

INDIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATS RESHUFFLE FORCES*

Mr. Asoka Mehta's expulsion from the Praja Socialist party [PSP] marks yet another phase in the chequered, crisis-ridden history of "social democracy" in this country.

For almost a decade now, Mr. Mehta has been exploring "areas of co-operation" between him and the Congress leadership. He did not find much support from among his own party colleagues in this task.

Finally, when he was offered the Deputy Chairmanship of the Planning Commission last year, he accepted it.

"Incompatible"

Protesting against this, the National Executive of the PSP "requested" him to resign from the party, since his new post, in the words of the chairman of the PSP, Mr. S. M. Joshi, was "incompatible" with the role of the PSP as a "militant" socialist opposition to the Congress, "controlled by capitalists and vested interests."

But Mr. Mehta turned down the "request," expecting perhaps that the party would never take any action against him. Now that he has been expelled, his supporters have announced their decision to resign from the party en bloc.

Mr. Joshi, however, hopes to neutralise these "losses" by seeking unification with the Socialist party [SP], led by Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, who split away from the parent body nine years ago.

Dr. Lohia's Advice

Dr. Lohia, on his part, has already advised his followers to join the PSP "unconditionally." His advice was endorsed by the National Executive of the SP at its recent Lucknow meeting without waiting to ascertain the views of members through a convention.

A decision on unification is now expected to be taken at the national conferences of the two parties.

The return of the prodigal to the party fold has its own significance, insofar as it lends a semblance of unity to forces of "social democracy" in India. The fundamental question is whether the united socialist party to be set up will act as a new pole of attraction to the entire left movement, now in the throes of an ideological and

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organisational crisis.

Nine years ago, Dr. Lohia, then launching his new party, had held out the assurance that it would capture power in seven years.

"Seven-year Itch"

Fascinated by his "seven-year-itch," which was reinforced by his emotional speeches and fire-eating antics, many young people joined the SP only to be disillusioned sooner or later. Ostensibly to realise his objective, Dr. Lohia launched mass campaign after mass campaign -- in pursuit of what he called a technique of "permanent satyagraha" -- on every conceivable issue, not excluding that of abolishing English as an official language.

Dr. Lohia soon realised that his "permanent Satyagraha" was a poor substitute for a real socialist movement with a well-defined political and ideological perspective. When his isolated "struggles" failed to attract followers, he began to flirt with extreme right-wing parties like the Jan Sangh and Swatantra party in a vain bid to form a national front with the twin objective of defeating Communism and denigrating Prime Minister Nehru.

Futile Acrobatics

When he detected signs of a split in the CPI [Communist party of India], he thought he could draw the so-called "left" Communist into a militant opposition party to fight the Congress. Both the attempts misfired.

These acrobatics in the political arena have not brought the SP anywhere near power. Dr. Lohia is more bitter and more frustrated than ever before. He has realised that he has failed to make a real impact on the Indian people in spite of his radicalism. He is now anxious to send his followers back into the fold of the parent party, with which he never had any fundamental ideological differences. The PSP and the SP were two poles of "social democracy."

This raises an important question with regard to the role of "social democratic" parties in an underdeveloped country like India. In advanced countries of Europe, social democracy did play a role by offering "prudent" opposition to the ruling classes in a period of capitalist prosperity. The prospects of social democracy emerging as a serious challenge to the ruling class in India are limited.

When the Congress Socialist party [CSP] was formed in the thirties in opposition to the Gandhian leadership of the Congress, the CSP was described as a product of the "sectarian sins" of the Indian Communists. Had the Communists remained loyal to the Indian revolution, instead of acting as "faithful interpreters" of the Kremlin's foreign policy in the Stalin period, the left movement as a whole would perhaps have taken a different turn altogether in this country.

When the CSP came out of the Congress to form the SP in 1948, it gave promise of emerging as the main force of left opposition to the Congress. Its electoral debacle in 1952, however, dashed all such hopes to the ground.

"Anti-Communist" Shell

Soon the Socialists merged with the Praja party, a group of dissident Congressmen, to form the PSP in 1953. This was countered by the Lohia-ite split in 1954.

Historically speaking, the CPI as a "party of the proletariat" should have played the role of a consolidator of the Indian left, but its subservience to Moscow isolated it from the social democrats who withdrew more and more into a rigid anti-Communist shell.

In that sense, the entire left in India is facing a serious political crisis at the present moment. What is happening inside the PSP and the SP, and for that matter even inside the CPI, is a reflection of the wider political crisis outside, which has resulted in a new process of permutations and combinations among the numerous left groups.

The left as a whole lacks a correct political perspective at present; it has not been able to define its political tasks in relation to the Congress which despite being controlled by vested interests, claims to be building socialism. What is required is a realignment of left forces in the country on the basis of a clear-cut programme of action to bring about speedy socialist transformation of Indian society.

Common Endeavour

The PSP-SP merger, should it materialise ultimately, has only a symbolic value. The merger is no guarantee in itself against future splits, so characteristic of social democracy.

Genuine socialists, whether they are in the existing traditional left parties or outside, must come together to assume leadership of the classes they claim to represent in their common endeavour to bring about a "socialist revolution" in India.