Raju

Liberalism connotes different things to different people. In the United States the term liberal is applied to anyone who is to the left of the political spectrum i.e. a leftist - those who advocate a greater role for the state. In Europe and the rest of the world the word means exactly the opposite - Liberals are those who want a minimalist role for the State. This is how I propose to use the word in this talk.

Gandhiji is often quoted as saying "That government is best that governs the least". He was for minimum government. This was also the credo of two very famous sons of Mangalore: Professor B.R.Shenoy and Mr.M.R.Pai. Both sadly are no longer with us but it is obvious that there is something in the soil of Mangalore that produces such outstanding liberals.

But Liberalism is not about economics or governance alone. It is about values; it is about character; it is about tolerance; it is about human rights; it is about social justice. This is the kind of Liberalism that the Indian Liberal Group stands for.

Until 1925, the Indian National Congress was led by Liberals - men like Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Srinivasa Shastri, H.N.Kunzru and many more. In 1925 with the passing away of Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Gandhiji took over the leadership of the Congress he abandoned the way the liberals were handling the freedom movement which he ridiculed as 'petition-mongering' and took the path of agitation. It is not for us to pass judgement on the option that Gandhiji chose, but the fact remains that breaking the law became a matter of habit in post-independence India.

The Indian Constitution was, and despite the many amendments restricting freedom of the individual, remains essentially a liberal document. This indicates the influence that liberals in the Congress and outside continued to have. While this liberal document ensured an essentially free society it could not prevent the enforcement of socialist economic policies after the First Five Year Plan. In 1957 the country abandoned economic liberalism in the direction of a State controlling on the commanding heights of the economy. This led to Dr.B.R.Shenoy submitting his famous note of dissent and being dropped from the Planning Commission.

Liberalism in India surfaced in the opposition benches of the Lok Sabha from 1960 to 1974 in the form of the Swatantra Party led by C.Rajagopalachari, Minoo Masani, N.G.Ranga, K.M.Munshi and others. Though not a member, the leading economic ideologue of the Party was none other than Prof. B.R.Shenoy.

Economic compulsions forced the then Government to take a 'U' turn that Mr.Palkhivala demanded at his budget speeches.

Unfortunately the 40-year old licence-permit-quota raj wrought havoc not only on the economy but affected the character of the people. Corruption became a way of life and has acquired an octopus-hold on our people which liberalisation has not been able to shake off.

Liberalism and Liberalisation are not synonymous. China has liberalised but continues to be a dictatorship. It cannot be said that because India has liberalised the economy, we are a liberal society. Intolerance is on the increase; our political parties always personality based do not consider it necessary to have even a fig leaf of policies. Alliances and United Fronts are formed not on the basis of alternative sets of policies but merely to acquire power and that too around personalities.

I referred to the fact that the Indian Constitution is essentially a liberal document. Isn't it ironic that when the Preamble proclaimed that we are a "Democratic Republic" the then Party in power pursued socialist policies which brought India to economic ruin; and when the Preamble now reads that we are a "Socialist republic" we have switched to liberal economic policies!

It is in such circumstances, that the Indian Liberal Group seeks not only to promote the right kind of economic policies but also to strengthen civil society by campaigning against corruption and seeking a clean polity based on tolerance, and respect for the rule of law - the basic ingredients of a liberal society.

Based on a talk by S.V.Raju to the Rotary Club, Mangalore on January 22, 2004.