

DEBATE

ISSUES



Sharad Joshi
President,
Swatantra Bharat Party

Liberalism means widely different things to different people. In US, a liberal is a person who is in favour of increasing governmental intervention for welfare activities. In Europe on the contrary, liberals want the government's role in the economy to be minimal. There is no unanimity amongst the liberal as to what they stand for. The Swatantra Party founded by C. Rajagopalachari has been possibly the only political party that could be called liberal. It opposed Nehru-socialism that concentrated increasing power in the government, bureaucracy and the public sector. Rajgopalachari himself preferred to call his party a conservative party rather than a liberal party. It was Minoo Masani who stuck to the adjective 'liberal'. Liberals essentially believe in superiority of individual enterprise and consider any intervention by any arbitrary authority as being opposed to public interest. It's understandable that people who believe in individuality find it difficult to gang up in any cohesive form, particularly as a political party.

Politics, as Ashok Mitra has defined it, is essentially concerned with seizure of power so that it may be used to turn the terms of trade in favour of a class close to those in power. Consequently, those who wish to gain economic gains through seizure of power gang up quite easily. There is an abundance of socialist parties because the working classes hope to gain by seizing political power. Liberalisation as a process, be it in USSR or UK, started only when the State-dominated economy clearly failed to work. Liberalisation was brought in not by a grass-root popular party but by a single individual or a group of individuals who camouflaged their true colours till they reached positions of power.

In India, socialism clearly failed but

► What prevents Indian liberals from exerting political influence?

► What is being done to remove legal hurdles in liberalism's path?

► What is the liberal political strategy today?

neither Dr. Manmohan Singh nor Mr. P.V. Narasimha Rao had the courage to say that the economy's efficiency can only be inversely proportional to the degree of State-intervention. Liberals have failed to stage a *coup d'état* unlike Nehru who subverted Mahatma's almost anarchist opposition to the State as an institution and propounded socialism. Since then politics has been a battle ground of politicians trying to allure electorates by dangling free lunches and of citizens voting for parties that offered the most mouth-watering memos. Social democracy, thought Fukuyama, is the end of history. That is far from true. A social democracy becomes a contradiction in terms because every politician seeks to gain power by bribing voters. No wonder liberals in India have failed to make any impression. Their message, briefly, is that there are no free lunches in life and each one must



gain only on the basis of one's own work, enterprise and innovation. There can be no takers for such a manifesto. It may look politically impossible today, but the liberals continue to keep the flag flying in the conviction that what appears politically impossible today will soon become politically inevitable.

In fact, People's Representation Act does not permit establishment of a political party unless it swears by the credo of socialism, secularism and democracy. The most rabidly communal and totalitarian parties have filed false affidavits to gain recognition. Liberals steadfastly refused to resort to such subterfuges and, consequently, have not been able to get registration as a liberal political party for years together. They have, since, become more realistic and found ways and means of getting their party registered under the banner of the Swatantra Bharat Party. It is now trying to work to get into political power in order to subvert the State rather than generate a groundswell of liberal opinion that could get them an electoral victory.

What deter

With elections around the corner fact that law prevents a liberal p ing unfair electoral competition

S V Raju
Editor,
Freedom First

Strange as it may sound, a Liberal Party which returns even five members to the Lok Sabha has, in the emerging politics of the coalition, the prospect of acquiring a ministerial berth or two. The results of the last two elections to the Lok Sabha have shown that that it is not necessary for a party to have even two or three seats to be able to boast of a Minister in the Union Cabinet. Having made this assertion the following questions arise: 1. Is it possible for a Liberal party to legally participate in the electoral process?

2. If, by some miracle a Liberal Party is able to participate in the electoral process, what are its chances of even marginal success?
3. What ought to be the *raison d'être* of a Liberal party in India?

The first question is important, because this is impossible today, by law. Under the current laws any party that wishes to participate in elections to the Lok Sabha, State Assemblies or even to Municipalities has to affirm its loyalty to democracy, secularism and socialism. It has also to have a provision in its Constitution that the party subscribes to democracy, secularism and socialism. The Swatantra Party (the unit in Maharashtra which survived the dissolution of the party by the then pusillanimous leadership in 1974) decided to take steps to return to electoral politics. In the late eighties its application for registration with the Election Commission of India was rejected on the ground that the Party was not prepared to swear by socialism. A writ petition admitted in 1994 in the Bombay High Court has yet to come up for hearing. Since the filing of the writ petition a number of elections to the State Assembly and the Lok Sabha have been held but the Swatantra Party has not been able to put up candidates. So, the reality is



that it is still not Liberal Party to con unless it is prepar believes in socialism tion that arises is th toral success for a this question I wo much. Unless it is promise on its basic perhaps with forces ticularly fond of d instance with part even practice intrap But there is still a ra Liberal party. A I indeed a party with fact now the used Swat its Rtic 1959 diffe party as th end. prosp be a polici size i ty, d mal state which de issues such as the pr goods like roads and ensuring the rule of l tious justice. The ra Liberal party is to p government without affairs that are not t cerns. The economic r by the Congress in tl are almost similar to t nomic system adv Swatantra Party 40 y 1959. I use the word edly because economic honestly implemented tion. Secondly, there i of ends and means. A (as did the Swatantra when it declined to accept defectors - the defection law then) has be value-based, howe this phrase has become a Liberal party has no its existence. (S.V.Raju was th Secretary of the Swa its National Headq 1959 to 1973.)

