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Personal

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H J 6/6 Finding An Identity

In the highly permissive and self-regarding political milieu that India has witnessed in the recent past, Mr Minoo Masani's vicarious atonement for his party's debacle in the recent elections stands out as an exemplary gesture. Some would even regard it as an exaggerated gesture, since it is nobody's case that it was any inadequacy in Mr Masani's leadership that had led to the party's poor performance. Indeed, far from being responsible for the party's electoral misfortunes, Mr Masani could, if he were so minded, say with some justice that he had warned the party of the dangers implicit in the election strategy it chose to adopt. He was clearly of the view that an unprincipled alliance with no commitment to a common minimum programme such as the one that was brought about before the elections would be politically indefensible and electorally damaging. At one stage in the tortuous negotiations that preceded the forging of this alliance, he even walked out of the parleys. He was however "over-ruled" by his party and he loyally executed the decision.

Whether Mr Masani is persuaded to change his mind or not, the major problem is the future of the Swatantra party. Here an

agonising reappraisal is unavoidable even if such an exercise proves inconclusive for the present. The party has long had its own identity problem. It has tended to be regarded with some justification as a party of feudal and moneyed interests without a mass or even a middle class base, except possibly in part of Andhra, and in Tamil Nadu where Mr Rajagopalachari's personality has been the main factor in moulding the party's image. The results of the election have tended to confirm this embarrassing identity. Ideally, what the Swatantra party should be espousing is a kind of forward-looking and aggressively modern conservatism such as Mr Edward Heath has made fashionable in Britain. But there are obvious difficulties from the electoral and other points of view in the Swatantra party adopting this philosophy in the conditions prevailing in India. Still, the Swatantra party's election manifesto showed that it is not irrelevant to the Indian situation. Consequently if it could make common cause with others of like persuasion, possibly in the derelict Congress (O), it could become a natural democratic alternative to the right of the Congress (N). The process of this polarisation may have been put back by the last election. But it should come about eventually.