

The man who did not become Prime Minister

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Personalities



Appreciate the scenario if Jyoti Basu had become Prime Minister of India then. Kargil had already started; it would have been discovered under his watch. The BJP's negligence would have crushed its reputation, and it would not have had the opportunity to recover through some brilliant leadership by Vajpayee. Jyoti Basu would have won the war for India, and been in power till today. Instead he heads towards retirement

Jyoti Basu should have been Prime Minister of India. Jyoti Basu could have been Prime Minister of India. Unusually, opportunity came to his door twice. On the first occasion he was stopped by his comrades; on the second he was betrayed by an alleged ally.

If Jyoti Basu had become Prime Minister on either occasion, he would have done what so many claim and so few achieve. He would have changed history.

This is not an exercise in adulation, although if any contemporary politician deserved that term against his or her name, then it is only Jyoti Basu. This is recognition of fact.

The first opportunity came after the collapse of the H.D. Deve Gowda government in 1997, pulled down by Congress president Sitaram Kesri in an unusually potent mood. The BJP and its allies still did not have the numbers to form a majority government, and the Congress had neither the numbers nor the moral and psychological authority. The dreams of that uncertain cause called the Third Front survived the punctured Deve Gowda; no one wanted an election, and the objective situation remained what it had been the previous year. The Congress still had no option but to support a non-BJP government; the only question now was getting the right man to lead. Fringe politicians once again began to float on hope. There was only one leader whose name brooked no dispute when it was suggested. That of Jyoti Basu.

In an astonishing display of masochism, a self-important majority within the CPI(M)'s Politburo stopped Jyoti Basu from taking the oath of office. Apparently this would have interfered with some revolution they had been planning for six or seven decades.

I have too much respect for the political maturity of the CPI(M) to call this stupidity, but in the history of political suicide this will merit a very long and detailed chapter. Jyoti Basu, being the calm personality he is, accepted his party's decision without a demur. If he had any inner feelings on the subject they were not visible to either the party or the people of Bengal and India. However some very close friends noted a wry smile when they brought up the subject, but only after the option closed.

The strangest thing about this decision was that the CPI(M) should have rejected the idea that a political party can use power to expand its base, when all through the second half of the Sixties and then from 1977 onwards in Bengal it had done this very same thing brilliantly. The CPI(M) was not the most important component of the United Front that replaced the Congress in Bengal in 1967; the chief minister then was Ajoy

Mukherjee of the Bangla Congress (current Bengal Congress chief Pranab Mukherjee's alma mater, incidentally) and Jyoti Basu was only the home minister. Within a few years the Bangla Congress had become irrelevant and the Communists under Basu had become the primary opposition to the Congress. When the CPI(M) forged the Left Front after the Emergency in 1977, the partners had a far greater role to play in decision-making. Two decades later they are useful appendages. The CPI(M) clearly did not believe that India was Bengal, and no one in his right mind would easily equate the two. But it was preposterous of the Politburo to conclude that Jyoti Basu as Prime Minister would actually hurt the party in Bengal. The consequences of that decision three years ago have not been fully realised. The Communists could pay a very heavy price — as heavy as the price the Congress is paying for having denied Jyoti Basu the chance to become Prime Minister of India in 1999.

Once again, Jyoti Basu did nothing to either create or fur-

ther that chance; it flew into his lap because it really had nowhere else to go.

Jayalalitha, having come to a deal with the Congress through the volatile offices of Subramanian Swamy, withdrew from the Vajpayee government forcing a confidence vote in the Lok Sabha, which the Prime Minister famously lost by a single vote. He received 271 votes when he needed 272: a number that would soon become famous in both Hindi and Italian.

The Congress, which had kept away from power as long as Sitaram Kesri was its president, sought to become the successor government with Mrs Sonia Gandhi as its candidate for Prime Minister. The situation was so heavy with irony it could barely walk. When the others wanted the Congress to join the government, it did not. When the Congress was ready, the others discovered a problem. Sonia Gandhi.

