

OPINION

Vol. VIII

Tuesday, APRIL 2, 1968

[No. 48]

PROMISE—SOLEMN OBLIGATION OR CONVENIENT DEVICE?

"How comely it is and how reviving

To the spirits of just men long opprest"

by the general cynicism of Indian politics to find among practising politicians at least a few who regard the keeping of their plighted word as so important that they resign their cherished Party offices when they find that it is being set at naught by those in duty bound to honour it. Messrs. Bhailalbhai, Jaideepsingh and Masani have by their resignations shown how greatly they value the keeping of promises. All citizens interested in the maintenance of honour in political life must heartily approve of their conduct and accord to them a tribute of respect and sympathy.

The facts are well set out in the second paragraph of Mr. Masani's letter of resignation to the Secretary of the Party: "In 1966 our Party invited the support of the Independent Progressive Group, of which Mr. Babubhai Vaidya was the leader in the Gujarat Assembly, in order to secure the election to the Rajya Sabha of Dr. Beharilal Anantani, our Party's candidate. At that time, Jaideepsinghji of Baria, with the approval of Bhailalbhai, the Leader of the Party, and his other colleagues wanted in return to promise that Babubhai Vaidya would be our Party's candidate for the Rajya Sabha in the 1968 elections. I was then the General Secretary of our Party at the National level and Jaideepsingh of Baria asked for my approval to this arrangement and also an assurance that I would see that the Central Parliamentary Board stood by the promise that they were giving to Babubhai Vaidya. On being assured that this arrangement would be in the interests of the Party in Gujarat, I gave an assurance that the Central Parliamentary Board would honour the arrangement in 1968. Later, when the matter came up at the Central Parliamentary Board level, you will recall that it was decided that this promise given by the Gujarat Party leaders should be honoured and the Central Parliamentary Board at its meeting in Bombay recorded that Mr. Babubhai Vaidya would be the Party's candidate for the Rajya Sabha in 1968. It is this solemn promise given by the Party that over a score of our members in the Gujarat Legislature have violated by joining hands with the Congress Party to get our Party's candidate defeated."

Accordingly the resignations, as some atonement to those who had been deceived by the breach of faith on the part of some Party colleagues and in the hope that because of them the conscience of the Party might

be stimulated, for as Messrs. Bhailalbhai and Jaideepsingh make clear "No one will now have any faith in the Party and its promises."

This contretemps is unfortunate not only for the Gujarat Swatantra Party but also for Gujarat itself, for the present comparatively good government in Gujarat is, according to non-politician observers, in no small part due to the influence and strength of the Swatantra Party, with its independent, experienced, talented and principled leadership both in State and Legislature.

To turn from this example of worthy conduct by leaders to the behaviour of the Maharashtra and Bombay Provincial Congress Committee chiefs in the matter of the observance of promises made, is to come nearer the norm of Indian political practice. On 5th November 1966, Shri P. G. Kher, President of the B.P.C.C. issued the following statement: "Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee has been anxious to give representation to the members of the minority communities inhabiting Bombay, which has the proud privilege of being a miniature India. The recommendations of candidates to the Lok Sabha and the Maharashtra State Assembly have been made on the basis of this consideration. There are over 200,000 members of the Sindhi community in Greater Bombay. The leaders of the B.P.C.C. and the M.P.C.C. have unanimously decided to send one representative of the Sindhi community to the Rajya Sabha, and the choice has been upon Shri Ram Jethmalani, an eminent advocate of the city." Says Mr. Jethmalani: "In the last General Elections I had applied for a Congress ticket for the Lok Sabha both to the Bombay and Maharashtra Congress Committee from any constituency in Greater Bombay and Thana District respectively. The day the B.P.C.C. announced its list, a public statement under the signature of the then President Mr. Kher was released to the Press and prominently publicised declaring the joint resolve of both the Congress Committees to return me to the Rajya Sabha. On the faith of this I did not appeal to the Central Parliamentary Board against the refusal of a Lok Sabha ticket. Throughout the election campaign wherever necessary, this fact was exploited to get votes.

"Some time last year, a casual vacancy arose in Maharashtra. I approached both the Congress Committees to fulfil their pledge but I was told that the intention was to nominate me at the time of regular biennial election and that a casual vacancy had not been contemplated. Now the regular election has come and the Congress Committees in question have announced their list of nominees. My name has been omitted. . . . I have protested to the local party bosses and beyond reaffirmation of their promise I see no desire to reverse their decision. A post-dated cheque in renewal of one already dishonoured hardly inspires confidence." Clearly a solemn undertaking was entered into; clearly a solemn undertaking is being wilfully and knowingly disregarded. Repentance? Atonement? "Absurd, surely you know that for bosses like us promises are like pie-crust, as useful to cover up, as easily broken." Moral? No one can or should put any trust in the Congress leadership; its words are written on water, its deeds on sand.