



BALI RAM BHAGAT



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Shri Bali Ram Bhagat was an outstanding parliamentarian and an able administrator who played an important role in strengthening our parliamentary polity during the post-independence era. A veteran freedom fighter, an ardent patriot with a vast knowledge of legislative procedures and practices, Shri B.R. Bhagat was a multi-faceted personality and had the rare distinction to serve under four Prime Ministers, namely, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri, Smt. Indira Gandhi and Shri Rajiv Gandhi.

Shri Bali Ram Bhagat was born on 7 October 1922 at Mehdiganj, Patna, Bihar. He was the son of Shri Ram Swarup Bhagat and Smt. Kamala. He married Smt. Vidyadhari Devi in 1943 and was blessed with one son and one daughter. He did his graduation from Patna College, Patna and obtained a Masters Degree in Economics from Patna University.

Shri Bhagat's passion for politics and his intense patriotism led him to take the plunge into the freedom struggle during his student days. In 1939, at the age of seventeen, he joined the Indian National Congress and took part in many struggles for the freedom of the country. In 1942, he left college to join the 'Quit India Movement' and remained underground for a period of two years. He was a founder member of the All India Students Congress in 1944 and was the General Secretary of the Bihar Pradesh Students Congress during 1946-1947.

The illustrious parliamentary career of Shri B.R. Bhagat, spread over about four decades (1950-1989) with a gap of three years during 1977-1980, began in 1950 when he was elected to the Provisional Parliament. As a member of Provisional Parliament (1950-52), he actively participated in the discussions in the House and established himself as an able parliamentarian.

Shri Bali Ram Bhagat was elected to the Parliament from First to Fifth Lok Sabha from 1952 to 1977 and again to the Seventh and Eighth Lok Sabha (1980 to 1989).

He represented the Patna *cum* Shahabad Parliamentary Constituency of Bihar in First Lok Sabha; Shahabad Parliamentary Constituency of the Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Lok Sabhas; Sitamarhi Parliamentary Constituency during the Seventh Lok Sabha and Arrah Parliamentary Constituency in the Eighth Lok Sabha. The fact that he was elected seven times to the Lok Sabha bears ample testimony to the fact that he was a popular leader.

During much of his long and distinguished legislative career, he was a Member of the Treasury Bench and worked from there in different capacities. He held a range of Ministerial Portfolios at different points of time. He was the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance from 1952 to 1956. In 1956, he became the Deputy Minister of Finance and continued in that position for a period of seven years. In 1963, he became the Minister of State for Planning and held that portfolio till January 1966. During 1963-1967, he was the Minister of State in the Ministry of Finance. He also served as Minister in the Ministry of Defence for a short while in 1967 before he became the Minister of State for External Affairs in the same year. He was elevated to the Cabinet rank in 1969 as the Minister of Foreign Trade and Supply. Later, he served as the Minister of Steel and Heavy Engineering for a period of eight months. He was appointed Minister of External Affairs by Shri Rajiv Gandhi in 1985.

With this political background, Shri Bhagat was elected to the office of Speaker of Lok Sabha, during the Fifth Lok Sabha on 5 January 1976. On his elevation to this high office, Smt. Indira Gandhi said: "Shri Bhagat has spent most of his adult life in the service of the people. He has distinguished himself as a parliamentarian and as a Minister who has held charge of a large range of Departments. He has earned respect for his straightforwardness, his capacity, his grasp of principles and details". In his first address to the members after assuming the Office, Shri B.R. Bhagat said: "The Speaker is but a servant of the House and as such he equally belongs to all sections in the House. He is expected to discharge his responsibility, impartially and judiciously. I shall follow this golden rule as long as I occupy this Chair". As Speaker of the Lok Sabha he conducted the

proceedings of the House with great finesse and distinction. His parliamentary skill, in-depth knowledge of parliamentary procedures and practices, insight and holistic vision, coupled with a constructive approach towards the issues at hand, earned him respect from all sections of the House.

One who laid stress on discipline and decorum, Bhagat was a stickler for parliamentary traditions and propriety. His concern for procedural propriety is best illustrated by the ruling which he gave on a Calling Attention notice wherein he observed that the time taken on Calling Attention should be restricted to 30-35 minutes and the member Calling Attention should take only 3-4 minutes with the other members taking 2-3 minutes each. The Minister's reply should be complete but brief.

