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PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPING AN OPPOSITION IN INDIA*

I—Swatantra Party

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AFTER SEVENTEEN YEARS OF FREEDOM, INDIA TODAY does not possess an opposition in the sense in which it is understood in the West. Why is this so? What are the difficulties in the way of such an opposition emerging? Will it at all emerge in the background of Indian traditions? These and many other questions come to one's mind when dealing with this subject.

What exactly do we mean by the word "Opposition"? For a fruitful discussion it would perhaps be worth-while to begin with a clear understanding of its usage.

As the term is used here, "Opposition" signifies an organised group which :

- (a) offers constructive criticism of government policies while subscribing to democratic values and practices;
- (b) is in a position to provide alternative policies to those of the party in power;
- (c) has the necessary influence and organisational strength both at the State and National levels to make its presence felt in the political life of the country; and
- (d) has competent and clean leadership which not only presents a superior image but has the capacity to assume the reins of power when called upon by the electorate to do so.

Used in this sense it becomes immediately apparent that not one of the opposition parties in the country can lay claims to being a genuine "Opposition".

* This article is in three parts and is written by persons closely connected with the opposition parties discussed. They are not political scientists but their experience of practical politics makes their observations interesting. (Editors)

Being intimately concerned with the fortunes and future of a recently formed opposition party, the writer hopes to throw some light on the difficulties that lie in the way of its development. Therefore this paper is largely empirical and lays no claim to being a theoretical analysis. The problems outlined here are the problems faced by the Swatantra Party since its formation in late 1959.

The very first problem is the size of the country and the many difficulties that rise consequently in terms of resources. In the first few months after its formation, the party was able to establish branches in many States of India. Many people who came to man party committees were people who had never been in a political party before. A few others were persons who had been with the ruling Indian National Congress and had resigned for various reasons. But both the novices and the experienced soon found that enthusiasm though a vital factor was not of much use unless reinforced by resources.

Ideologically speaking, the Swatantra Party was very different from the party in power and the other democratic political parties on the scene. While the majority of Indian political parties paid at least "lip sympathy" to socialism, the Swatantra Party was perhaps the first to criticise and question the validity of that creed. At a time when the formulation and assumptions of the Five Year Plans, directed by the Planning Commission, were considered unexceptionable, the Swatantra Party expressed itself against centralised planning. When it was considered that any party worth its salt had to take a stand on the question of a National Language or on the linguistic redistribution of States, the Swatantra Party refused to take a stand and allowed freedom of expression to its members on such questions on the ground that such issues were matters of individual opinion. When, by and large, our foreign policy of non-alignment was accepted uncritically by almost all political parties, the Swatantra Party bluntly expressed its view that non-alignment had proved to be an unmitigated failure. Thus in every major aspect of Indian policy the Swatantra Party had a view radically different from that of parties already in existence.

Basically therefore, the Swatantra Party's appeal was to the intelligentsia of this country. In fact its foundation was a

result of ideological differences with the Congress Party's policy of cooperative farming, as adumbrated in their Nagpur resolution.

The fact remains that the party was able to make greater headway in the rural rather than in the urban areas. Why was this so? Primarily because the party far from advocating any radical philosophy which would appeal to the emotions of the city or town-dweller, spoke a sober middle-of-the-road, liberal language. Another reason was the tremendous opposition aroused to the Swatantra Party's disavowal of what were considered to be accepted truths. The media of mass communication played their role to the disadvantage of the new party and the labels attached to it by eminent spokesmen of other parties, particularly by the late Prime Minister himself, made the problems of the Swatantra Party doubly difficult.

The question that may rightly be asked is: 'The majority of the Indian people live in the countryside. If the urban intelligentsia are not prepared to listen to its views why could not the Party have emerged in strength with rural support?'

This brings us to the problem of what the General Secretary of the Swatantra Party described as the absence of a "conveyor belt" to transmit the ideas, the philosophy and the attitudes of the Party down to the village level.

Why was this "conveyor belt" absent? And specifically, what was this "conveyor belt"? The "conveyor belt" referred to was an army of dedicated party workers who could carry the party's message down to the grass-roots level. Adherence to a party's principles is easily obtained if it is an appeal to emotional sentiments of communalism or class-warfare. When the Swatantra Party eschewed both, by expressing its faith in secularism and denying the need for class-warfare in solving society's problems, it lost at the same time, adherents and workers who could be moved by emotionalism. Moreover, it is a sad fact of politics in post-Independence India that workers for a cause are available only for a price. The price varies from place to place and from individual to individual but it is always present to a greater or lesser degree. It has been easy for the ruling Congress Party to find workers because it has both the financial resources

and the power of patronage. A worker belonging to the ruling party can always "get things done". Unfortunately for the Swatantra Party it has neither the financial resources (the widespread notion that it is a "rich man's party" notwithstanding) nor does it have power. Therefore, it becomes exceedingly difficult for the party to attract loyal, dedicated workers unless it is willing to pay the price.

