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Rajaji: The Last Phase

Setting Traditions in Party Politics

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As Executive Secretary of the Swatantra Party at its Central Office I was associated with Shri C.Rajagopalachari(Rajaji)the Party's founder along with Minoo Masani. It was the only central office of any national political party, to be located in Mumbai and not Delhi. I held the position from December 1959 to December 1973 - 14 of the 15 years that the party was active on the then Indian political scene. I met Rajaji for the first time in December 1959 and for the last time in June 1972. He passed away on December 25, 1972. I was a very minor player in his life. But he and Minoo Masani played a big part in my life. So this narration is in the nature of an observer who occupied a ringside seat, as it were, seeing Rajaji in action in the last decade of his political life.

In fact, during this period I had the good fortune of keeping company with a galaxy of distinguished personalities all in the leadership of the Swatantra Party - men like Shri KM Munshi, Professor M. Ruthnaswamy, Mr. VP Menon, Sir Homi Mody, Shri Narayan Dandekar Mr. J.M. Lobo Prabhu, Professor N.G. Ranga, and Rajmata Gayatri Devi to name a few. Though this narration is not about the Swatantra Party but about its founder, the two were synonymous in the last decade of Rajaji's political life. The period before 1959 has been biographed, examined, analysed, dissected and interpreted by many leading, and far more qualified writers ranging from Monica Felton to his grandson Rajmohan Gandhi. On the one hand, not many people are aware of Rajaji's political life in the last decade. On the other, those in the know have attempted subtly, or often not so subtly, to downplay it as if it was of no consequence.

Minoo Masani, in his biography, writes that their (the Congress Party's) attempt was to prove that Rajaji's political life ended after he stepped down from the Chief Ministership of the then Madras state in 1954.¹ This is simply not true. A recently published pictorial volume² has a chronology marking milestones in Rajaji's life. The milestone for 1959 says "*Blesses (emphasis mine) the Swatantra Party*"! A more factual statement would have been 'He *founded* the Swatantra Party'. He was its creator and architect. A documentary by the Films Division on Rajaji produced after he died had only a passing reference to the fact that he founded the Swatantra Party. The then Congress regime which Rajaji battled from 1959 till his death, was naturally not interested in the 'last phase' which as Nani Palkhivala observed could well be regarding as Rajaji's greatest contribution to India's political life (see box).

I saw Rajaji for the first time when he delivered the inaugural address at the Preparatory Convention of the Swatantra Party's on August 1, 1959. I was then a reporter covering the convention for a small Kerala weekly. Little did I realise that four months later I would be appointed Office Secretary of the Central Office of the Swatantra Party and destined to interact with him for the next 12 years.

His inaugural address did not give one the impression that he was a disgruntled politicians.. Quite the contrary. There was a sparkle in his eyes and a spring in his step.

This is how he began his inaugural address:

"when I was forty years old, after 20 years practice at the bar and 12 years of political life in connection with the Congress, the national party of the time and the Home Rule movement, I joined the non-cooperation movement in close collaboration with and under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi"... "Now when I am twice that age, I am leading a revolt against what I have come to believe to be a fatally wrong direction taken by the Indian National Congress in the governance of this great country. I have come to the conclusion that a movement for freedom, as important as the movement for independence against British rule, is now to be inaugurated, against the misconceived progress of the Congress towards what it would finally end in the suppression of individual liberty and the development of the state into a true Leviathan " ⁱⁱⁱ

Secondly, if he were a frustrated, disgruntled individual and wanted to teach the Congress a lesson, the *kind* of political party he founded was hardly the instrument to seek revenge. His speech at the Preparatory Convention and the many that he delivered thereafter for the next ten years clearly indicated that he wanted the Swatantra Party to be 'a party with a difference. The Swatantra Party, he kept repeating, should seek power by educating the people; a party for which power was the means to an end. 'We should not chase power, power should chase us' he once wrote in the weekly. The Swatantra Party's objective was the

attainment of "Prosperity through Freedom" - the title of the document which outlined the party's policy document.