The merits of the reservations about Sonia Gandhi can be argued elsewhere; for our purpose, it is sufficient to note that many important parties of the emerging non-BJP alliance

found it deeply unacceptable that a person of Italian origin, still green in her understanding of India's polity, politics and people, should be made Prime Minister of this nation. The resentment extended to within the Congress, as became apparent soon enough. The one group that wanted the BJP out so anxiously that they were ready to vote Sonia Gandhi in, was the Left. Sonia Gandhi herself revealed levels of ambition that she had effectively disguised. She made her own elevation to power a non-negotiable condition of Congress participation in government, even when Mulayam Singh Yadav took a formal stand that any coalition was acceptable to his party as long as Sonia Gandhi did not become Prime Minister. He would have accepted another Congressperson, if there was one on offer; but there was no question of Sonia Gandhi making anyone else in her party Prime Minister. She wanted power for herself. From a few respectful steps away, her coterie whispered the language of megalomania: she was the Congress, and the Congress was

nothing without her etc etc etc. Sonia Gandhi met the President and claimed that she had the support of 272 MPs when in truth she could not have counted more than 200, if that.

At this point, someone began to speak some sense. The only person who could lead and sustain a non-BJP government was Jyoti Basu. He was perfectly acceptable to everyone — except for Sonia Gandhi. Basu had no problems about Sonia Gandhi when she had her chance. When the time came to reciprocate, Sonia Gandhi actually went on television to sabotage his chances, and did so while he was sitting beside her, for one of those interviews that dominate life during a crisis. He looked imperturbable while Sonia Gandhi wielded the knife.

Sonia Gandhi hurt Jyoti Basu, true; but the person she really destroyed was herself. In the elections the BJP showed her precisely how popular she was. The Congress, which removed Narasimha Rao for losing an election, and repeated the process with Sitaram Kesri, tolerated Sonia Gandhi despite her abysmal defeat. That is the one thing, of course, that Sonia Gandhi has done successfully: she has taken away and locked up the Congress' spine in some safe deposit vault and thrown away the key.

Appreciate the scenario if Jyoti Basu had become Prime Minister of India then. Kargil had already started; it would have been discovered under his watch. The BJP's negligence would have crushed its reputation, and it would not have had the opportunity to recover through some brilliant leadership by Vajpayee. Jyoti Basu would have won the war for India, and been in power till today.

Instead, he heads towards retirement. The decision has now been made. Within a short while, perhaps even within a couple of months, one of the greatest Indians of our times, and perhaps the finest politician of the post-Nehru age, will voluntarily leave the office from which he could not be defeated.

This itself is unusual. Indian politicians retire only once, when God intervenes.

Jyoti Basu does not want to wait for God, or being an atheist, for nature to take the decision out of his will. Power did not come to him for long decades of his political life. When he became a Communist, and then remained one (unlike many of his leftist contemporaries) he knew that public life demanded service whether it offered power or not. He did not enter politics merely for power, so it is easy for him to relinquish it.

If Sonia Gandhi understood as much, she might yet reverse the damage she is inflicting upon her party.

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VK
The CPI(M) shares the legacy of Shyama Prosad Mookerjee

