



DR. SYAMA PRASAD MOOKERJEE



Lok Sabha Secretariat
New Delhi
2019

DR. SYAMA PRASAD MOOKERJEE

An illustrious son of India, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee was a great patriot, educationist, parliamentarian, statesman, humanitarian and above all, a campaigner for national unity and integrity. Born on 6 July 1901 in Calcutta*, Syama Prasad inherited a rich tradition of erudite scholarship, fervent nationalism and fearlessness from his father, Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee, who as the Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University and a Judge of the Calcutta High Court, occupied a unique position in the life of Bengal.

Young Syama Prasad grew in an atmosphere where he could watch religious ceremonies and also listen to discussions on most of the modern and scientific subjects his father had with great scholars coming from all parts of India and abroad. This, in fact, created in him, deep respect for India's age-old culture and a keen interest in western thought and learning. A happy blending of Hindu spirituality, tolerance and humanity with scientific outlook and broad understanding characterized the life of Syama Prasad throughout, both as an academician and as a parliamentarian.

Syama Prasad Mookerjee had his schooling at the Mitter Institute, Bhowanipur. For further studies, he joined the Presidency College, Calcutta. He stood first in the University in Inter Arts examination in 1919 and passed B.A. examination with Honours in English in 1921 securing first class. But the nationalist in Syama Prasad did not allow him to take up English for M.A. and made him opt for Bengali and another Indian language which he passed in first Division in 1923. The editorship of the Presidency College Magazine drew him to the field of journalism. He started "*Bang Wani*", a Bengali journal, in 1922 and also wrote, in 1923-24, a regular feature for "*Capital*", edited by Pat Lovell under the pen name "*Ditch*". This lure for journalism was a passing phase though he took to it again in the forties when he started his own daily from Calcutta called, "*The Nationalist*". He also obtained the degrees of B.L., D.Litt. and LL.D. In 1927, he was called

*Now known as Kolkata.

to the English Bar from the Lincoln's Inn. While in England, he ably represented the Calcutta University at the Conference of the Universities of the British Empire and from then on, began to be counted as one of the leading educationists of India.

Dr. Syama Prasad was known for his deep insight and greater understanding of the educational plans and policies. He was elected to the University Senate and Syndicate in 1924 and represented the Calcutta University as a Congress candidate in the Bengal Legislative Council. In 1930, when the Congress decided to boycott the Legislatures, he resigned his seat in the Legislative Council, but soon re-entered the Council as an independent candidate, with a view to safeguarding the interests of the University. His main concern, however, remained service to the cause of education.

In 1934, Syama Prasad became the youngest Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University, which gave him an opportunity to put into practice his aims and ideals regarding education. It was under his Vice-Chancellorship that Rabindranath Tagore delivered his convocation address in Bengali which was indeed a proud moment not only for Bengali-speaking people but also for all those devoted to the promotion of Indian languages.

The elections to the Provincial Legislatures, consequent upon the introduction of the Government of India Act of 1935, influenced the Indian political scenario. Syama Prasad was again returned from the University Constituency to the Bengal Legislature which offered him an opportunity to study the working of provincial autonomy from very close quarters. During the same period, Syama Prasad joined the Hindu Mahasabha. At the elections held in 1937, Muslim League formed the Government which, however, fell shortly. Syama Prasad mustered all the non-Congress forces in the Legislature and formed the Progressive Coalition with Krishak Praja Party under the leadership of Fazal-ul-Haq, with himself as the Finance Minister. In 1940, he became the acting President of the Hindu Mahasabha and declared complete independence of India as the political goal of the Hindu Mahasabha.

In November 1942, he resigned from the Bengal Cabinet protesting against the interference of the Governor and the bureaucracy in the ministerial discharge of the affairs of the police and the general administration and characterizing the much advertised provincial autonomy

as a *mere farce*. His correspondence with Lord Linlithgow, in which he urged upon him to release the detained leaders, trust the people and permit the raising of a National Defence Force to meet the Japanese threat, was ample evidence of his persuasive firmness in the national cause.

