

There is room at the top

By M. R. MASANI

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A FREELY functioning Opposition is the essence of parliamentary democracy. A country may have a Constitution providing for periodical elections, a secret ballot and an independent judiciary but, if an Opposition Party is not to be found functioning freely, that Constitution would prove to be an empty shell. The example of countries like Soviet Russia is conclusive on this point. It is not enough if, in theory, there is no bar to free opposition. What is essential is the existence in point of fact of a freely functioning Opposition.

The role of an Opposition is two-fold: the first is to act as a vigilant critic of the policies of the government of the day. The second is to offer an alternative government which, given the mandate, can replace the party in office. To what extent does the Opposition in India fulfil these functions?

First of all, it must be conceded that there is no such thing as "The Opposition" in India. There are several distinct Oppositions—some of which have little in common with one another—as for example the Swatantra Party and the communist parties. The Opposition in the Indian Parliament is a divided and splintered one, incapable—as the recent debate on a motion of no-confidence showed—of challenging the Government effectively. What are the factors that have led to the situation, and how can they be removed?

OUTMODED ELECTORAL SYSTEM

There are two basic reasons for the imbalance in our party system today. The first is the existence of half-a-dozen opposition parties instead of just one or, at the most, two. This would not have been a very serious handicap but for the fact that, alongside of this party structure, we have an electoral system that does not go with it. Most democratic and progressive countries of the world have one or another form of Proportional Representation which ensures that, even with half a dozen parties in the field, Parliament reflects fairly the strength of the different trends of thought in the country. Since, under such conditions, no one party normally gets a clear majority, a coalition government is formed after the elections, which has the support of a clear majority of the electorate and in consequence of Parliament.

Unfortunately, although ours is a modern Constitution, it has adopted an archaic system of election from the British. The British system of a single member constituency resulting in the election of the candidate who is "first past the post," even though he may have a minority of votes, goes well with a two-party system, but in India it results in a veritable travesty of democracy.

Our present Lok Sabha, where the Congress Party, which polled 44.72 per cent of the votes cast in 1962, possesses no less than 72 per cent of the seats, is a gross distortion of the people's will. The opposition parties, which between them polled more votes than the Congress Party, are all grossly unrepresented and the fact that they have more than half the people of India behind them is constantly overlooked in the ordering of business and the conduct of the proceedings of Parliament. The shocking and ugly scenes in which members of the communist parties and the SSP recently participated were partly a reflection of the impotent rage to which some people are reduced in consequence.

NEED OF A SECOND PARTY

The solution, if Indian democracy is to survive, is for a Second Party to be thrown up which can offer an Alternative Government to the country. Today, however, such an effective choice for the electorate is lacking, with the result that large numbers of people who dislike the Congress Party and understood its responsibility for the mess in which the country finds itself are still prepared to vote for Congress candidates in a mood of utter resignation. Has our young democracy got the capacity to throw up such a Second Party as is needed in the immediate future?

Such a party should have two basic qualifications: first, that it is a National Democratic Party, that is wedded to democratic processes, and that its motivations are not dictated from abroad. The second, that it has the capability in time to replace the ruling party.

Judged by this test, the two communist parties must first be eliminated because one of them is a fifth column of Peking and the other of Moscow. Their extra-territorial loyalties and their adherence to the cult of dictatorship and refusal to accept a plurality of parties wherever they are in power rule them out of the race. Of the other opposition parties, the only one that can hope to make the grade is the Swatantra Party. This claim is based on its clear-cut policies, which are distinct from that of the ruling party, the character and

quality of its leadership and its national character as opposed to the regional or communal character of some others. It is a party in which all Indians, whatever their religion or their habitat, can find an honourable place. In a recent editorial on August 7, 1966, *Mysindia* of Bangalore observed:

"There can be no doubt after devaluation that the Swatantra Party's economic thinking is the soundest. The way it proposes is the quickest, and indeed the only way towards prosperity and higher standards, and it would also put the democratic system and the citizen's freedom on the strongest basis."

The journal then went on to ask:

"Can such a programme gain the support of the electorate? Those who hoped for the support of big business have been disappointed. Big business has too much to lose: it is quite happy under a system which deprives it of legal gains but allows illegal ones in plenty. But the interests of all other classes should lead them to support the Swatantra policy, and now that the pleasing illusions of the past have been dispelled, there ought to be a chance for reason to prevail."

SWATANTRA OBJECTIVES

In this context, the objectives of the Swatantra Party for the general elections of February 1967 are to deny the Congress Party a continuing monopoly of power at the centre based, as at present, on a bogus majority and to carry at least a couple of states. It may be conceded that these are ambitious objectives. Our answer is that, as has been well said, "It is not failure but low aim that is a crime." These objectives are eminently capable of fulfilment given efficient organisation, good candidates and adequate resources. None of these conditions are at present adequately available and the challenge that the party and its supporters have to face is to produce them in the next four months.

At present, the party has only nominated some 65 prospective candidates for Parliament throughout the country. This number will have to be multiplied many times over by the end of the year. It is in this spirit and as an act of faith that Rajaji recently made his appeal in the following terms:

"I smell the coming upsurge against the Congress Party as one smells a coming storm and rain..... The main difficulty is that the Congress has infinite cash as against its opponents. I appeal therefore for offers from good and qualified men to stand as candidates for Parliament on the Swatantra ticket who are able to meet their own election expenses. We are considering a plan under which we throw all caution to the winds and set up our candidates in three to four hundred Parliamentary constituencies and have it out with the Congress."

It is more than likely that there are a large number of good men and women in fundamental agreement with the Swatantra Party's policies who are not today on its membership rolls. This may be particularly true of the kind of young and dynamic men and women whom a party of modern, twentieth century thought like ours should be able to rally to its ranks.

ROOM FOR HONEST CITIZEN

The Swatantra Party, as Rajaji has so often said, wants to see the present Government replaced by a good and efficient government in which the Swatantra Party would be prepared to play its part, but which it would have no desire to monopolise. There should be room in such a government, if we can achieve it, not only for members of various political parties, but also for good citizens outside the field of party politics, whether in the ranks of the professions, business, labour, the peasantry or *sarvodaya*.

It is in the pursuit of these objectives that the Swatantra Party has been trying, in a single-minded manner, to achieve electoral understandings or arrangements with other non-communist parties. This has nothing to do with ideology, but is an attempt at removing the distortion in popular representation which is to be found in the present Lok Sabha and many State Assemblies. No question of an alliance is involved in such understandings. The Swatantra Party will fight the elections under its own banner and on its own platform.

If the effort of the Swatantra Party to provide an effective opposition next year were to fail, a situation would arise in which a government rejected by a majority of the electorate would seek to enjoy power for another five long years. One shudders to think of the prospect.

As a party in whose policies is to be found a synthesis of Gandhiji's thinking with modern liberal thought, the Swatantra Party is entitled to the support of young, progressive and forward looking men and women throughout the country.