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Swatantra in the doldrums

by
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THE Swatantra Party is in the doldrums. A simmering revolt within the party has compelled the leadership to postpone its all-India conference scheduled for June 1 and 2 at Bhubaneswar. Instead, meetings of the National Executive, the Central Parliamentary Board and the General Council have been called at Madras in the first week of June. The elation and enthusiasm resulting from the phenomenal successes that the party achieved in the fourth General Election are gone, and in their place have set in serious apprehensions about its future. The party's defeat in the Rajasthan by-elections and the debacle of the party in the Haryana mid-term poll have started a process of anxious heart-searching and re-thinking both on the political and organisational levels. Dangerous cracks have appeared in the organisation and large chunks in various units, particularly in Gujarat and Rajasthan, are threatening to break away. Discipline is at a low ebb, constraining the ex-General Secretary M. R. Masani to submit his resignation from his positions in the National Executive and the Parliamentary Board.

The immediate problem has been created by open defiance of 35 party legislators in Gujarat as a result of which the party's candidate for Rajya Sabha, Babubhai Vaidya, got defeated. The rebels are not even penitent. They assert that the candidate was not even a member of the party and had been thrust on them against their wishes. The state party had been even earlier complaining of the unwarranted interference in its affairs by the central leaders particularly by Masani. In the interests of the growth of the party in Gujarat they wanted a free hand. A senior State Swatantra leader, Bhailal Patel, went to the extent of accusing Masani of being anti-Gujarat and threatened that if the latter did not change, he would not be given any help to get

re-elected from his Gujarat constituency. The defeat of Vaidya was a manifestation of this anti-Masani feeling. The accusation against him is reinforced by reference to his attitude on the Kutch and Narmada issues. The Gujarat party feels that it has been stopped from joining agitations on these questions under the advice of Masani.

Masani, on the other hand, feels that whatever its background, a decision once taken must be respected and that its violation is "tantamount to a grave breach of discipline calling for severe action." If indiscipline is condoned, he feels, the party will go to pieces. His view, however, was not shared by a majority in the last meeting of the Executive. Chairman Ranga and General Secretary Dandekar were not in favour of making a serious issue out of it. The general opinion was in favour of closing the affair with a token punishment for the ring-leaders of the revolt. Masani is adamant and has pressed his resignation in the interests of cleaning up the party. He has openly expressed his preference for quality against quantity.

The issue that Masani has brought to the forefront is not confined to Gujarat alone. It has an all-India bearing. Linked with it are a number of other questions that the Swatantra Party will have to resolve if it is to survive. Indiscipline in the party has been the result of unresolved contradictions between the state units and the centre, and between the various interests that strive to make the party primarily an instrument for promoting their cause.

The centre-State conflict was responsible for the exit of the Bihar unit before General Elections. It is now the cause of the crisis in Gujarat.

The Swatantra Party was conceived

as a brake on the socialistic trends that had grown in the Congress under the leadership of Nehru. It was intended to be more of an ideological pressure group than an alternative to the ruling party. As such the leaders who floated the party were interested more in getting into the Parliament effective debaters and lobbyists than in developing a grass-roots organisation. The local units, to remain alive and effective, got involved in local problems and, in the process of democratisation, tended to adopt political postures which did not always fit in with the ideology of the party. The clever leaders of the Swatantra Party had seen this happening in other parties. In their view, it weakened the ideological content of a group or party and thus rendered the lobby less effective. So they tried to keep the top unencumbered by the roots. As a result the local units remained neglected and developed a resentful feeling that they were being used as mere pawns in the game. The local party's leaders now feel they have a stake in local politics. Wherever a unit becomes strong either due to local circumstances or due to the pull and popularity of its leaders, it tends to assert itself leading to conflict with the central party.

This conflict has another aspect too. The State units are dominated by the agriculturist class, mostly rich peasants who are interested more in facilities for agricultural operations and in avoiding inconvenient land-reforms. Agriculture being a state subject they are interested more in influencing the state government's than in changing or modifying the central policies, whose impact is primarily on the industrial development. The State-Centre wrangle is, therefore, sometimes described as the conflict between the industrial lobby and the agriculturist lobby within the Swatantra Party.

Again the state units wish to resort to agitations on certain issues. Otherwise, they get left out. The central leadership wants to keep the party confined to "constitutional" means and is opposed to the agitational approach. On issues where other parties try to work up emotions the Swatantra endeavours to take a rational attitude which is found irksome by local level politicians. State leaders feel that

In one place in the paper it has been said that resources to the extent of Rs. 200 to 300 crores should be mobilised from the public sector. I do not see how such optimism is justified. Our experience to-day is that these public sector projects are bottomless pits in which money is only sunk and from which nothing comes out! There may be a project here and there which may be making money like Hindustan Insecticides or Hindustan Antibiotics. By and large, the public sector is a losing business involving annual losses of crores of rupees, particularly such big projects as Hindustan Steel, Heavy Engineering, Heavy Electricals and Indian Drugs and Pharmaceuticals Ltd. We are not opposed to the public sector altogether. We believe that public sector may be necessary where private enterprise is not forthcoming and where we must go ahead with progress and development. But the policy of the present Government is to go into the public sector whenever and wherever it is possible, regardless of the losses to the public exchequer or of the sacrifices demanded of the tax-payer. So long as this policy is not changed, it is futile to expect any return or resources from the public sector and any plan based on such mobilisation of resources is only a paper plan devised to mislead the public and to throw dust in the eyes of the people so that they may not know the exact picture of the public undertakings under the management of the present Government.

Talking about co-operation, the record of the Congress Party is poor and dismal. If Government were really keen on seeking the co-operation of the Opposition parties with a view to evolving national consensus on matters of common interest, you would not have turned down our unanimous proposal for Standing Committees of Parliament to be attached to certain important Ministries such as Defence, External Affairs, Industrial Development and Commerce. That itself shows that scant respect is paid by you and your Party to the wishes of the Opposition parties, and therefore, it is really hypocritical to talk of co-operation of the opposition parties in the evolution of any national plan.

In view of the above exposition of the philosophy of the Swatantra Party, we feel that there is no scope for co-operation with Government for dealing with a paper like the one under discussion. We hope that even at this stage Government would realise the wisdom of a consensus on matters of national economy and will sit down in a truly co-operative manner with the leaders of the opposition parties and evolve a policy which will bear in mind national good rather than party interests. Unless this is done, it is futile for us to join with Government in any discussion on planning, national economy or national integration.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

(N.G. Ranga)

Mrs. Indira Gandhi