He emphasised on more than one occasion that his party was a party in the opposition, not an opposition party. The nuance is not so subtle. An opposition party is permanently in the opposition, whereas a party in the opposition is in opposition one day and in power the next - in other words opposition not for opposition sake. Time and again Rajaji made it clear that his party would oppose socialism. An assertion that required great courage to make because socialism was a "mantra" and to criticise it was considered political blasphemy. No one who wanted to stay in politics dared challenge it."

Trade Unions and Political Parties

Rajaji was very clear that political parties should not seek to capture or run trade unions; nor for that matter interfere in student unions. Why? Because trade unions are created to look after the workers' interests and should not be exploited by political parties and students have to first complete their studies before getting involved in politics. Rajaji thus took away from the Swatantra Party two very potential sources of cadres for doing party work. On the other hand he was mocked for being 'anti-labour'.

The 21st Principle of the Swatantra Party

He innovated a new principle in party politics. It was his belief that it was not necessary for members belonging to a political party to agree on everything. Insofar as the Swatantra Party was considered the only areas where it insisted on identity of views were economic and foreign policies and right conduct (*Dharma* as he put it). In fact he drafted 21 Principles to guide party members. The first 20 principles were party prescriptions. The 21st principle said that on all issues falling outside the scope of the preceding 20 principles, party members were free to act according to their conscience - be it prohibition, population control or the question of the national language. And this freedom extended to the party's legislators and members of parliament. The party whip should be used only to ensure attendance and attention to legislative duties and to issues relating to the economy and not be so oppressive that the party's legislators were mere voting machines. For this innovative Rajaji and the Swatantra Party were described as 'escapist'!

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Clearly he had fashioned an instrument and was fine tuning it all the time. His intention was change the face of party politics in India. He never held office in the Swatantra Party. He was a member of the National Executive, a member of the General Council. He was not even a life member. He was an annual dues paying member which was Rs.Ten. The National Executive of the Swatantra Party was literally a Who's Who of well known and highly qualified personalities. But the lessons he gave them could well for a book of ethics and etiquette for politicians of all politicians. When taking a decision or passing a resolution he would say: "Every time you draft a resolution, imagine how, how would you react to a situation. This will ensure your resolution is in the country's interest even if, in the short term, it is not in the party's interests?" He frowned on 'walk outs' in parliaments and legislatures. There was only one occasion in the Swatantra party's 15 year history that Rajaji approved a walkout. This was when a patently unfair ruling was given by the Speaker during the debate on the 17th Amendment to the Constitution taking away the property right of the farmer was being discussed.

The Accountability of Legislators

He insisted on high standards of public behaviour, including accountability of elected legislators. The Speaker, whether in parliament or the state legislature must be respected. At a meeting of the National Executive (As Executive Secretary I was in attendance at all such meetings and I recall that during my 14-years tenure I missed only one meeting of the National Executive and that too due to illness) Rajaji turned to me and wanted to know whether it was true what he had had a read in the newspapers report that Sardar Goutu Latchana, Leader of the Swatantra Party in the Andhra Legislature had led a demonstration outside the Assembly when it was in session. I said 'yes sir, it is true' The next question: "Was he holding the party flag?" "Yes, sir, the party flag was very much in evidence". "Was the Assembly in session?" he asked. I replied in the affirmative. Rajaji was furious. He admonished Sardar Latchanna who as a member of the National Executive was present at this meeting. He got the Executive to record a decision that "When the Assembly is in session, all Swatantra legislators should be inside the Assembly and not outside." You are not elected to stand outside and protest. You are elected to be in the House and record your protest vote,

When Parties need to be Bipartisan

Then there was the occasion when the Congress Party led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi sought the support of the opposition parties to devalue the rupee in the late sixties. The economy was in dire straits and the rupee being overvalued foreign trade took a massive beating. Rajaji and Masani were clear that such issues should be bipartisan and should be treated on merit and not politicised. The Swatantra Party gave her the support to devalue subject to follow up measures that would make devaluation worthwhile to the country. The other parties in the opposition were furious but we stood our ground stating that the currency needed devaluation, the economists including Professor B.R. Shenoy had recommended devaluation. The 'Liberation' of Goa