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Death made him

RUDRANGSHU MUKHERJEE

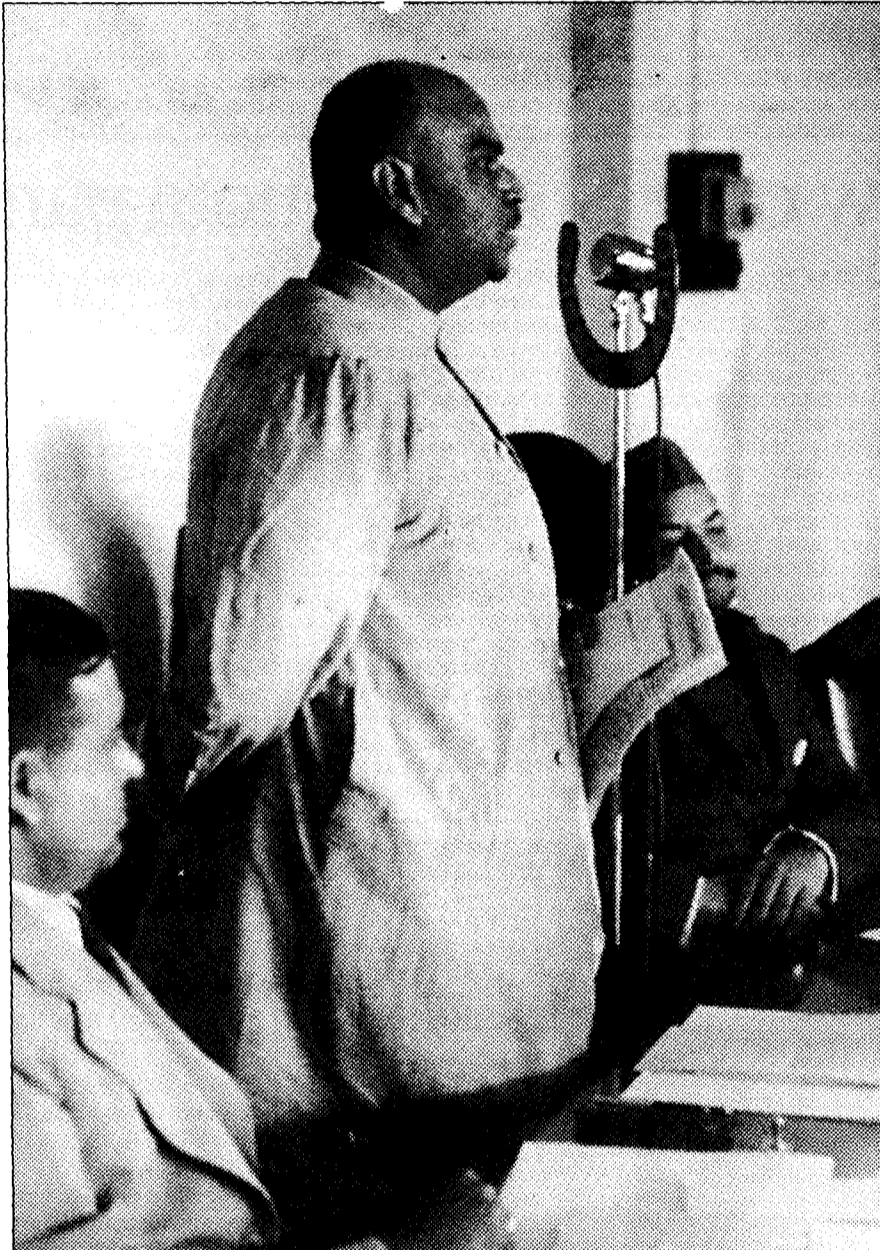
Mookerjee, Shyama Prosad, born 1901; son of Sir Ashutosh; educated at Presidency College and Law College, University of Calcutta; called to the Bar from Lincoln's Inn; lecturer, Law College, Cal. Univ.; president, council of post-graduate teaching in Arts, Cal. Univ., 1934-47; president, council of post-graduate teaching in Science, 1943-45, Cal. Univ.; vice-chancellor of Cal. Univ. for two terms beginning 1934; member Bengal legislative assembly, 1937-45; minister to the government of Bengal, 1941-42; minister to the government of India, 1947-50; founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh; leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha; D.Litt (*honoris causa*), Cal. Univ.; died in Kashmir, 1952.

If India had a proper *Who's Who*, this is perhaps how the entry on Shyama Prosad Mookerjee would read. What such a dry as dust and barebone summary of a chequered career does not convey is the respect he was accorded in Bengal's public life. When the news of his death reached Calcutta, all work in the city came to a halt for two days. Legend has it that even public conveyance did not ply. Moreover, such an entry says nothing about Mookerjee's outstanding record in the examinations of the University of Calcutta. Like many others of his family, he never stood second in any examination conducted by the Calcutta University. It would also not record his powers of oratory which enthralled his audience and in Parliament left India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, withered and in tatters.

