

## **Shyama Prasad Mukherji**

(Address while unveiling the bust of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, organised by Asutosh Mookerjee memorial Institute, Kolkata on February 23, 2001)

I deem it an honour and privilege to be invited to unveil the bust of Sri Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, one of the illustrious intellectuals and dedicated patriots of our land. I thank Justice Chittatos Mookerjee and the Asutosh Mookerjee Memorial Institute for their kindness and courtesy.

Bengal had during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and in modern times produced a galaxy of talented men and women who had carried forward the torch of renaissance, lighting the path to the rest of India. Hindu reformers like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, social reformers like Raja Ram Mohun Roy, writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterji, who gave us the immortal national song, *Vandematram*, which is resounding in every nook and corner of India; renowned poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, political activists like Surendranath Banerji, Chittaranjan Das, Bipin Chandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghosh and Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, that peerless prince among patriots of undaunted courage who challenged the mighty British Empire in an armed conflict. Eminent scientists like Jagadish Chandra Bose, Acharya P.C. Roy and Megnad Saha, champions of emancipation of women like Renuka Roy, Phulrenu Guha and Renu Chakravarti - all of whom were my colleagues in Parliament, and finally that versatile scholar and educationist, the maker of modern India Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, to name only a few of the galaxy of leaders who have been immortalised in the annals of our nation.

It is often said that Newton's son was no mathematician or Milton's son a poet. But Britain itself disproved it when Pitt the elder Earl of Chatham was succeeded by his illustrious son Pitt the younger, as Prime Minister of England. The nearest parallel to the renowned Pitts of England is Sir Asutosh and Shyama Prasad of India. Sir Asutosh was an eminent Judge of the High Court, and a great educationist who as Vice Chancellor of the Calcutta University, kindled the creative force of education and research and aimed at achieving parity with the West. Above all he was a great reformer who tried to synthesize the ancient culture of India with modern science and research.

Shyama Prasad Ji imbibed all the great qualities of his father and became as great a success as his illustrious father, - a great son of a great father. He was a brilliant student securing a first class and first rank in his Arts and Law degree examinations of the biggest university, the Calcutta University. He latter went to England for higher studies in Law and was called to the Bar in England.

Though the Bar was a very lucrative profession, Shyama Prasad Ji's interest was more in education. He got himself elected successively to the Senate and the Syndicate of the University and from there to the Bengal Legislative Council at the age of 29. At the age of 33 he became the Vice-Chancellor of the prestigious Calcutta University- the youngest Vice Chancellor ever. He became Finance Minister of undivided Bengal, a member of the Constituent Assembly and Minister for Industries and Supplies in the national Cabinet of 1947. He resigned from the Union Government in 1950, owing to differences on the Nehru-Liaquat Pact and functioned as the Leader of Opposition both in the Provisional Parliament and in the Lok Sabha after the general election until the cruel hand of destiny snatched him away prematurely. He strode on the

political firmament of the nation like a colossus, shedding light and luster, steadfastly upholding the Cause of Indian nationalism. Under his inspiration the Hindu Maha Sabha adopted in 1939, complete Independence as its political goal. Gandhiji himself welcomed Shyama Prasad Ji, joining Hindu Maha Sabha, saying, "somebody had to lead the Hindus after Malaviya Ji."

It is the qualities of Shyama Prasad Ji that had attracted the whole nation. A man of dauntless courage and firm conviction Shyama Prasad Ji while a minister, defied the ban on the Hindu Maha Sabha session in Bhagalpur in 1942 and courted arrest. It was the most sensational news in all India and abroad. Several ministers had courted imprisonment after resigning from the ministry but the action of Shyama Prasad Ji was unparalleled.

Again when he was in Fiazlul Haque ministry, he found the governor's interference intolerable and it was making a mockery of the much advertised provincial autonomy under the Government of India Act 1935, he tendered his resignation. This enhanced his reputation as a person who cared more for principles than for office.

During the fierce repression let loose by the British against the Quit India movement launched by the Congress, Shyama Prasad wrote strong letters to the Viceroy and the Governor condemning such brutality. His differences with the Congress did not stand in the way of his burning patriotism for the country.

When more than 3 million people died in the Bengal famine 1943, he was one of those who exposed the misery of the starving people braving the wrath of the then masters. He organised relief in a manner that elicited the admiration, not only of Bengal, but of the entire nation.

Dr. Shyama Prasad joined the Union Cabinet in 1947 in his personal capacity along with other distinguished non-Congressmen like John Mathai, Shanmugam Chetty and Ambedkar and the great Congress leaders, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel. Though an educationist by specialization, he handled the portfolio of Industries with a rare felicity and laid the foundation for what was later called the 'mixed economy'. Despite being an ardent believer in private sector, he established the outstanding public sector undertakings like the Chittaranjan Locomotive Works, the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. and the Sindri Fertilizers. Pragmatism and not dogmatism informed his industrial policy. His approach to industrialisation was based on the needs and circumstances prevailing in the country and not on any ideological approach to the issue. He, thus, encouraged every sector, the public, private, cooperative, individual, and the small and rural industries. I should like to cite one example: Around 1948, the workers of salt Pans in the district of Tirunelveli in South India had formed a co-operative for the manufacture of salt and applied to the Central Government for assignment of land. The idea was novel and was resisted by the bureaucracy from the lowest level to the highest in the government of India. I was then in charge of the labour wing of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee and I represented to Dr. Shyama Prasad the cause of the salt workers. I explained to him that the salt workers had experience in salt manufacture and that the experiment was worth a trial. Overruling all objections, from the officialdom, Shyama Prasad Ji allowed the co-operative to be formed and assigned the land. It is today one of the outstanding examples of co-operative salt manufacture by the workers themselves.

