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For Economic Times  
DEBATE**Prospects for a Liberal Party in India****S.V.Raju**

Presumably the 'prospects' refers to electoral prospects. And, 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 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 of marginal success
- the 3. What ought to be raison d'être for a Liberal party in India

1. *Is it possible for a Liberal party to legally participate in the electoral process:*

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 possible for a Liberal Party to contest the elections unless it is prepared to lie that it believes in socialism.

2. *If, by some miracle a Liberal Party is able to participate in the electoral process what are its chances of even of marginal success.*

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.

- the 3. *What ought to be raison d'être for a Liberal party in India.*

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 clean drinking water, primary health and primary education, ( leaving the door open for individuals, groups, private enterprises to participate even in such areas of social concern); 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 defectors - 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.

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