It was the Bengal famine of 1943 which brought the humanitarian in Syama Prasad to the forefront. He became the moving spirit behind both the Bengal Relief Committee and the Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee. His appeals for fund evoked positive response from all over the country and large sums of money started pouring in. His sympathy had never been merely verbal; he made suggestions which were practical. After Independence also, he suggested in Parliament: "We get, now Rs. 40 per day. I do not know what the allowance of the members of the House of the People will be hereafter. Let us agree to a voluntary cut of Rs. 10 per day and let us set apart this sum for the purpose of opening homes where these women and children (of famine-affected areas) may be housed and fed".

In August 1947, Syama Prasad was invited by Gandhiji to join the first Government formed immediately after Independence. He accepted the invitation in the hope that he would be able to influence the policies of free India in its formative period and, thus joined the interim Government headed by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. As the Union Minister for Industry and Supply in the Union Cabinet, he laid the firm foundation for the industrial development of the country by setting up the three most successful gigantic industrial undertakings, *viz.* the Chittaranjan Locomotive Factory, the Sindri Fertilizer Corporation and the Hindustan Aircraft Factory*. He judged every scheme and policy by the criterion of its practicability and usefulness to the people.

However, he quit the Government because of growing differences with his Cabinet colleagues on various issues. After quitting the Cabinet, Syama Prasad concentrated his energies on creating a political platform through which he could project the ideology and policies he stood for. As a result of his efforts, the All-India Bharatiya Jan Sangh was formally launched in October 1951. He was elected to lead the new organization as its first National President. He visualized Jan Sangh as the spearhead of the nationalist forces in the country and wanted it to be so broad based as to be able to comprehend and consolidate all of them into an effective political organization.

*Now known as Hindustan Aeronautics Limited.

Dr. Syama Prasad returned to the First Lok Sabha in the first general elections held in 1952. However, the Jan Sangh, the party that he launched, could return only two more members. But he was not the man to despair. He brought together a number of small parties including the Ganatantra Parishad of Orissa, the Akali Dal of Punjab, the Hindu Mahasabha and a number of independents to form the National Democratic Party in Parliament, of which he was elected as the Leader. They all considered him to be the chief spokesman of the Opposition and conceded to him the right to reply on their behalf on all major issues.

His stature and acumen as a statesman and constructive approach to the problems facing the country made him the most formidable opponent of the Government. The Treasury Benches respected him for his deep understanding and appreciation of the issues and problems that came up before the Parliament. His searching and penetrating probe into their policies and affairs, the ease and cogency with which he countered their arguments was to be seen to be believed. His role in Parliament as the (unofficial) Leader of the Opposition earned him the title, "The Lion of Parliament". With his emphatic views and exceptional oratorical skills, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee carved out a niche for himself as an eminent parliamentarian. During his parliamentary career, he enriched the debates on various issues of national concern such as the Kashmir issue, migration between Pakistan and India, foreign policy of India, preventive detention, electoral reforms, etc.

The final act in the parliamentary life of this great statesman took place in 1953. He decided to take up the cause of Jammu & Kashmir Praja Parishad which had been demanding that the State be fully integrated with the rest of India. During his visit to Jammu in August 1952, he once told a mammoth meeting: "I will get you the Indian Constitution or lay down my life for it." His passion for keeping the State of Jammu & Kashmir within the Indian Union was so irresistible that despite his ill health, he rushed to Jammu where he was arrested. He fell seriously ill in prison and breathed his last on 23 June 1953 for the cause of Indian Unity. Dr. Syama Prasad was, in fact, an ardent champion of the cause of United India which he espoused zealously throughout his life.

The Parliament, the State Legislatures, the Press and the political leaders irrespective of party affiliations,

mourned his death as a great loss and paid glowing tributes and homage to him as the one who devoted himself entirely to the service of his Motherland.

In Lok Sabha, mourning the unexpected demise of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the then Speaker, Shri G.V. Mavalankar observed:

“...His ability, sincerity, the masterly manner of handling his subject, his eloquence and above all, his patriotism and love for his countrymen, entitled him to our respect.”

The then Prime Minister and Leader of the House, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru described Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee as “one of the leading figures of this House and a Leader of the Opposition who played a very important part in the work of this House”.