

Quintessential Dissenter

S. V. Raju

Minocher Rustom Masani (Minoo as he was better known) author, politician, and an eminent parliamentarian who participated in the freedom movement and was a member of the Constituent Assembly died in Mumbai on May 27, 1998 after a prolonged illness. He was 92.

Author of *Our India*, an all-time bestseller and a prescribed text-book in schools even in pre-independence India (the book was withdrawn when he parted company with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the then establishment), Minoo Masani was an alumnus of Mumbai's Elphinstone College, the London School of Economics and Lincoln's Inn. He joined the Bombay Bar but soon gave up practice to participate in the freedom struggle. He courted imprisonment in 1932 and 1933. He joined Jayaprakash Narayan, Achyut Patwardhan, Yusuf Meherally and others, to form the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) and became its Joint Secretary. He was elected to the Bombay Municipal Corporation soon thereafter and, in 1938, presided over the CSP conference in Lahore.

An admirer of the Soviet Union, he visited that country in the late twenties when he was a student at the LSE and later as Secretary of the CSP. The early thirties were the period of Stalin's purges of his rivals in the CPSU and the liquidation of millions of farmers who opposed his policy of forced collectivisation of farms. Horrified by Stalin's brutality, Masani's disenchantment with Soviet communism led to his questioning the credentials of the Indian communists. He strenuously resisted communist attempts to infiltrate and capture the CSP. Unable to convince the majority of his colleagues in the CSP to

support him he resigned along with Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan and Asoka Mehta. A year later the communists were expelled from the CSP. His disillusionment with Soviet communism led him to question marxist dogma and to a rethinking of his socialist beliefs. The result was his well known essay 'Socialism Reconsidered'.

The freedom movement was gathering momentum and when Gandhiji launched the 'Quit India' Movement, Masani who was then an employee of the Tata organisation, resigned his job, volunteered himself as a satyagrahi, courted imprisonment and found himself with other Congress leaders in Nasik Jail.

On his release from jail, Masani entered legislative politics via the Bombay Municipal Corporation (he was Mayor in 1943) and to membership of the Indian Legislative Assembly which was later converted into the Constituent Assembly. He played his role in the drafting of the Indian Constitution as a member of the Fundamental Rights Sub-Committee and Union Powers Committee.

Following his renunciation of socialism it was only logical for Minoo Masani to start thinking of an alternative to socialism and an economic system for independent India. His was a middle-of-the-road recipe - a mixed economy in a free and open society. This was the theme of a series of lectures he delivered in 1947 to the Bombay University's School of Economics which were later published under the title 'Plea for a Mixed Economy.'

Nominated by the Government of India as representative on the UN Sub-Commission on Minorities

I Believe ...

Minoo Masani

I believe in the Brotherhood of Man. There are many who think that the Brotherhood of Man is meaningless without the Fatherhood of God. To me there does not appear to be any such essential interdependence. The Brotherhood of Man involves human solidarity based on the fact that human nature is essentially the same everywhere, that people react fundamentally in the same way to the same incentives and the same pressures. Certain modifications, of course have to be made to allow for variations in social heritage, religion, climate, and such factors, but basically we are brothers under the skin.

Because of this belief, which I find corroborated by concrete experience, I am not inclined to accept the plea that the economic and social policies that produce certain results, shall we say, in Japan or Germany or the United States would not produce similar results in India. Human nature being what it is, people everywhere respond to the same incentives and to the same stimuli. I find nothing unique about the people of our country or the situation in which it finds itself. I believe that, thanks to the conquest of space the crashing of the sound barrier and the development of telecommunications, the world is now one organism. Chauvinism and xenophobia are today, therefore, forces that are as reactionary as racism.

The belief in Humanism leads to an acceptance of Ethics. I believe there is such a thing as good and evil. Of course, the idea of what is good or evil, what is moral or immoral, is a subjective one. My own belief is that what makes for human happiness is moral, what makes for misery is immoral. One man's food, of course,

Masani invited Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's wrath when he refused to turn a blind eye to the persecution of the minorities in the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe and was sent off in 1948 as India's Ambassador to Brazil.