Whenever the party anywhere in the country launched a membership campaign, it found that the worker who enrolled members, simultaneously presented a bill of expenses which more often than not exceeded the actual amount collected by way of membership subscription !

Ironically enough, though the Swatantra Party pleaded for a mixed economy underlined by the statement that "The business of the State is not business but government", businessmen, by and large, have not come out in numbers big enough to assist a party which believes that free enterprise should be given every encouragement. In fact, as recently as February 1964, the General Secretary of the Swatantra Party in his *Report to the Party's Third National Convention* said :

"... the supine and cowardly attitude of the larger part of Big Business in India which, aside from a few honourable exceptions who practise enlightened free enterprise, continues to turn its back on a party that stands for a way of life in which free enterprise can flourish, while lavishing its financial support on the ruling party which is progressively engaged in destroying a free economy.

"All one can do is to deplore the fact that fear of reprisals from those in office under a highly controlled economy and the shortsightedness of those who wish to make a quick rupee through obtaining permits and licences should thus combine with an inadequate awareness of the need to make sacrifices for the way of life in which one believes. . ."

The "Permit-Licence-Quota-Raj" has made it extremely difficult if not impossible to organise an opposition party in this country. Even where a business house donates to the Swatantra Party it insures itself against the wrath of the party in power by donating to the latter, twice the amount.

Another reason for the party's inability to raise a cadre of workers arises from the fundamental position it has taken with regard to students and labour. The Party's *Statement of Policy* adopted at Patna in March 1960 ruled out its participation among students and labour. The *Statement of Policy* while dealing with matters of education stated: "The Party is of the view that in free India, while students even before graduation should acquire some knowledge of the various trends in political thought, they should, while engaged in college life, abstain from active participation in the furtherance of any political party. Whatever other parties may be doing, the Swatantra Party is of the view that there should be no encouragement given to the division of students into groups related to the political parties of the country although they may be free to express their views in their own College Unions."

Dealing with Labour, the Swatantra Party emphatically asserted its determination not to mix politics with labour. It said: "Being opposed to the domination of trade unions by political parties, the Swatantra Party will not join the race to establish control over trade unions, though its members will be always ready to help in all possible ways."

Thus with the major source of recruits for its cadre locked out through this "self-denying ordinance", with a philosophy and outlook devoid of appeals to the emotion, with inadequate financial resources available from those with the means to give, is it any surprise that the Swatantra Party has had to face an herculean task in developing that "conveyor belt", its General Secretary talked about?

But the single biggest determining factor of the political and organisational strength of a political party comes during the General Elections.

The Election Commission, composed of civil servants and presided over by an officer of the pre-Independence Indian Civil Service, has a creditable record of impartiality in its dealings with political parties. The arrangements it makes also ensure, by and large, that no party is given special treatment. But this does not mean that the elections by themselves are contested in a clean manner and that the only considerations are those of ideology and a candidate's qualifications.

In fact the experience of the last three General Elections

has exactly been the reverse. Ideology has played a relatively minor role and a candidate's qualifications even less.

What then are the factors that have mattered? There are many. But among the more important are: (a) caste and communal considerations, (b) money power, (c) misuse of official machinery, (d) identification of the party in power with that of the State, and (e) illiteracy of the voter voting by symbol.

Caste and communal considerations: This is the most important factor which a political party has to reckon with before setting up a candidate. I can speak with some personal knowledge on the subject. The General Secretary of the Swatantra Party in the course of his report to the *Third National Convention* had to admit: "In the 1962 elections, our Party emulated the bad example set by the Congress of adopting practically the whole list of candidates a few weeks or days before nomination day. There was competition between all parties in the clever-clever game of first seeing the other fellow's list and then choosing one's own candidates!"

Why did even Swatantra Party units indulge in this game of being "clever-clever"? They indulged in it because of the vital role played by caste and religion in the elections. If the Congress Party set up a Kayastha in Bihar, the opposition party immediately tried to set up another Kayastha. If however, there were already two Kayasthas in the field then the opposition party reckoned with the sizable Bhoomihar minority in the constituency and set up a Bhoomihar candidate to ensure at least block voting by the Bhoomihars for their candidate. The calculation being, that the Kayasthas would divide the votes between themselves and the candidate belonging to the minority could win. It was so with the Khammas and Reddis in Andhra, the Chettiars and Nadars in Madras, the Rajputs and Jats in Rajasthan, the Brahmins and Marattas in Maharashtra, to mention only a few.

