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★ WHY I
TOOK TO
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WHY I TOOK TO POLITICS

By Charanjit Rai

The great Greek philosopher Aristotle said: "Man is a political animal"—but as far as we Indian business men are concerned, he was wrong. In our country, business men keep away—I should say run away—from politics in the same way that a healthy person runs away from a leper.

When the news of my going into active politics got around, my business friends, one by one, asked me: "Is it true that you have gone into active politics? Have you actually joined an Opposition Party?" From the tone in which they asked these questions I knew they were as shocked at my entry into politics as if I had committed murder!

You know I am in business and industry. I have fairly widespread interests and, by God's grace, in a fairly big way, too. I may also mention that I did not inherit this business, nor did I have an ancestral fortune. I started out on a very modest scale in the world of trade and industry at about the time that the dawn of independence was breaking over the political horizon of our country.

ERA OF STRUGGLE

As a young boy at college, in the thirties, I was often swayed by political situations and conflicts, for it was an era where the whole nation was struggling for independence. I watched the development of the Indian political movement with quite some interest—but at most this was merely the awakening of political consciousness. I never took active part in the political game.

Time passed by and the great moment of Indian Independence came. As Wordsworth has said:

*" Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive;
To be young was very heaven."*

It was a time of great hopes. We all thought that when we had discarded the chains of slavery, the misery of the people would also go. We looked forward to an age of peace and prosperity and plenty. People sang with Tagore:

*" Into that heaven of freedom,
My father, let my country awake."*

DEEP DISAPPOINTMENT

It was on this note that the Congress assumed the reins of power. But years passed—and the soaring eagle came down like an ominous owl. Gandhiji's death wrought a great change. Within a few years people found Congress rapidly moving away from the path shown by the Father of the Nation, found most of the Congress leaders treading the path of Oscar Wilde, who wrote: "I can resist everything but temptation."

Gandhiji had faith in people; he looked on business as a trustee of the nation's wealth, to be used for the good of all. He did not believe in confiscation of wealth and property by the State. He trusted people—but since his time "faith in the people" has been replaced by "suspicion of the people."

Personally I have always felt that Indians are a great and lovable people, essentially good, affectionate, sentimental and emotional—people who have an enormous capacity for accepting whatever Fate brings their way. They have an inexhaustible stock of patience, and somehow or other they always manage to adapt themselves to whatever circumstances they find themselves in. Moreover, they are capable of giving their best in times of great crisis.

But you cannot take the best out of a man beset by doubts and scepticism. Put faith in the man, trust him—and he will live up to your expectations. Johnson rightly said : "Suspicion is no less an enemy to virtue than happiness. He that is already corrupt is naturally suspicious, and he that becomes suspicious will quickly be corrupt."

As I was saying, after the demise of Gandhiji, slowly but imperceptibly, the rot set in. Gradually, the freedom to act, the initiative to grow in every field, including trade and industry, was taken away from the people and transferred to bureaucrats. Interference by Government officials increased, and led inevitably to rise in corruption. Business was put in shackles. A sense of frustration began to make itself felt. Men who hardly knew anything of economics, business or industry tried to teach us business men what we should do and what we should not do. There was a good deal of annoyance, yet one could do nothing but bite his own flesh in frustration.

RUSSIAN MODELS

The Government embarked on a policy of Plans designed after the fashion of the Russian Five Year Plans. The First Plan, the Second and the Third came one after the other. The stress was on how much to spend—not on whether that expenditure was wise or necessary. This can be illustrated by a conversation between two Government officials:

Official: Sir, if we are unable to figure out a way to spend that 50 crores, we'll be out of jobs.

Secretary : How about building a bridge across the Jamuna ?

Official: That couldn't cost 50 crores.

Secretary : Don't worry, we can build lengthwise.

^cThis story may be apocryphal, but it exactly points the mentality of a dangerously large

number of bureaucrats who have been placed in charge of spending the people's money.

Once the Plan mania had been embarked on, taxes were gradually raised to such high levels that we became the highest taxed nation in the world. The economy was controlled, industry and production capacity was controlled. Industry, because of lack of competition, yielded high profits, but a large share of these profits were taken away in taxes. Still, the rich became richer. Ordinarily I should have been happy that the firms I am associated with were making profits, but I felt it was unfair that just because one or two firms got manufacturing licenses, there should be no competition and that the consumer should pay for it and the common man be made to suffer for it—the common man by whom Congress swore so loudly. I felt it was definitely wrong that the common man should be compelled to live a life of misery while a privileged few reaped the harvest of the controlled economy.

CRIPPLING TAXATION

Incidentally, when I talked of taxation, I did not mean only direct taxation. It is the indirect taxation that affects the common man. Out of every rupee he pays for sugar he is paying 25 paise as Excise Duty. For kerosene and cloth he is paying 45 paise in a rupee as Excise Duty. The result naturally has been that prices have risen steeply—and the income of the people has not been able to keep pace with this rise. It did not take me very long to realise that this vicious circle was most dangerous.

We people in the business world are trained to visualise the effect of policies we wish to adopt so, by examining the Government's policies, I clearly visualised the slow but certain annihilation not only of private initiative in business activity but also of individual liberty and freedom in every sphere of man's activity. In such circumstances I felt that the death of democracy was a virtual certainty.

In my mind I also visualised my child standing at the end of a queue, a long

waiting patiently to get their quota of bread from a ration shop. But when their turn came, there was no bread left. I could clearly see the hungry look on their faces—the same hungry look that I have seen on the faces of people in some of the Communist countries I have visited. On my mental screen I saw my son and his friends being ordered about by bureaucrats to do this and to do that—and not what he or they liked.

Then I said to myself: "If I die tomorrow, what is it that I leave my children? It is true that I have done well in business and industry, I have made money, paid huge taxes. I have enough to eat and my children will have enough to eat also. But what good is all that if my children cannot breathe the free air of democracy and liberty?"

The day that this realisation dawned on me, I decided to join politics. The next question was which party to join. It had to be some Opposition party. I studied the principles of all the Opposition parties, made charts by putting their policies under different heads like agriculture, industry and so on, made a study of Gandhian liberalism—and found that the Swatantra Party was the only party whose principles were more or less identical with Gandhian liberalism, which safeguarded individual liberty and freedom and could bring about the prosperity of the common man. And here I am with Mr. Masani.

I believe that each one of us has a duty to see that in addition to giving our children an education, a good home and leaving some money for them we should do our utmost to bequeath to them the air of democracy wherein they can breathe freely. If we cannot do this, whatever else we might do for them is meaningless. And we must also remember that we cannot leave this job to be done by somebody else. We have to do it ourselves by taking active part in politics. It is worth keeping in mind the words of Prof. Harward. "The greatest duty of a free born people is to transmit that poliom to their children."