

4389

Liberalism – A Contemporary View

S.V.Raju

What is Liberalism all about? If it were a dogma or a doctrine a straight answer would be easy. That it is not, is, at once, its strength and weakness. The only dogma, if you can call it that, is the conviction that Liberal thought is anchored in freedom. The content of Liberalism has never been static. It is constantly evolving. At times it has meant the democratic state taking on additional tasks not strictly governance and, at other times limiting its role. But at all times it has been in and through freedom.

The most remarkable aspect of the liberal philosophy in the West has been its continuous evolution and vitality, responding to social problems as they emerge and seeking to resolve them in a manner that would promote the rights and dignity of the individual. A political philosophy that developed in an agrarian context adapted itself to the requirements of an industrial society, thanks to political philosophers like Bentham, John Stuart Mill and T.H. Green, often asking the state to intervene on behalf of groups of people at the receiving end.

In India Liberalism evolved as a philosophy of liberation, liberating Indian society from a variety of social and political chains and reminding the educated public of the values of civility. In the early part of the twentieth century the Liberal Party of India could not make much headway but it leavened the Congress ideology in many ways. The Indian Constitution, despite the many horrible amendments since 1949, still bears testimony to the resilience of liberal values – emphasizing liberty, equality, and justice as the cornerstone of the Indian Republic.

But the emergence of the Swatantra Party (a party based on liberal principles and values) in the early sixties was denounced by Jawaharlal Nehru as a party representing capitalism and the philosophy of *laissez faire*. The party's strong defense of the right to property was given as evidence of its pro-rich anti-poor character.

Despite this assassination of its character, The Swatantra Party, during its lifetime, did not bother about being politically correct. On the other hand its policies were dictated by what it considered right in terms of ethical and liberal values. To give some examples: The Swatantra Party repeatedly demanded in Parliament and outside that India honour the pledge of a plebiscite in Kashmir; commended a confederation between India and Pakistan; opposed banks nationalisation. opposed the abolition of privy purses; fought the collectivisation of agriculture (attempted in 17th Amendment under the guise of cooperative farming); opposed the so-called 'liberation' of Goa.

The party was able to expose the mantra of socialism for what it really was and to brand the statist policies of the then ruling Congress Party led by Mr. Nehru and his daughter as the 'Licence, Permit, Quota Raj'. But despite Rajaji's and Masani's untiring efforts the Swatantra Party was unable to break the tag of a 'rich man's party'.

The Swatantra Party secured 44 seats in the Fourth Lok Sabha (1967 -71) (not 60 Sauvik Chakraverti 'The Liberal Vision', *The Times of India*, July 9). It was 2 more than what the Jan Sangh (now called the BJP) had. But there are two features to be noted in connection with this achievement: 1. Not one of these 44 was from a metropolitan city. All of them were from rural or semi-rural constituencies; 2. It was not due to a voter appreciation of the election manifesto of the Swatantra Party - a Manifesto steeped in Liberal values. The success arose from other factors mainly in the realm of realpolitik.

The Swatantra Party emphasized freedom as its basic value. Its Statement of Policy was titled "To Prosperity through Freedom" and its slogan "Farm, Family and Freedom". Repeatedly the party emphasised that it stood for a mixed economy (in fact Minoo Masani is credited with pioneering this concept at a series of lectures to the Bombay University in 1947) where the State would run enterprises that were not attractive to private investors and would leave the rest to private initiative and enterprise. Later, in both cases, the Swatantra Party made it clear during parliament debates that it opposed all monopolies including state monopolies and demanded that the MRTP should ~~be~~ equally apply to the State undertakings as those in the private sector.

The Swatantra Party's economic policies were greatly influenced by Prof. B.R. Shenoy. For instance any one who cares to read the debates on the Finance Bills in the sixties will see Swatantra spokesmen advocating a floating rupee - a proposal that Professor Shenoy tirelessly advocated, as was his opposition to deficit financing. At the same time the party did not oppose all subsidies. Subsidies to loss making PSUs was opposed; but the Public Distribution System had to be rationalised so that it did not subsidise foodgrains to the well heeled.

It is this legacy of social concern even while advocating a free market economy that the Indian Liberal Group carried on even after the party's eclipse. In 1985 with Minoo Masani and Count Otto von Lambsdorff, an outstanding German Liberal, present, the Indian Liberal Group adopted a manifesto, which, in a reference to equality, had this to say:

"To try to eliminate poverty and social injustice is not to accept egalitarianism viz. the abstract right to rigid equality of conditions for all, independent of talent, work or forethought. While

Liberals strongly support measures to reduce differences in wealth to protect each citizen and to increase equality of opportunity, they decidedly oppose egalitarianism which degrades the individual, whereas the recognition of merit in conditions of social justice is stimulating." The Indian Liberal Group does not believe that freedom and equality are antithetical (Sauvik Chakraverti, 'Liberty and Equality - Freedom as the Supreme Value', *The Times of India*, July 19)

The Indian Liberal Group values freedom, and equality born out of that freedom - the equality of opportunity. Even Pandit Nehru who is quoted as saying that 'democracy and private enterprise are incompatible' had, in his later years to amend his assertion somewhat.' Nehru may have had different notions about equality but let us not forget that it is because of his strong commitment to parliamentary democracy that we have in India today, a free society - with all imperfections, a free society nevertheless.

As for Minoo Masani this is what he wrote on December 1952 when naming the journal he founded *Freedom First*: " We selected this title for our Bulletin because we consider Liberty, with the great historian Lord Acton, to be the supreme good. We do give priority to freedom - not in point of time, but in point of fundamental importance. The fight for bread and freedom has of course to be waged simultaneously. We want both for our people - we want bread *through* freedom because that is the only way to get it. "

Much later in, 1985, referring to socialism in his seminal article "Liberalism" he wrote *inter-alia*: "Socialism has failed to deliver the goods. It has produced neither equality nor a better life for the masses of the people. The aims of socialism are good. I am still a socialist in that sense. If you put it to me: 'Do you believe in Lenin's free and equal society?' I will say 'Yes' . If freedom and equality are the objectives of socialism, I am for it. But when I find that the weapon that I have used does not create freedom or equality, but creates tyranny and slavery on one side and inequality and poverty on the other, then I would be a fool if I stuck to that weapon."

In March this year the Indian Liberal Group incorporated in its Constitution the following, among other things, as the Group's Objectives: "The purpose of the ILG is to foster the values of freedom, responsibility, tolerance, social justice and equality of opportunity based on the liberal beliefs that liberty with individual responsibility are the foundations of civilized society; the State is an instrument of the citizens it serves; any action of the State must respect the principles of democratic accountability and the rule of law."

The bottom line is of course a better life for our people.

This ought to be the profile of contemporary Liberalism.