The primary consideration was caste and only incidental was the candidate's qualification. This is borne out by the rather colourless composition of a majority of members in the Lok Sabha. There are, however, a few exceptions like the North-Bombay election, the recent by-elections to the Lok

Sabha from Amroha, Farrukhabad and Rajkot where other factors came into play.

Money power: The *Manual of Election Law* published by the Election Commission fixes the ceiling on expenditure that may be incurred by a candidate for election to the Lok Sabha at Rs. 25,000. While this figure itself is beyond the reach of many competent people, in reality the actual amount spent is many times more. Because, while the stricture is on a candidate's expenditure, no limit is placed in the way of a party sponsoring the candidature expending money. This presents a tremendous problem to an opposition party starved of adequate financial resources.

What is done with all this money? An army of workers have to be paid. During election-time, professional vote-getters suddenly appear on the scene. For instance, a voter in a constituency claims that he is in a position to deliver a certain number of votes provided he is given adequate resources to enable him to meet his conveyance costs, entertainment expenses etc. Of course his intention is never to sell the votes he claims he has in his possession, to the advantage of a particular candidate. Oh no! All that he wants, he repeats, is to ensure that he is not inhibited in his movements by a scarcity of resources, to reach the voters whose votes he claims are in his "pocket". The *Manual of Election Law* forbids the candidate from providing vehicles for giving lifts to voters to reach polling booths. And what do the campaigners do to get over this? They go into the bazaar and with a show of great delicacy hand over a rupee or two to a voter and express their apology for putting him to the inconvenience of having to foot it out or hire a taxi and miss in the bargain his usual cup of tea. The small amount they say is to enable the voter to cover his expenses while going to vote. In popular parlance, this practice is known as "Cha-Pani".

All this costs money. In addition there are the inevitable jeeps to be bought or hired. Cars by the dozen to be hired or borrowed from friends and to be maintained, for at least a month, including petrol, repairs and drivers. One is therefore, driven to the conclusion that to be a candidate in an election would mean ability to secure the support or sponsorship of an influential political party or at least be in a position to

raise the necessary financial resources. And for a party, it means availability of large funds.

Misuse of authority: The misuse of authority by those in seats of power has become so widespread that it does not even evoke a sense of guilt in those who misuse their authority for personal or party ends during election-time. The population in a small town in Andhra Pradesh had been demanding for a considerable period the installation of street-lamps. Largely as a result of bureaucratic indifference no action was taken. But soon after the General Elections, the incumbent Member of Parliament from that area, a Congressman resigned. The seat was declared vacant and a by-election ensued. But the by-election promised to be a difficult one for the Congress and all forces were mustered by the party in power to retain the seat. When citizens of the area pointed out once again, their demand for street lamps, the official machinery this time moved with lightning speed. Orders were immediately passed and before polling took place the town was blessed with street lighting!

This writer can personally testify that he has seen jeeps belonging to the district boards, cooperative societies in villages, jeeps used by block development officers etc. being pressed into service with impunity, by the candidates of the ruling party. The staff of government offices in the rural areas have similarly been made use of. Veiled threats have been held out against village Panchayats suspected of harbouring feelings not helpful to the party in power. The punitive action threatened, includes a threat to siphon off funds for development works in such a village.¹

In a small town in Gujarat, water taps mysteriously went dry on polling day for the major part of the day and taps gushed forth as mysteriously as ever, an hour or so before polling came to a close. It was said that this prevented a large number of voters from turning up at the polls since without their morning ablutions no one was willing to stir out. It was feared by supporters of the ruling party's candidate that a large turn-out of voters would have been unfavourable

¹ For an elaboration of this trend see Myron Weiner, "India's Third General Elections", *Political Change in South Asia*, Calcutta, 1963 pp. 278-86.

to their candidates, chances. The voting as a result was very poor. It is of course difficult to say whether this was a coincidence or deliberate mischief.

The spectacle of a candidate of the ruling party, at that time a Minister, arriving to address an election rally organised by his party with official paraphernalia like motor-cycle outriders, is a calculated attempt to impress on the voter his authority and thus secure votes.

Identification of the party in power with the State: Among the major difficulties facing an opposition party, especially during elections is the similarity of the Indian National Flag and the tricolour of the Congress Party. During the last General Elections, the entire city of Hyderabad was flooded with buntings of the Congress Tricolor, giving the voter the impression that the occasion was either a celebration of a national event or that the exhortations to vote for the tricolour was in fact one to vote for the Government.