As Speaker, Bhagat upheld the basic norms of parliamentary conduct and was always calm and composed even in trying situations. He was very particular about protecting the privileges of the members. During his Speakership, a question of privilege regarding the handcuffing of a member of the Lok Sabha while he was being taken from the jail to the Magistrate's Court in Bihar came up before the House. Deploring the action of the concerned officials as highly improper, Speaker Bhagat observed that handcuffing a member of the Lok Sabha was in utter disregard and defiance of the instructions of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Government of Bihar. He expressed the hope that relevant instructions would be strictly and scrupulously followed in future.

A man of principles, Bhagat always believed in the Rule book. On a particular day, when the Question Hour was taken up, he was distraught to see that most of the members in whose names Questions stood in the list were not present in the House. As a result, the Question Hour collapsed after a short while. Expressing his grave concern over the development, Speaker Bhagat observed that this was an unfortunate situation which should not recur.

Shri B.R. Bhagat was Speaker for a short period of a little more than one year but his tenure was very eventful. The first Conference of the Chairmen of the

Committees on Government Assurances was held in March 1976 during Shri Bhagat's Speakership. He stressed that steps should be taken to ensure that the Government honoured and implemented the assurances given on the floor of the House. Yet another important initiative, the Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training (BPST), an integral part of the Lok Sabha Secretariat today, was set up in 1976.

During his long parliamentary career, Shri B.R. Bhagat represented the Indian Parliament at various international fora. He attended the Inter-Parliamentary Conference in Istanbul in 1951 and later in Havana in 1981. He also attended the 4th Commonwealth Speakers' and Presiding Officers' Conference held in London in September 1976. Besides, he attended several meetings of the Colombo Plan Conference during 1950s and 60s.

A firm believer in international economic cooperation, Shri B.R. Bhagat was an active participant in the preparatory meetings of the Asian Development Bank in Manila. He also had the privilege of attending the inaugural session of the Asian Development Bank as its Governor in Tokyo in 1966. He was the Alternate Governor to the annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1954 and again in 1958. Besides chairing the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in 1972, Shri Bhagat was its member from 1972 to 1977. He was the Leader of the Indian Delegation to the Conference of UN Economic Commission for Asia and Far-East (ECAFE) held in Tokyo in 1955 and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) held in Delhi in 1968. He also led the Indian Delegation to the UN General Assembly Session in 1968 and 1985.

A human rights activist, Shri B.R. Bhagat led the Indian Delegation to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights which was held in Geneva in 1982-83. He also had the distinction of being the Chairman of the UN Seminar on the thirty-third anniversary of the Human Rights Commission in 1983. He laid special emphasis on the International Instruments of Economic Rights—notably the right to work—as a distinctive part of the Political and Civil Rights.

Shri B.R. Bhagat was appointed the Governor of Himachal Pradesh in February 1993, a position he held for four months. Later, he functioned as the Governor

of Rajasthan from 30 June 1993 till 1 May 1998. Shri Bhagat also held the post of the President of the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi from 1982 to 1985.

Shri B.R. Bhagat was also a well known journalist and writer. During the 'Quit India Movement', he edited two underground weeklies—*Our Struggle* and *Non-Violent Revolution*. In 1947, he started *Rashtra Doot*, a progressive Hindi weekly from Patna. Besides being a regular contributor on economic, national and international affairs in leading national newspapers, Bhagat authored two books on international issues: *Non-Alignment: Present and Future* and *Commonwealth Today*.

He was deeply committed to the progress and development of the rural areas, farmers and the disadvantaged sections of society. He articulated the voice of the underprivileged through his writings in the columns of various journals and dailies.

Shri Bali Ram Bhagat died at the age of 89 in New Delhi on 2 January 2011. On his demise, rich tributes were paid to him by the entire country. In his condolence message, the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh said, "In Bhagatji's passing away, the country has lost a freedom fighter, a great patriot and a veteran politician who was deeply committed to the cause of the people". The Lok Sabha also condoled the demise of Shri Bhagat. Hon'ble Speaker, Lok Sabha, Smt. Meira Kumar paying homage to Shri Bhagat on the floor of the House said: "In his demise, the country has lost a great patriot, a distinguished Legislator and a true son of the soil". The Rajasthan Government declared a two-day State mourning as mark of respect to him.

Shri Bali Ram Bhagat's remarkable parliamentary career and his many-splendoured contributions to strengthening democratic institutions, laying foundation for sound administrative policies and his achievements in diverse areas with particular emphasis on ameliorating the lot of the teeming masses of the country will always remain a source of inspiration for the coming generations.