PERSPECTIVES

deters India's liberals?

around the corner, at a time of widespread disaffection with statism, the emergence of a liberal party from forming must be seen as a means of institutional competition. Our panelists are, however, confident of the future:

that it is still not possible for a Liberal Party to contest the elections unless it is prepared to lie that it believes in socialism. The next question that arises is the chances of electoral success for a liberal party. To this question I would answer: Not much. Unless it is prepared to compromise on its basic beliefs and align perhaps with forces that are not particularly fond of democracy — for instance with parties which do not even practice intra-party democracy. But there is still a *raison d'être* for a Liberal party. A Liberal party is indeed a party with a difference. In

fact this assertion now appropriated by the BJP was first used by the Swatantra Party in its Statement of Policy way back in 1959. The essential difference is that the party views power as the means to an end. The end being a prosperous people to be achieved through policies that emphasise individual liberty, dignity, a minimal

state which deals with basic issues such as the provision of public goods like roads and law and order; ensuring the rule of law and expeditious justice. The *raison d'être* of a Liberal party is to provide a strong government without meddling in affairs that are not the state's concerns. The economic reforms initiated by the Congress in the late eighties are almost similar to the kind of economic system advocated by the Swatantra Party 40 years earlier in 1959. I use the word 'almost' advisedly because economic reforms to be honestly implemented require conviction. Secondly, there is the question of ends and means. A Liberal party (as did the Swatantra Party in 1967 when it declined to engineer or accept defections — there was no anti-defection law then) has necessarily to be value-based, however hackneyed this phrase has become. Bereft of this a Liberal party has no justification for its existence.

(S.V. Raju was the Executive Secretary of the Swatantra Party at its National Headquarters from 1959 to 1973.)

Dr Parth J Shah
President,
Centre for Civil Society

What prevents Indian liberals from exerting political influence? Numbers. Out of almost a billion people, there are probably less than a thousand individuals who could explain the basic tenets of liberalism, let alone provide philosophical as well as pragmatic grounding for these tenets. Why are the numbers so small? Our own search for answers to problems of the human condition on this earth has not been determined and consistent enough. We oscillate between focusing on problems of this life and of the after life. Liberalism is a philosophy of living on this earth. We should make up our minds, at least long enough to abolish destitution.

However there are strands in Indian thought which can be seen as proto liberal. But they have not been woven into a coherent philosophy. Indian intellectuals who learned of western liberalism have not been successful in translating it in the Indian context. Liberalism has remained a foreign philosophy.

Even after the collapse of all major alternatives, liberalism attracts only a few of our young. Liberals are as rare in our academia and intelligentsia as are honest politicians in our polity. This also explains why our young hardly hear let alone learn about the liberal perspective in schools and colleges. It is commonly said that today Marxists exist only in American universities. Indian academia easily proves the statement false. More importantly, in American universities, Marxists exist with liberals, libertarians, and conservatives. Indian academic Marxists face little challenge and enjoy sinecure without any accountability to the people who pay for their musings; their hegemony is complete. No surprise that liberalism is still suspect among our educated class. It is still perceived to

be the philosophy of imperialism. People who advocate liberal ideas and policies are still seen as agents of foreign powers. We still need to rid ourselves of the colonial mindset.

One of the first questions asked of any liberal group in India is where they get their funding. As if no Indian could ever be liberal without being bribed! The funding question is hardly ever raised for anti-liberal groups. The colonial mindset is still very pervasive. Any one who opposes socialism and advocates capitalism is denounced as unpatriotic, and a puppet. *Ad hominem* rule the day.

We must learn to debate ideas openly, honestly, and forthrightly.

Liberalism has little chance until the civic space is genuinely open. Unlike the alternatives, liberalism depends more on human rationality than emotions. People have to understand the operation of the invisible hand, cooperation without

design, spontaneous order, division of labor and knowledge, trade as a positive sum game; they have to discern consequences of various policies. The first thing Indian liberals need is moral certitude. Liberals must not only be convinced themselves but also effectively communicate that the policies they advocate benefit each and every citizen of India, not any particular class. They must situate liberalism in India — develop it on the basis of Indian traditions and strands of thought. It should become an intellectual adventure of the heart and the mind to attract the best and the brightest to work in this paradigm.

Mr. SV Raju, editor of *Freedom First*, has been holding seminars and workshops around the country to articulate a Liberal Manifesto for the 21st Century.

The Manifesto will be out by the end of the year. The reaction to it will be a good gauge of liberal sentiments in India. For liberal political strategy, Aija Matule of Latvia can be given an air ticket — hopefully a one-way ticket.



HP DeskJet