It is obvious from the brief *curriculum vitae* given above that Mookerjee spent the better part of his working life in Calcutta University. He served his *alma mater* for nearly 26 years. He was elected to the Senate and the Syndicate immediately after his father's death in 1924. He became vice-chancellor at the remarkably young age of 33. Both these, the election to the Senate and the elevation to the number one job in the university, bore testimony to the tremendous influence that the Mookerjee family wielded in that institution at that time.

It was the university, and not politics, now the subject of controversy, which was at the heart of his work. The official history of the first 100 years of Calcutta University wrote that "like his father, the University was his life, his aspiration and his dream". Despite this, his work at the university is not being recounted and evaluated in the centenary of his birth.

In Calcutta University, Mookerjee played an important, perhaps even a crucial, role in bringing about three changes. The first of these is of long term significance and carries obvious contemporary resonances. This was the revision of the Matriculation Regulations which were passed in final form in 1935. But the process of revision went back to 1922 and passed through a number of stages. Mookerjee, after he became a member of the Senate, was instrumental in introducing a number of significant amendments. One of these related to making vernacular the medium of instruction in all subjects other than English. The regulations also



Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it

allowed for answers to be written in one or the other major vernaculars. Supporting these changes, Mookerjee urged his colleagues to "look ahead to the time when our mother tongue will be the medium not only of our Matriculation Examination but also of the highest examinations in this University." In terms of approach to education, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is in direct line to Mookerjee.

Mookerjee followed up his advocacy of the vernaculars as the medium of instruction by initiating a scheme of publishing a series of books in Bengali on the different arts and sciences. This scheme, as the paucity of good books in Bengali suggests, was not too successful.

The other area in which Mookerjee took a leading role was in the creation of a Board of Secondary Education which would be responsible for the whole of Bengal. Mookerjee obviously did not foresee

the dangers inherent in this proposal. Growth in the number of school students has made examinations conducted by one board into a mockery. Mookerjee clearly did not visualize a spurt in education.

A third field was the consolidation of the central library of the university and of streamlining the various collections it held. Dare one say that this was a job not for the vice-chancellor but of a good librarian?

Mookerjee was thus a moderately successful vice-chancellor, nowhere as innovative as his illustrious father. But he nurtured Calcutta University as his constituency and used it as his launching pad to enter a wider public arena. In the 1945-46 elections, the Hindu Mahasabha contested 26 seats and lost all but one. The lone winner was Mookerjee who won unopposed from Calcutta University, thus confirming the popular impression that the

university was the Mookerjee family's bailiwick. His ideological orientation had become clear long before this. As the vice-chancellor of the university, Mookerjee had established a close relationship with the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East which was sponsored by Benito Mussolini's government.

In Calcutta, his brief moment of political glory was in November 1945 when the police opened fire on a student procession. The students in protest refused to leave the street where the demonstration had been stopped. Mookerjee was the only important political leader who rushed to the spot and talked to the students and the police. In his diary, Mookerjee ruefully recorded that despite his repeated personal requests the other leaders had refused to accompany him to the trouble spot.

At the national level, he worked behind the scenes to ensure that the Hindu Mahasabha did not get banned with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh after the murder of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. In the public mind, Mookerjee's name is associated with the establishment of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. Christophe Jaffrelot in his detailed study of the Hindu nationalist movement has shown that the move to set up a new party came from within the RSS and it found in Mookerjee a convenient leader. The ruling body of the new party was dominated by senior *swayamsevak*s. Mookerjee, as the president, was allowed to thunder in the Lok Sabha but the policy line of the Jana Sangh was controlled by the RSS leadership.

The evaluation of Mookerjee by his contemporaries remains somewhat elusive. That the RSS leadership would not allow him to control the policy line of the Jana Sangh suggests that his commitment to *Hindutva* was considered suspect by the hardliners.

There is one other extremely damaging assessment. Lord Mountbatten in one of his reports to London wrote that according to the then governor of Bengal, F.J. Burrows, Mookerjee was "so low that a snake could not crawl under his belly". There is no reason, of course, to take such a statement seriously but would Mookerjee have liked the comment from someone who claimed to know him well?

