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Rajaji : The Last Phase Innovating Traditions in Party Politics - 2

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It was not so much the defeat of the 'Grand Alliance' in the 1971 elections that broke Rajaji's spirit. What added to his cup of misery was when two of trusted lieutenants deserted him. Prof. N. G. Ranga defected to the Congress, and Mr. Masani announced his retirement from active party politics.

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Within weeks of its founding in 1959, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was quick to denounce the Swatantra Party as a feudal party, a party of princes, a party of capitalists etc. And the label stuck. Rajaji's riposte was characteristic of him. He pointed out to the large number of the rich and former princes and maharajas in Nehru's Congress. With cold logic Rajaji pointed out that the rich and the princes who had joined the Swatantra Party had shown much courage to dare incur Nehru's displeasure! Moreover, men and women of means who had chosen to throw their lot with Rajaji would not be tempted to be corrupt as they had money of their own. He rapped the point home when, on the eve of the general elections of 1967, he got the Swatantra Party to advertise in the press, his appeal to those with means to come forward and contest the elections to the Lok Sabha as self-supporting candidates of the Swatantra Party!

Quite a few businessmen with courage decided to buck the permit-licence-quota raj and responded to Rajaji's appeal. The Swatantra Party emerged as the single largest party in the opposition in the Fourth Lok Sabha with 44 members comprising 19 agriculturists, 12 professionals, 9 industrialists and 4 princes. Though publicly Rajaji expressed disappointment that his party was unable to get at least a hundred of its candidates elected, the success in getting as many as 44 elected within eight years of its formation was astonishing. The 1967 elections had dented the Congress monolith. With his weekly *Swarajya* in one hand, and the Swatantra Party in the other, Rajaji took on Nehru and his establishment and severely dented the Congress monopoly on power. One has only to read the columns of *Swarajya* in the run-up to the General Elections of 1967 to get an idea of the ideological ammunition he marshalled to make this happen - not to mention his extensive electioneering, travelling the length and breadth of the country. He was 88. His criticism was severe but never personal. As Gandhiji's secretary Pyarelal wrote a year before he died:

"Rajaji has a sharp tongue but like a polished razor's keen edge it causes the ritual wound with a touch 'that is scarcely felt or seen.' The wound is meant to heal, not hurt. Like a surgeon's knife it removes the scab without leaving a scar. Rajaji is unsparing but never heartless or cruel. He can be angry but never vindictive."

The Swatantra Party's performance in elections to various state legislatures was equally creditable. A total of 259 MLAs were returned. The party led a coalition government in Orissa, was the official opposition in the state assemblies of Rajasthan and Gujarat and had sizeable representation in the Andhra and Tamil Nadu assemblies.

Speaking of Rajasthan and Gujarat the Party had come within reach of power. The temptation to encourage defections from other parties to make a bid for power was great. Both the central and state leadership of the Swatantra Party were wooed by power-brokers and big business with offers to buy some legislators mostly independents and a few from other parties. With strong support from Rajaji, Minoo Masani then General Secretary of the Swatantra Party, took the principled position that as the electorate in these two states had not voted the party to power, the Swatantra Party would respect the verdict of the electorate and play its role from the opposition benches. Here was a trend-setter far more effective than any anti-defection law.

A principal reason for the Swatantra Party's early successes was the tremendous rapport between Rajaji and Minoo Masani. Nine times out of ten their interpretation of events coincided and the policies and strategies they fashioned generally found support in the highest organs of the party viz., the National Executive and the Central Parliamentary Board.

The Congress split in 1969. The split was engineered by Mrs. Indira Gandhi for one reason - only Mrs. Indira Gandhi's determination to be in control of the Indian National Congress. There were now two Congress factions: the

Congress (I) better known as the Indira Congress and the Congress (O) or Organisation Congress led by Kamaraj the strongman of the Congress in Tamil Nadu. Following the split in the Congress, and to consolidate her hold on the party Mrs. Gandhi had parliament dissolved and called for elections a year ahead of schedule. The General Elections to the Fifth Lok Sabha were held in 1971.

