

Rajaji - Some Recollections Over Four Decades

By M.R.Masani

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Casting my mind back to recall when I first encountered Rajaji, I find that my earliest recollections of him are during the Congress Session at Worli in Bombay in October 1934. The issue in question was the Constitution of the Congress and in particular the procedure to be followed in the elections to various elective bodies in the Congress.

Some time before the Congress Session, Jayaprakash Narayan and I, who were then Secretaries of the newly formed Congress Socialist Party, had gone to see Gandhiji in Wardha. He had shown us the draft Constitution he had prepared in order to tighten up the Congress organisation. We had agreed to support the changes he had in mind on one condition and that was that all elections should be by the system of Proportional Representation with a single transferable vote so that the Socialist minority and other minorities should not get eliminated in the process. Gandhiji had accepted the idea and a clause was drafted and added that all elections would be by that method.

When the first Conference of the All India Congress Socialist Party met in Bombay in October a few days before the Congress Session, Gandhiji's draft Constitution had come in for a great deal of criticism from some of our colleagues who thought it savoured of "Fascism". Jayaprakash and I had staunchly defended Gandhiji's Constitution, thrown ourselves behind it and got it accepted. Imagine then our horror when, at the meeting of the Subjects Committee of the Congress, the draft Constitution which was circulated did not contain that clause about elections by proportional representation.

I remember Jayaprakash and I were sitting then in the Press enclosure, not being members of the AICC. We were very upset. I picked up a sheet of paper and wrote a rather cheeky note to Gandhiji in

which I said we were shocked to find the vital clause missing. I also asked whether this was a printing error or whether he had gone back on his word! I gave this to a volunteer who gave the note to Gandhiji on the dais. He read it and put it under a paper weight on the desk in front of him. When his turn came to speak, Gandhiji picked up my letter and to my horror read it out aloud to the meeting. He said I had upbraided him for breach of faith. He explained that the draft he had presented was not his own but that adopted by the Working Committee which had rejected the inclusion of such a clause.

When the meeting adjourned for tea, Jayaprakash and I went to Gandhiji's camp. We told him we were not satisfied with his explanation. We said if he had really thrown himself behind this clause, as we had done behind his Constitution in our Party, he could have got it through. I told Gandhiji that his explanation showed a subtlety unworthy of a Mahatma.

When the AICC met after the tea interval, Gandhiji said on second thoughts we wished to re-open the matter of the draft Constitution and suggested that a Sub-Committee be appointed to study this problem overnight. The last two names of the members of the Sub-Committee were those of Jayaprakash and myself. That evening, when the Sub-Committee met, Gandhiji fought like a Trojan for the reintroduction of the P.R. clause and carried it through the Sub-Committee in the face of opposition from his trusted colleagues.

Next morning when the matter came before the AICC, it was Rajaji's turn to be furious with Gandhiji. He got up and opposed the amendment. Great tension built up at this unexpected confrontation between Rajaji and Rajendra/ on the one side and Gandhiji and the new Socialist group on the other. The P.R. Clause was reinstated by a majority when Gandhiji raised his hands along with the Socialists. It remained there for at least two decades. I am not sure whether or not it is

still there.

1935
My next encounter with Rajaji was also not too friendly. As Joint Secretary of the Congress Socialist Party, I undertook an extensive tour of Tamilnadu, visiting more than one district in the State. I made several speeches - two major speeches, one as President of the District Congress Socialist Conference at Trichinopoly and another at a rally of Railwaymen organised by the South India Railway Union also at Trichinopoly. It appears that my speeches disturbed Rajaji who had by then become Prime Minister of Madras. Soon after I left Tamilnadu, he wrote a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, who was Congress President, on July 20, 1937, complaining against the content and tenor of my speeches coming as they did from a member of the Congress.

The text of two of my two speeches are fortunately still available. These show that the main thrust of my speeches was not at all directed at Rajaji. The speeches, at some length, stressed the need for a Socialist Party and the relevance of Socialism in the struggle for gaining national independence.

The remarks that offended Rajaji were evidently off the cuff comments made in response to his own speech made earlier at Chingleput in which Rajaji had made two statements - one, that the village Congress Sabhas would from now on form a limb of the Government and the other that there was no need for a separate organisation of the peasants as the Congress was there to look after them.

Jawaharlal forwarded Rajaji's letter to me asking for my comments and suggested that I write direct to Rajaji in reply. This I did and sent a copy of my reply to Jawaharlal. In my letter I started by thanking Rajaji for giving me an opportunity to explain my *position* ~~points~~ and assuring him that my criticism was not unfriendly. I then proceeded to explain and justify what I had said:

"My criticism of your remarks regarding the relations between the Congress and the Government were, I still feel, called for. Your two remarks, first, that

there was now no difference between the Congress and the Government and, secondly, that the Congress Sabhas had become limbs of the Government, are to me full of danger.