There was nothing in Mookerjee's political career that was worth writing home about. His stewardship of the university had substance but its impact may not have been altogether beneficial for the institution and the state. More importantly, in terms of the present controversy, it was no different from the policies pursued by those who claim to have "fundamental differences" with him. In any case, which successful vice-chancellor and powerful orator gets his centenary celebrated with such fanfare?

The clue to the fanfare is his death. If Jawaharlal Nehru's cat's paw in Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah, had not perpetrated what in West Bengal was perceived as a martyr's death, Mookerjee, as a political leader, would have been as unforgettable as, let us say, Buddhadev Bhattacharya.

ILLUSTRIOUS TEACHER

Remembering Susobhan Chandra Sarkar

By HIREN MUKERJEE

READERS with a long memory may recall that a little over 20 years ago *The Statesman* published on its edit page a review of a remarkable (and in Indian conditions, unusual and rare) *festschrift*: "Essays in Honour of Prof SC Sarkar" (Peoples' Publishing House, New Delhi, 1976). It was edited by a committee comprising former pupils of the illustrious teacher born this day in 1901. The coming 12-month stretch is thus Susobhan Chandra Sarkar's centenary which, one learns, will be appropriately celebrated by his former pupils and the larger body of admirers spread all over the country. Naturally, one expects some intellectual stir since Susobhan Sarkar was not only, to three generations, an eminent teacher of history but, to a larger audience, a superb expositor, of the principles of social reconstruction and their objective manifestation in the historical process. In this, he followed Marx.

For myself, I cannot help recalling, with pleasure, the meeting in Calcutta where, as perhaps the oldest survivor among Professor Sarkar's pupils, I had been asked to release the *festschrift* mentioned earlier. The professor was ailing, and in his absence I handed over the first copy to his wife whose benign personality charmed all who knew her.

NO PROPAGANDIST

It was a voluminous tome, its nearly one thousand pages, contributed by scholars from all over India, weighing like an encyclopaedia, perhaps a not unworthy representation of the deep respect that Professor Sarkar commanded in our intelligentsia. We missed his presence but there was no help. Perhaps not long after this, he passed away, but the manner of his return to the elements was superb. He got up and washed and waited for his morning cup of tea, when perhaps with the day's newspaper in his hand, he collapsed in his chair — a way of dying that even our *rishis* of old would have envied. It was swift, presumably painless and avoiding the agony and anxiety involved in the process of taking (as, of all people, Charles II once joked) "an unconscionably long time dying!"

I remember that meeting, especially because, to be frank, I told the audience that in spite of my enormous admiration for Professor Sarkar I had known him as a teacher for a very short period when we were nearly at the end of our term in MA History at Calcutta University. He had only recently come down from Oxford and while there was no mistaking his tall, handsome frame, his precise manner of speech and the conscientiousness of his preparation for whatever was our theme of study, he was only a little older than we were, a "colt" still to prove himself. Besides, we gloried then in the great teachers of history who had captivated us — a Kuruvila Zachariah and a Hemchandra Ray Chaudhuri (I do not mention others lest it be invidious), and we could not share the near-ecstasy which the more regular pupils of Professor Sarkar so obviously felt and expressed, proudly and happily, in that meeting. I was abroad from 1929 to 1934 and out of Calcutta — at Andhra University — till early 1936, and I had missed the exhilaration which so many of my younger friends and acquaintances experienced from Susobhan Babu's lectures. However,

The author, an eminent parliamentarian, represented the Communist Party of India.

I had known him fairly closely from around sometime in 1936 when, having joined the then illegal Communist Party of India, I learnt how the socialist movement had benefited from the ideological support that Professor Sarkar, though in Presidency College, a government institution, had courageously given. His exposition, oral as well as written, never deviated from high academic standards of objectivity, upholding, in essence and never through the gush of pro-



paganda, the Marxist interpretation of history.

In those days I met him often at meetings of contributors to *Parichaya*. Sudhindranath Datta's rather highbrow literary journal, an unlikely vehicle for socialism as such but a purveyor of ideas then sweeping a world torn by contradictions. It thus won an audience even in the prisons and detention camps of British India and all who were seriously concerned in the struggle for the freedom of our land and its fulfilment in a non-exploitative socialist society.