As Industries Minister, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee had a practical and sympathetic approach to labour problems. He had no faith in the Marxist doctrine of class struggle. He believed in co-operation between labour and employer for the benefit of increased production and productivity. He had a great solicitude for the welfare of labour for which I can also bear personal testimony. It was around 1948 that there was a complete strike in textile mills in

Coimbatore. Sir R K Shanmugam Chetty (then Finance Minister) and Shyama Prasad ji visited Coimbatore to discuss the matters with mill-owners as well as the workers. At the meeting, I opened the case for the labour and said that the employees were paying prewar wages in the days of post war inflation. I was followed by other trade union leaders. The mill-owners presented their case. Apparently, Shyama Prasad Ji had come with a prejudiced brief against workers but such was his broad mind and open sympathy for the labour that he totally changed his approach and gave directions for resolving the problem.

Shyama Prasad Ji's solicitude for labour was so well known that the workers of the Hindustan Shipbuilding Yard, Vizagapatnam offered to abide any decision that Shyama Prasad Ji may give in their dispute with the management.

As a Parliamentarian, Shyama Prasad Ji was an orator, a skilled debater and master of witty sallies and repartees. During my days in provisional parliament and the first Parliament, I had the benefit of watching his composure during criticism and his devastating reply.

As Minister for Industry and Supply, he was once criticized in Parliament for having disposed of the surplus stores at a very low price. I remember one member, who made these allegations, brought a few specimens of good brushes and showed them as having been disposed of at a very low price. Shyama Prasad Ji, while replying to the debate, answered the criticism saying that the surplus stores consisted of both good and bad materials that had to be disposed of at the best available price. He then produced a few brushes before the House which had no bristles at all as samples disposed of and thus completely silenced the House!

Above all Shyama Prasad ji was front rank patriot and an ardent nationalist. He did not accept anything less than complete independence to the country unlike the moderates of those days who were content with Dominion Status. He was against the partition of India and resisted it with all his might. After independence Shyama Prasad Ji wanted total integration of Kashmir with India and opposed the special status under Art 370 of the Constitution. His speech in Parliament opposing a separate flag for Kashmir state which was put forward by the influential leaders of the National Conference before the Kashmir Constituent Assembly rings in our ears as one of the finest pieces of parliamentary eloquence. He told the people of Jammu at a mammoth public meeting "I shall get you the Indian Constitution or give up my life for it"

In May 1953 the Jammu and Kashmir State was in ferment. The Praja Parishad had mounted an massive agitation for keeping Jammu and Kashmir as one of the other states within the Indian Union and the local government had let loose leonine violence and suppression. Despite indifferent health, the lion hearted leader Shyama Prasad Ji rushed to Kashmir. He was arrested and he died while in prison custody. He died a martyr to the cause of Indian Unity. The nation was plunged in sorrow.

Shyama Prasad Ji was universally admired and respected. In Parliament the treasury benches, the opposition and all other sections were deferential towards him. In fact Shri Mavlankar, the then Speaker of the Lok Sabha echoed the feelings of all sections of the House when he said: "His ability, sincerity, the masterly manner of his handling his subject, his eloquence and above all his patriotism and love of his country-men entitled him to our respect".

Prime Minister Nehru as the leader of the House made a memorable obituary reference in which he said that "we are deprived of the personality who had played a notable and great part in the country.... A large and good stretch of years was before him. But that was not to be".

I should like to add one more admirable quality of his, namely his adherence to the highest democratic tradition during debates in the House. Speaking as the Leader of Opposition in the debate on Planning, Shyama Prasad Ji said "We are anxious to give you cooperation.

We are not enemies sitting face to face before each other. You feel for the Country; we feel the Country should develop. We know that political freedom will be meaningless and fruitless if it is not followed by economic freedom and social equality. But let us proceed not on party lines. Let there be more tolerance, let there be more appreciation of each other point of view. If some of us do not agree with you, do not see eye to eye with you; do not immediately think we are traitors or enemies of the Country. We are here to serve the Country and that is the spirit in which I have spoken”.

Shyama Prasad Ji was a Karma yogi. He performed his duties without fear or favour, affection or ill will. Bhagavan said in *Bhagavat Gita* ( Ch III V 19)

*Thasmat asaktah satatam Karyam Karma Samachara  
Asaktohi acharan Karma param aproti Purushah*

Therefore, constantly perform your obligatory duties without attachment . By doing duty without attachment man verily obtains the Supreme. By his martyrdom, Shyama Prasad Ji has attained the Supreme.

I congratulate Asutosh Mookerjee Memorial Institute on their decision to install the bust of Shyama Prasad Ji so that the illustrious son may keep company with the illustrious father

Lives of great men remind us

That we make our life sublime

I am sure that this image of Shyama Prasad Ji will instill in the succeeding generations qualities that make a nation great.