The Congress split changed power equations not only within the Congress but in many other parties including the Swatantra Party. Rajaji and Kamaraj were political opponents. After having invited Rajaji to be the Chief Minister of the then composite state of Madras to deal with a communist threat to capture power in the State, Kamaraj manoeuvred to have Rajaji removed once the purpose was served. The Congress split, suddenly found Rajaji and Kamaraj on the same side of the fence. The Congress (O) also led by Kamaraj, was determined to regain its lost power. Rajaji who had started his crusade to destroy the Congress monopoly on power now found an ally in his old opponent Kamaraj. Rajaji easily accepted Kamaraj's assurance that one final assault on the Indira Congress would mark the eclipse of the Congress. What was needed was an alliance of all parties in the opposition. This united front of parties came to be known as the infamous "Grand Alliance". A coalition of opposition parties across the political spectrum, excepting the communists who declined to join.

The Swatantra Party's National Executive shared Rajaji's optimism that with Kamaraj at the helm the defeat of the Indira Congress was certain. It decided to support the move for a national alliance provided it was based on an agreed common minimum programme. Masani and Dandekar were asked to represent the party at the discussions to arrive at an agreed common programme and in the negotiations for allocation of parliamentary constituencies between the parties.

The negotiations got under way, and though it was tough going – hammering out a common programme – progress was being made. All of a sudden some leaders from the other negotiating parties including Atal Behari Vajpayee (Jan Sangh), Ram Subhag Singh (Congress O), George Fernandes, Madhu Limaye (Samyukta Socialist Party better known as the Lohia Socialists) to name a few demanded that the agreed common minimum programme that had been drafted be abandoned in favour of a one-point programme 'Indira Hatao' (Throw out Indira). Both Masani and Dandekar were taken by surprise. They insisted that the only way to convince the people to vote Mrs. Gandhi out of power was to offer a credible alternative with a common manifesto. Unable to convince the Congress (O) not to give in to this new demand, Masani took the next flight to Madras to report to Rajaji and to get him to reiterate the stand that the alliance should be based on a common minimum programme.

Unfortunately for Masani, by the time he could reach Madras, Kamaraj had already got to Rajaji and had persuaded him not to insist on a common minimum programme but to support the one-point formula of "Indira Hatao." Masani found that Rajaji had already made up his mind. He rejected Masani's suggestion that if the alliance did not agree to contest the elections on a common minimum programme, the Swatantra Party should go it alone and do its best. He asked Masani to go back to Delhi and announce that the Swatantra Party agreed to the 'Indira Hatao' slogan without a common programme. Masani said this he would not do and asked to be excused. Rajaji was not deterred. He asked Narayan Dandekar to convey the party's acceptance. This, he did with great reluctance.

The rest is history. Mrs. Indira Gandhi swept the polls even if the votes the Indira Congress polled were less than 35%. She secured over 70% of the seats. The Grand Alliance suffered an ignominious defeat and the Swatantra Party's strength went down from 44 to 4.

Rajaji put up a brave front. Soon after the results were announced Masani resigned from the presidency of the Swatantra Party taking responsibility for the Party's defeat. More than the defeat, Masani felt let down by Rajaji and what he considered as Rajaji abandoning the party's mission to be a 'party with a difference'. The deep bond between the two men which enabled the Swatantra Party to become an important player on the national political scene in less than a decade after its formation, had broken. Publicly and privately, Rajaji sought to persuade Masani to withdraw his resignation. Masani refused to oblige. In a desperate bid to persuade Masani to carry on as Party president Rajaji even wrote to me: "Dear Raju, nothing would please me more than if Masani could change his mind and agree to be President again at least for one year."² I took the letter to Masani and, on behalf of Rajaji, tried to persuade him to heed Rajaji's request and continue as president for one more year. What I got was a typical Masani riposte "what's going to happen after one year? Nothing."

