

## SIMPLY SHASTRI

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Even after a lapse of decades, I cannot recall my relationship with Lal Bahadur Shastri without a pang in my heart. He was a unique human being. In or out of office, he remained the same. He never sought office, but offices sought his services both in UP and at the Centre.

When I came to the Provisional Parliament in 1950, I found that Kamraj and Shastri very close to each other. Both were of the same mould. Of poor origin, with no property or influential connections, they rose to conspicuous positions by honesty, integrity, sacrifice and concern for the weaker sections of the Society.

I was amazed at Shastri's sense of fair play and objectivity when he dealt with the faction ridden UP Congress. He never decided anything by hearing only one side. Kamaraj also had that quality; partisan representations received the stock answer in Tamil "Parkalam" (let us see) and it became the joke of Delhi. This great virtue stood Shastri in great stead in the high offices he held.

Shastri's modesty was proverbial. When his son, Hari, was appointed an Engineer in Ashok Leyland at Madras, Shastri wanted no one to know that he was his son, so that no special treatment should be accorded to him. When his daughter and son-in-law came to Madras they refused the hospitality at the Raj Bhavan.

Once while I called on him around 10 PM when he was prime minister, a file came to him. After reading it, he searched for a pen; I gave him a ball-point pen I had bought abroad. He signed with it and returned it to me saying "it writes well". When I was leaving, I told his PA that Shastri liked the pen and left it for him. Next morning, the PA came to the Tamil Nadu house and handed the pen to me and said Shastri insisted that it must be returned to me!

Both in UP and in the Union government, Shastri left the stamp of his personality. As railway minister, he abolished several classes of travel and laid the foundation for two classes; upper and lower, and improved the amenities for the last class of passengers. And as Commerce and Industries, he laid equal emphasis on the development of khadi and village industries. As PM, he was in favour of progressive elimination of controls by the removal of several items from the Schedule to the Industrial Development and Regulation Act.

When the language agitation sprang up in India, there was agitation in Tamil Nadu also. There was a severe opposition to the possibility of a switch from English to Hindi by January 1, 1965. Shastri fully understood the apprehensions of the southern states and assured their leaders that Hindi will not be imposed on them. He also introduced the Official Languages Bill, which provided that even after January 1, 1965, the use of English may be continued in addition to Hindi for all official purposes. People of the southern states were touched by this pragmatic solution. Shastri was the first in India to establish the constitutional responsibility of the minister for acts of omissions and failures of the departments in his charge. When there was a serious train accident in the then state of Madras, Shastri accepted the moral responsibility and tendered his resignation. Despite Prime Minister Nehru's dissuasion, Shastri quit office.

As the delegate to the United Nations General Assembly and as a member of the United Nations Administrative Tribunal, I was often asked by my colleagues, "After Nehru who?" I used to tell them that under our democratic Constitution, we would be able to find the right person when the time came. On the demise of Nehru in 1964, the Congress Working Committee

arrived at what was known as a consensus formula, which required the president of the Congress, Kamaraj, to ascertain the wishes the wishes of the MPs individually and announce the person supported by the majority. Two candidates emerged – Morarji Desai and Shastri. The count showed that a large majority was in favour of Shastri. Morarji accepted the decision and seconded the nomination of Shastri.

The nation was shocked by the sudden news of his demise in Tashkent on January 11, 1966. The nation lost an able administrator and a true friend of the common man. He gave an abiding slogan “Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan”. Underlying this slogan was his basic commitment to his innermost sentiment of Jai Hindusthan.