With a puritan Brahmo mental make-up, young Susobhan had gone to Jesus College, Oxford, and his natural patriotism was qualitatively heightened by the winds that blew in the '20s (and even more, in the early and middle '30s) in Oxford, in spite of its rooted conservatism ("the home of lost causes and impossible loyalties"). Secret service agents keeping a watch on colonial students found out and reported that Sarkar, among a few others, had acquired socialist convictions, "was well grounded in Marxism", the result being that on returning home he was refused appointment in the Bihar government colleges.

PERSECUTED

It was a blessing in disguise for Sarkar found a modest job in Calcutta University, moving on a little later to Dhaka for some time. But around 1935, in a less unpropitious atmosphere he found himself in his own dear college, Presidency, run by the government but badly in need of the talent that Sarkar was by then reputed for. Here, indeed, he found his *metier* and his audience, spending the major, uninterrupted spell of his more than three decades of teaching. A price had of course to be paid; he was kept out of normal promotions but he never cared to be principal or director of public instruction; his ideology, never hidden, made him in official eyes a kind of a "corruptor" of youth, but he was academically impeccable, his pupils found his lectures invaluable, hostile bureaucrats could not even manoeuvre his "transfer" to some "punishment" posting elsewhere, for the step might recoil on them and in any case Presidency pupils would resist the stratagem! Thus Sarkar had a long innings there, ensuring a continuity of intellectual influence on several generations of the finest students in Eastern India. After retirement, his services were lapped up by Jadavpur University and till his death he remained an institution by

himself, a maker of his times and of the thought processes vitalising not only the academic but the larger social scene.

This was because, apart from his output as an outstanding teacher, he was tirelessly writing, in Bengali and in English, with a niche of his own in literary circles. Uninvolved in politics but profoundly interested, his guiding principle perhaps was summed up in one of Karl Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach": "Philosophers have interpreted the world in different ways; the task however, is to change it." There is neither space nor need

here for a catalogue, however summary, of his prolific output. Let it only be noted that in spite of his "communist" reputation (suspect in the then "academia") and his revulsion for self-advertisement and scholarly "politicking", he was elected president of the Indian History Congress and commanded conspicuous respect in the world of scholarship. He never made any bones about his proximity to Marxism, so much indeed that in the

festschrift already mentioned, PC Joshi, a former general secretary of the Communist Party of India, reports that around 1943-44 he had offered his services as a "whole-timer", wanting to live in the party's "commune" to work for the cause. Wisely for the party, he was dissuaded; he could do a lot more valuable work for the movement by staying on his own and helping in its ideological programmes.

MODESTY

It is indeed symptomatic of the man that with his background he could think of accepting and even welcome, the "discipline" (and dangers!) of whole-time, "professional" revolutionary work. One is reminded of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty's grouse that Communism demanded from its adherents *un oui trop massif et charnel* ("a 'yes' too massive and heartfelt") to party directives based on "democratic centralism". Around 1943-44, however, this was no dilemma for Susobhan Sarkar who, balked of his wish to merge himself in the movement, served as long as he lived to promote its basic interests, though later he found some of its aberrations more than a little irking. His life was an affirmation of ineffaceable affinity with Marxism.

It is with some hesitation that I recall some differences I had with him over his concept of the so-called "19th century Bengali renaissance" which, in spite of his first sober exposition and subsequent explanations, some of those who presumed to follow him, "more royalist than the king", chose, I regret, to exaggerate, even vulgarise. In a kind of euphoria, even Jadunath Sarkar, the then *doyen* of Indian historians and the polymath Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, chose in some passages almost to hymn the Bengal phenomenon as more lustrous than the Renaissance in Europe! He never countenanced such things but was too polite to counter them. I have found myself involved in controversy with him over the "Western" impact on Rabindranath Tagore's thought processes. But there never was in me the slightest tinge of disrespect for my old teacher's viewpoint.

Susobhan Sarkar's birth centenary bids us remember that "ideas become a material force when they grip the masses" and that the Communist idea can prevail only on the strength of a mass movement and a struggle for a new and just and human society.