Another unfortunate fact is the practice of a Minister on an election tour being accompanied by the District collector and other officials. It has been reported that this gave the impression to the poor villagers that the Minister was the "Sarkar" and they had to demonstrate their support for the "Sarkar" by voting for the person the Minister wanted.

Illiteracy of the voter: The widespread illiteracy of the voter and his inability to comprehend the meaning of the vote, apart from leading to corrupt practices, has been skilfully exploited in other ways. During a recent by-election the writer became personally aware of how cleverly this was done. Canvassers belonging to the rival party went around with a specimen ballot paper and a rubber stamp marked X. Wherever they found voters a little hostile these canvassers glibly explained to such voters that the cross (X) meant their disagreement with a candidate and therefore when they did not like a candidate all they had to do was mark an X against his symbol!

Voting by symbol, while simplifying matters for the illiterate, has also in many instances reduced the exercise of voting to a farce. For instance, in a constituency in Mysore the writer had occasion to visit, he found that the ruling Congress Party would win, whatever the odds, simply because they had as

their symbol, the bullocks and the yoke and the majority community in this constituency happened to be worshippers of the Bull.

This recitation of a few problems would have served its purpose if the reader becomes aware of the complex factors that face *any* political party in India. For the party in power the problems are solved through the very fact of it possessing power. For an opposition party which cannot provide say overnight street-lighting, the difficulties are enormous. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the development of an opposition is impossible under present conditions. Unfortunately, adult franchise has preceded political education. And the result has been an almost total absence of any comprehension of democratic concepts. Therefore, if democracy is to survive, the task of political education must take precedence over every other activity of a political party. During the last General Elections the Swatantra Party made an attempt to do just this by inserting in leading newspapers a series of advertisements entitled "Democracy and the People". The Party tried to raise the level of electioneering from narrow, parochial, caste considerations to a healthy ideological plane. Unfortunately, the ruling Congress Party instead of taking the cue answered with its own advertisement with the exhortation. "Follow the Leader" and a huge portrait of the late Prime Minister. But the mere fact that even the Congress Party had to insert something by way of an answer is encouraging.

There are no short-cuts to the growth of a mature democracy. An opposition Party like the Swatantra must persist in its attempts to educate the people not only in the values of democracy but also encourage their participation in greater numbers in the processes of decision-making.

The problems of an Opposition are tied up with the larger problems of a nation trying to shake off age-old traditions of authoritarianism. In the process, one is bound to feel a sense of frustration at times but the fact that we still enjoy the rights of civil liberty and political opposition after 17 years of self-government should serve as an encouragement to develop a new tradition wedded to democracy and the free way of life.

II—Bharatiya Jana Sangh

G. B. KANITKAR

In this brief article I shall try to explain what in my opinion are the main difficulties in building up an opposition party in India. I must, however, make it clear that I have not devoted much time to the study of political science; and although my experience of practical politics has been quite short, I have had the opportunity of playing a significant role in the last two General Elections; in a joint-front set up, to contest two Corporation elections myself, succeeding in one and what is even more important losing in the other. I have also had valuable experience as Secretary of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh unit in North Bombay and as Secretary of the Bombay "Vibhag", as we call it in our organisational pattern, for about two years I have toured various parts of Maharashtra State, particularly in Vidarbha and Khandesh, both during elections and at other times.

My article therefore, is based primarily upon the impressions gathered during these years of experience as a field worker of an opposition party and on a more or less conscious attempt to interpret these impressions.

At the outset, I must confess that I do not share the prevalent view that opposition parties are not developing at a satisfactory pace in India. The only element of truth in the matter is this: against the background of the overwhelming majority which the Congress enjoys in the Lok Sabha, in state assemblies and in most of the district and local bodies in the country, that the emerging opposition groups which are many and divided, appear very small, and in most cases, almost insignificant.

Again, though Congress wins a large majority of seats on the strength of a minority of the total valid votes, thanks to the British pattern of elections, the opposition vote is divided with the result that there is no single party in opposition which can be compared to the ruling Congress in either the number of seats or the percentage of votes polled.

The Nature of the Congress

According to me, there are a number of reasons for this phenomenon. I shall now proceed to discuss the more important

opinions of the importance of parties in a democracy, but the fact remains that parties do exist, and play vital roles, in all modern democratic states, and indeed in most states, whatever their ideological orientation. If India is to survive as a state moving generally in the democratic direction, it must evolve a healthier party system or develop some effective alternatives to parties, i.e., a system of "partyless politics" which Jayaprakash Narayan and others believe to be both possible and necessary.