It was not the 1971 election alone that broke Rajaji's spirit. What added to his cup of misery was that two of his trusted lieutenants had deserted him. Prof. N. G. Ranga defected to the Congress, and Mr. Masani announced his retirement from active party politics. The Swatantra Party did not survive Rajaji too long. Small men who took charge of the Party lacked the vision of the party's mission. The Swatantra Party *had to be* 'a party with a difference' or not at all.

All through the Swatantra years — from June 1959 to 26 June 1972¹ Rajaji nurtured the Swatantra Party by trying to imbibe it with values (some liberal, some conservative) constantly reminding its leadership that power was not the end but only a means to the end — the welfare and wellbeing of the Indian people. The means had to be good if the goal was to be worthwhile. Sadly, and ironically, he ignored this just once when he allowed Kamaraj to persuade him to take a stand that was expedient and not in accordance with principles he had set for himself. It was a gamble that he was prepared to take at his age. A momentary lapse which ultimately led to the collapse of the Swatantra Party.

Nevertheless what Rajaji achieved in the last decade of his life was without parallel. At the age of 80 when most men retire, he embarked on the Himalayan task of building a political movement to revolutionize Indian politics and put it on the path of Dharma.

Dr. Lalitha Venkataraman a Chennai based political scientist² remarked that if one were to visit the Connemara Library³ or any other library in Chennai and ask for books on or by Rajaji, the only books you will find on offer are his *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* or perhaps his speeches on nuclear disarmament! All India Radio and pronouncements by those in the establishment gave one the impression that Rajaji's public career came to an end with the award of the Bharat Ratna in 1955. This was evident when members of the party he founded were refused permission to display the Swatantra Party flag (which, incidentally Rajaji had designed)⁴ at his funeral, when his body lay in state for the citizens of Chennai to pay their respects.

In an article in the Rajaji 93 Souvenir published by *Swarajya*, Mr. N. A. Palkhivala wrote *inter alia*:

"In the crowded story of freedom and democracy there is no parallel to what Rajaji has attempted during the last thirteen years. Perhaps no other figure in world history, has, at Rajaji's age and against such overwhelming odds, tried so much, dared so much, toiled so much and given so much to his people. This man, cast in a heroic mould, has sought to bring back to India the Spirit of Liberty, to whose defence he summoned every resource of oratory and dialectic, character and action. His message is simple, freedom cannot be inherited in the bloodstream but has to be cherished, defended and preserved by eternal vigilance and struggle.

"The Measure of Rajaji's stupendous contribution in the last decade is not the number of the members of his Party or the number of votes polled by them. His great work lies in the quickening of the seminal forces of basic freedom, and in the momentum which he imparted to the living principles of the rule of law so that democracy and civil liberty may survive beyond our own days when our place will know us no more."

(Concluded)

¹ Rajaji's letter dated September 16, 1971

² I am able to be so specific as to give the date and month because Rajaji's last public appearance was at a meeting of the Swatantra Party General Council in Madras on June 26, 1972 when he took on the unpleasant task of accepting Mr. H. M. Patel's resignation as party president and 'blessing' Mr. Piloo Mody's take over as president. Thereafter his already failing health deteriorated rapidly thereafter and he was to die, six months later on December 25, 1972.

³ Dr. Lalitha Venkataraman's thesis entitled "_____ was on the Jan Sangh and the Swatantra Parties.

⁴ Cited by Minoo Masani in "Against the Tide", Vikas Publishing House, page 337

⁵ "During the last few hours, it was interesting to see ministers of the Union Government appear at his bedside. As soon as Rajaji died, the Government took over all arrangements for a state funeral. It was obvious that Rajaji's own colleagues and followers of the Swatantra Party would be brushed aside ... permission was refused for the display of the Swatantra Party flag and the funeral arrangements were taken over by those who had no use for Rajaji when he was alive. Now, evidently, he belonged to them." Minoo Masani, *Against the Tide*, page 336, Vikas Publishing House 1981.