

4391

The Liberal Movement in India – a Brief Note

Indian liberalism begins in the eighteenth century with Ram Mohan Roy with his concerns for social reform, uplift of women, for education as a means of social transformation, for the freedom of the press".¹

It was the liberals who spearheaded the freedom movement in the 19th century. The Indian National Congress was a creation of the Liberals and pursued Liberal policies. The Liberals were trenchant critics of British rule. They adapted western concepts to suit Indian conditions:

The Liberal domination of the Indian National Congress ended when Gandhiji took over the leadership of the freedom movement and resorted to methods of agitation. Gandhi was a Liberal. Undoubtedly Gandhiji galvanized the people and hastened freedom. The Liberals faded away and the Indian National Congress, after independence and under Pandit Nehru's leadership, went on to adopt the 'socialistic pattern of society' as its credo. The policies pursued increased the powers of the state enormously.

Almost four decades later the Liberal movement made a comeback in the form of the Swatantra Party. Founded in June 1959, the immediate provocation was the very real threat of collectivisation of farms in the guise of cooperative farming. Minoo Masani, a patron of the Liberal International and Mr. C. Rajagopalachari a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi were its founders. The Party evoked ready response from small landowners and from a section of trade and industry who bore the brunt of the statist system of permits, licences and quotas.

The party's rise was meteoric - from 12 members elected to the Parliament in 1962 to 44 in 1967. The Party headed a coalition government in the state of Orissa and recognised as an official opposition in some state assemblies. The party pioneered policies that were intended to set traditions and standards of parliamentary and political behaviour. It must be remembered that the Constitution of India is itself a liberal document and the Swatantra Party sought to build a polity around this document.

Unfortunately those who took over the management of the Party after Rajaji and Masani ignored the basic ideals and primary objectives of the party and hastened its decline. The Swatantra Party's presence was reduced to a small unit in Maharashtra that continues to exist is not able to participate in the electoral process because of a stipulation inserted in the Representation of the People Act that to qualify for registration with the Election Commission of India every political party should swear allegiance, among others things, to socialism. A writ petition filed by the Swatantra Party in December 1994 in the Bombay High Court, challenging this provision has still to come up for hearing.

Since the Swatantra Party was unable to participate in the election process some of its former members and associates of the late Mr. Minoo Masani decided to revive the Indian Liberal Group which was also started by Minoo Masani in 1964 as a think tank for the Swatantra Party.

¹ S.P. Alvar: 'The Concept of Liberalism and its Relevance for India' essay contributed to *Freedom and Dissent - Essays in Honour of Minoo Masani*, A DRS Publication.

12/9/01

An important reason for the decision to reorganise the Indian Liberal Group was the concern of Liberals who found themselves without a party and without an organisation to participate in public affairs and put forth the Liberal point of view. These Liberals were deeply concerned with the steep decline in human values, public character, morality and the gradual disintegration of democratic institutions in the country. Corruption on an unprecedented scale was eating into the vitals of India's society and democratic polity.

The choice facing the Liberals was either to fold their hands and watch the country's slide into chaos and to levels where even the floors of are not spared riotous behaviour. Since power is not the sole aim of those who profess liberal values, the Liberals decided that the Indian Liberal Group would champion Liberal values seeking support wherever it could be found. Beginning October 1998 the Liberals organised a series of workshops all over the country culminating in a National Symposium in Delhi in November 1999.

A statement on Liberal Priorities for India in the Twenty First Century was adopted and recommended to the Indian Liberal Group for its consideration.

The Indian Liberal Group has developed an organisational infrastructure with a national executive and committees at the state level in Southern and Western India. They have developed their own website and, very soon, will be ready to present the Liberal position before the Indian people. The decks are now clear for the emergence of an organised effort to restore the Liberal dialogue in the country.

In the context of the government's intention to reform the economy with emphasis on the market, the time is absolutely right for the re-emergence of a Liberal organisation. Indeed the time is opportune in the context of many difficulties being faced by Indian agriculture, industry and trade as a result of the process of liberalisation and globalisation. Not many speak up for market reforms and support the government whenever it chooses to push forward in this direction. The Indian Liberal Group, has in the last few months already started organising meetings and discussions to explain the need for the country to part of the globalisation process even as the Indian Liberal Group speaks up for human rights and for the rights of minorities among other not so economic issues.