Earlier, when Pandit Nehru was the Prime Minister we were the only party to oppose the sending of troops to "liberate" Goa on the ground that it was an election stunt to ensure the election of Krishna Menon who was the Defence Minister and was being opposed in the Bombay North East Constituency by Acharya Kripalani. You don't use a hammer to swat a fly. All parties other than the Swatantra Party. Again the influence of Rajaji was evident because most parties other parties supported the abolition of the privy purses

Abolition of Privy Purses

Rajaji was clear that the Indira Congress's decision to get parliament to abolish the privy purses of princes abolished was wrong as it was the violation of a solemn entered into between the Government of India and the princes of acceding states. It amounted to dishonouring Sardar Patel, the then Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister. Rajaji asked the Swatantra Party to oppose the move even because it involved a principle - the sanctity of a contract. The Jan Sangh too opposed the Mrs. Gandhi's. Rajaji wrote about it in Swarajya and Masani spoke in parliament pointing out that though governments change commitments do not. A contract entered into by one government had to be honoured by its successor. This was something alien to communist and socialist parties.

Stunts Have No Place In The Swatantra Party

Then there was this question of responsible and dignified behaviour of the party that Rajaji founded. Once Rajaji read a report in the *Hindu* that the General Secretary of the Swatantra Party in Bombay, had with a band of members swept the streets to demand a ban on the export of foodgrains. Why sweeping the street? Because some gunny bags filled with rice had tears through which rice was spilling on the road. So this Swatantra leader with his party workers, the party flag and hall was sweeping the grain, and to draw public had informed the press which reported it the next day.

Rajaji wrote me a post card asking me if the report was true. When I affirmed its veracity He wrote a front page article in *Swarajya* "Stunts have no place in the Swatantra Party".

A Lesson in Party-Government Relations

Then there was his belief, obsession would be a better word that the party and government should keep away from each once that party had been elected to office. We were having the National Convention of the Swatantra Party in Bhubaneswar. At that time, our party was the senior partner in a coalition government in Orissa. As Executive Secretary I had the responsibility of overseeing arrangements. After the decision to hold the Convention in Orissa was taken Rajaji called me aside and said that he realised that I had to visit Bhubaneswar in connection with the Convention. He instructed me that that under no circumstance was I to avail of official machinery. That all discussion should take place at the party's office at Kharavelanagar. If a government car was sent to receive me at the airport I was to decline and hire a rickshaw or tax instead. Earlier, soon after the coalition government was sworn in Rajaji wrote an article in *Swarajya* - a veritable do's and don'ts on ministerial behaviour and party-government relations. What I remember most about that article was his admonition to his partymen: 'keep off the corridors of the government Secretariat!'

Rajaji was India's last Governor General, taking over from Lord Mountbatten in June 1948 and handing over to the first President of republican India on January 26, 1950. He returned to Madras. Less than six months later, on the insistence of Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel, he returned to Delhi and was a member of the Union Cabinet as Home Minister. Two years later he was asked to return to Madras as Chief Minister of the then composite state of Madras (which included large parts of what is today Andhra Pradesh). Two years later the state leadership of the Congress maneuvered to oust him. He left without demur.

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Unfolding Rajaji by C.R.Kesavan , EastWest Books (Madras) Private Limited, published in 2003
Twenty five years later, his prediction like so many others proved prophetic when dictatorship was clamped on the country by Pandit's Nehru's daughter Mrs. Indira Gandhi on the specious plea that India was facing an Emergency - which simply was not there

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This reminds me of an interesting exchange that took place at a meeting of the National Executive in 1961. The discussion was on the manifesto of the Swatantra Party for the General Elections of 1962. . Prof. N.G.Ranga, one of the finest persons I have ever had a chance to work with, said, 'Rajaji, why don't we declare in our manifesto that we believe in 'Gandhian socialism'? Rajaji looked at Ranga and, with a smile, asked "Ranga, what kind of an animal is that? I didn't know that Gandhi was a socialist!"