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"At the end of fifteen years of the Nehru administration, India finds herself on the brink of bankruptcy, her frontiers violated, military defeat staring her in the face and without a real friend in the world. The country obviously needs a change of government but the tragedy is that no alternative government is available," observed Mr. M.R. Masani, General Secretary of the Swatantra Party while addressing the Progressive Group this afternoon on the "Changing Pattern of Party Politics."

In the context of the Chinese encirclement of our troops in Ladakh, the speaker referred to the widespread indignation caused by the Defence Minister breakfasting and lunching with the Chinese Foreign Minister and exchanging toasts with his comrades Chen Yi and Gromyko.

Mr. Masani ascribed the failure of an alternative government to emerge to the defective electoral system of a single member constituency and simple majority, which had placed the Congress Party in power despite fiftyfive per cent of the popular vote for Parliament being cast against them earlier this year, and to the inability of democratic Opposition parties to arrive at an electoral understanding. He urged the fusion of all democratic opposition parties in a National Democratic Front.

Turning to the ideological pattern of the party system in India, the speaker deplored the use of labels like 'Left' and 'Right' which every student of political science knew had become meaningless in the world of today. "There can be nothing more reactionary," observed Mr. Masani, "than the communist ideology, with its belief in totalitarian control of every aspect of life and the complete servitude of the people, and yet it is labelled 'Leftist.' There can be nothing more progressive and radical than the philosophy of the Swatantra Party with its stress on individual liberty, the dignity of the human personality and the assertion of the Fundamental Rights in the Constitution, and yet it is often described as 'Rightist'! The Party does not stand for the status quo."

Analysing the ideological content of the Swatantra Party's programme, Mr. Masani said that, while there was room in the Party for those who wished to conserve what was best in the country's history and traditions, it was essentially a programme of Liberalism and Gandhism. The belief in ordered progress through minimum government and the fullest measure of individual liberty was the essence of Liberalism and the core of Gandhiji's philosophy.

In a backward and predominantly illiterate country, it was natural that organisation should count for more than ideology and that the strength of the machine should decide elections. Thus, the Swatantra Party's principles and policies had evoked widespread response but its limited resources in the way of funds and workers had prevented its message from reaching millions of voters.

Discussing the factors that may determine whether or not a particular party would make the grade in the General Elections in 1967, the speaker said that, with political power and economic patronage combined in the hands of the ruling party, only an Opposition party which was accepted by the people as morally superior to that in office could hope to win the people's confidence. Otherwise, all its talk of corruption in the ruling party and all its promises to provide good government would meet with scepticism. No amount of money, local influence, or caste solidarity would enlist the support of the electorate unless the image of a party in the minds of the electorate was that of one made up of good men and true animated by a genuine desire to serve the country and working hard for the cause.

Mr. Masani felt that the following measures would help in creating such an image:

(i) Candidates for Parliament and Assembly should be chosen provisionally four years ahead of the next General Elections and be finally nominated a year before the election in the light of experience. Mr. Masani welcomed Mr. Nehru's advocacy of this practice, which he himself had been advocating during the last two years.

(ii) The quality and credibility of the party's candidates in terms of competence and integrity would be decisive. Hence men of dubious character should be ruled out despite their attractiveness on grounds of caste, local influence or financial resources.

(iii) The building up of a cadre of intelligent and loyal workers through and round whom the organisation could be built up at grassroots level should be given priority over the enrolment of large numbers of 25 naye paise members.

(iv) The social basis of the party must be broad-based, including farmers, industrial and agricultural workers, artisans, shopkeepers, women and youth.

(v) The maintenance of a high level of discipline and rectitude and the purging of elements guilty of indiscipline and malpractices.

(vi) The collection of small contributions from a large number of middle-class and poor people in place of reliance on large contributions from a few with means.

"I am aware," said Mr. Masani, "that there are intelligent people, honest in their own personal lives, who believe that in a backward country like ours, condoning casteism, indiscipline and mishandling of funds helps in building a party. I am deeply convinced that, quite apart from moral considerations, this approach is even pragmatically unsound."

"A political party," concluded Mr. Masani, "is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Therefore the attitude 'my party right or wrong' is as unworthy of credence as that older slogan 'my country right or wrong.' "

Not for publication:

(M. R. MASANI)