" First of all, the word Government used simpliciter can, and must, mean the British Government in India. I know you could not have meant to use it in that sense, but that is surely its proper meaning. It would be so understood by many people and quoted in that sense. The word 'Congress Cabinet' or 'Congress Ministers' would be much ^{less} ~~more~~ ambiguous in such a connection. To call them 'the Government' is misleading. Effectively, the Government, even in the six Provinces, is the British Government represented by the Governor, the Civil Service, the police and in the last analysis the army, and the Congress Cabinets only exist at its sweet will. If we do not trouble to drive the distinction home to the people, do you not think we run the risk of being unconsciously absorbed in the Government itself?

" I am sure you are aware of this because in your own letter you have struck off the word 'the' and replaced it with 'my' before 'Government'.

" Even understanding the word 'Government' to mean the Cabinet, I feel that to describe Congress Committees as limbs of the Cabinet cannot be justified. The Cabinets are limbs of the Congress organisation, not vice versa. The directions must come from Congress Committees to the Cabinet and not from the Cabinet to the Committees. Your statement would, if unchallenged, lead to the abrogation of democratic control and its replacement by the dictatorship of the Cabinets over the party organisation.

" Regarding peasants unions, I do not mind admitting that many spurious organisations of this kind do spring up

as stated by you. In my speeches in Tamilnadu, I often warned against such tendencies and the attempts to make them rivals to Congress Committees.

" Your remarks, however, were of wider application and objected generally to such Unions on the ground that the Congress could do all that was necessary and that there would be duplication. In my speeches I argued that there were specific functions for such Unions to perform more or less on the lines of the Congress President's detailed statement in this connection.

" I also suggested that probably these objections of yours and some other Congress leaders were rooted in your distaste for the class struggle, further evidence of which is to be found in the communique of your Cabinet regarding the Kottapatam prisoners."

I then proceeded to deal with Rajaji's complaint that I had asked the Congress President to contradict what he had said:

" I had no recollections of having asked the Congress President to deny anything you had said. Since receiving your letter, I have gone through newspaper files and find that I did say something of the sort in connection with your remark that Congress Committees were limbs of the Government.

" I would like to assure you that I had no intention whatsoever of saying anything of the sort. I must have said it on the spur of the moment by way of emphasis. If I had really wanted the President to intervene, I would₂ of course have written and drawn his attention to the matter."

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I concluded my letter by saying:

" In what I said in Madras or in our propaganda generally there is no intention of queering the pitch for the experiment on which we are launched. Rather, in view of the obvious dangers, there is a desire to guard against them. That is why in practically every meeting I used to appeal to local Congress Committees to be more active in popularising the programme of the Congress and of the Cabinet and to act as links between the Cabinet and the people."

Looking back on this incident, it occurs to me that one of the reasons for it might have been the fact that my speeches during the Tamilnadu tour which were in English were translated into Tamil by P.Jeevanandan and others who were all Communists. It is quite possible in the course of ^{their} these translations they added a little salt and pepper to what I had said. This is what might have made the press reports more provocative than the speeches were.

While I used to run into Rajaji at meetings of the AICC and other functions, there was no particular incident which I can recollect till Rajaji became a member of Jawaharlal Nehru's Union Cabinet in the early fifties. Faced with an acute shortage of food in India the country was waiting for the United States Government and Congress to make up their mind and sanction a grant of food aid to this country. K.M.Munshi was then Minister for Food and Agriculture. Some of us felt that it would be helpful if a few of us could knudge the elbows of the U.S.Senators and Congressmen to expedite the grant of food aid at a time when the lives of people in this country were at stake.

I therefore drafted a cable which was to be signed by some Members of Parliament. It was addressed to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Vice-President in his capacity as Chairman of the Senate. I remember we got forty-three signatures on the telegram, many of them members of the Congress Party like myself.

who had infiltrated the C.S.P., though I was not aware of their real colour at that time.

1958-59

Wanting to make sure that this would be the right thing to do at the right time, I consulted my old friend K.M. Munshi. While he did not himself want to be directly associated with it, he said we could certainly go ahead and he felt that it might conceivably produce beneficial results. Thus encouraged, I despatched a long cable through the normal Posts and Telegraphs channels. I remember I and another person shared the cost which ran into a couple of hundred rupees. The text of the cable and the names of the signatories were released to the press. Next morning, a very agitated Prime Minister got up in Parliament and expressed his annoyance with us. He misrepresented the position in two ways. First he called it an appeal to a foreign Government. Secondly, he complained we had not consulted him or any member of his Cabinet. I could, of course, have got up and corrected him on both these points, but I thought that the correct forum to put the Prime Minister right would be a Party meeting and not the floor of Parliament.

Sure enough, Jawaharlal as party leader called a party meeting to discuss this matter. As it happened, a week-end supervened between the scene in Parliament and the Party meeting. Sometime, somehow, during the week-end the Prime Minister came to know, despite my own silence, that his Food Minister had been consulted but had not done anything to stop us. So, when the Party met, it was a rather chastened Prime Minister who got up and spoke. He grudgingly conceded that I had consulted the Food Minister who had in no way discouraged me from sending the cable and that, as he quite rightly put it, gave the matter a somewhat different complexion. He thought, in view of the circumstances, the matter should be allowed to drop.

At this point I decided to counter-attack. I knew there was a great deal of discontent over Jawaharlal Nehru's pro-Soviet and anti-Democracies attitude both in the Party and the Cabinet. I decided to bring it out in the open. I therefore asked for the floor. I said it was the Prime Minister who had behaved badly. He had misstated the position because we had only addressed our U.S. fellow legislators and not the Government as he had alleged. I felt therefore he owed an apology to us in the public forum of Parliament.

This set the ball rolling for a major debate on Nehru's foreign policy. I was delighted when one or two members of the Party actually had the temerity to say they ^{too dis-}agreed with me ^{the P.M.'s policies}. One of them was K. Hanumanthaiya who said: "Masani is not the only member of the Party who has doubts about the Prime Minister's foreign policy." P.Y. Deshpande was another.

At this point, Rajaji got up and appealed to me, whom he described as his "young friend", to withdraw my criticisms and bow to the Leader's wisdom and his decisions. I thanked Rajaji for his kindly appeal but much regretted that the national interest demanded that the Prime Minister's foreign policy should be questioned because it was not genuinely non-aligned and because it injured the national interest. Thus challenged, Jawaharlal Nehru demanded a vote of confidence from the Party. My comment on this was that he would get it, but I warned the Prime Minister that there were many, including some in his Cabinet, who did not have the temerity to put up their hands in opposition. "They may not agree with me", I conceded, "but neither do they agree with you. They are somewhere in between and they are only supporting you because of a mixture of affection, respect and fear."

When the vote was taken, some two or three hands went up along with mine in opposition, while the rest of the Party went along with the Leader. The ironic thing was that, as we came out onto the corridors of Parliament House, more than one Cabinet Minister and Party member squeezed my hand, leant over and said they were glad I had given expression to their suppressed feelings. Rajaji was not one of them.

My dear Masani,

Your beautiful book. Why don't you settle down as a schoolmaster instead of all this waste of valuable talent in a crowd that chatters in inaudible and unintelligible words about nothing at all?

Of course I wish you were a teacher but I must then wish

From 1959 till 1971, I had the privilege of working closely with Rajaji, first as General Secretary of the Swatantra Party and then as its President. That I should have drawn on his wisdom and experience throughout all these years is only to be expected. That we occasionally differed is also natural. But what stands out to me as the main feature of this decade of working together is the way in which Rajaji gave me his most valued support and encouragement in all that I and my fellow office bearers did. I shall always be grateful for it. *to him this.*

Naturally, Rajaji was not happy when I insisted in April 1971 on stepping down from the Presidentship of the Swatantra Party. I was sorry I could not respond to his plea to continue as President, but I felt that the principle that a man who leads an army to defeat must step down at the end of the war was so clear that I could not bow down to his wishes. It made me sad to disappoint him.

Recently, however, while going through some old papers, I came across a letter to me from Rajaji from his Cabinet Minister's residence at 1 York Place, New Delhi, dated 5th August 1950. He wrote it after receiving a copy of my book for children - Our Growing Human Family. I had started the book with a jingle which ran as follows:

" Oh why do we gather in herds
Like a lot of excitable birds
And chatter and bawl
About nothing at all
In wholly inaudible words? "

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It was a
real pleasure
and a priv-
ilege to be
so closely
associated
with him.

Rajaji
during
his 82 yrs
down for
Presidentship

From Masani
1950

wish our children all spoke English as their "mother tongue"

Your language is so good, it is a pity it is some one else's language."

I wonder if Rajaji would not concede that, by keeping out of active Party politics and speaking and writing on public affairs with a view to educating public opinion, I am not in some way rather belatedly following the advice which he himself gave me some twenty *years* ~~years~~ ago? I at least would like to think so.