Those were the Cold War years when the Soviet Union sponsored front organisations to promote its interests world-wide. Several organisations were set up internationally to counter the Soviet challenge. One of these was the Congress for Cultural Freedom based in Paris. In India, Masani along with Jayaprakash Narayan, Asoka Mehta and A.D. Gorwala took the initiative in establishing the Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom (ICCF) and affiliated it to the Congress in Paris. The ICCF was a non-party organisation of scholars, writers, artists and scientists to defend intellectual liberty, to cultivate a spirit of free enquiry and an appreciation of the arts.

Two years earlier he had founded, with the blessings and encouragement of the then deputy prime minister and home minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Democratic Research Service to educate public opinion on the dangers to India's national independence posed by communists who, acting under instructions from the Comintern in Moscow, were conducting a violent insurrectionary movement in Telengana in Andhra Pradesh.

His election to the Lok Sabha as an Independent from Ranchi in Bihar in 1957 signalled the beginning of his efforts to implement his thesis of a mixed economy and to combat the statist policies which went under the name of Nehruvian socialism. In 1959 he joined C. Rajagopalachari to found the Swatantra Party which could broadly be described as a liberal-conservative party.

Masani was that rare combination - an intellectual with tremendous or-

ganising competence. During his tenure as general secretary, the Swatantra Party grew rapidly and in less than ten years emerged in the 1967 general elections as the single largest party in the opposition in the Lok Sabha with a strength of 44 members, leading a principled coalition government in Orissa; as the officially recognised opposition in the Rajasthan and Gujarat Assemblies and with significant representation in the Andhra and Tamil Nadu legislative assemblies.

As the party's ideologue he was clear that the Swatantra Party should eschew non-parliamentary forms of protests like satyagraha, morchas, bandhs and walkouts in the legislatures. He was largely influential in ensuring that the party did not form fronts in the trade union and student movements. Perhaps it was his insistence on discipline and doing the right thing that led to the party's exit from electoral politics. In 1971 the 'Indira wave' swept all parties aside including the Swatantra Party. He accepted responsibility for the party's miserable performance (he himself failed to retain his seat in the Lok Sabha for a third term from Rajkot) and resigned from the presidentship of the party and from party politics.

His was an outstanding performance as member of the Lok Sabha between 1967 and 1971. He was Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee of Parliament. As leader of the single largest party in the opposition he invariably opened the debate on the Finance Bill that follows the introduction of the Union Budget. Many of his speeches in parliament were later published under the title "Congress Misrule and Swatantra Alternative". Masani kept a close watch on the attendance of members of his group and their behaviour. He firmly believed that occupying the opposition branches did not mean opposing for the sake of opposition. On many an occasion he supported the ruling party but did not hesitate

can be another man's poison and one man's pursuit of happiness may easily cause unhappiness to another. The test of action, therefore, should be overall balance of happiness and unhappiness it produces.

It is obvious that such an approach to the problems of morality has little to do with traditional or conventional codes of morality. Would such liberty as this approach of mine gives to each individual be exercised with maturity and restraint? I don't know. I only know that no other concept of morality appears to me to make any sense.

The Philosophy that appeals to me is the Stoic Philosophy. From my youth, I have responded to the logic of the Meditations of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. For instance, it is only what we ourselves do that can hurt us, nothing that anyone else does, however beastly, can possibly diminish one's dignity or make one shrink. I find that this philosophy helps in making it possible to tell the truth even when it is unpalatable and builds resistance to smears and lampooning as also a relative indifference to popularity, the pursuit of which is the bane of our national leadership.

From youth onwards, I have responded to Tagore's invitation "Ekla chalo re" and the sentiment of James Russell Lowell in his Stanzas on Freedom:

*They are slaves who fear to speak
For the fallen and the weak;
They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three.*

My mother tells me that, even as a little boy, I was always on the side of the underdog - the servant about to be dismissed or the woman selling fruit who was being beaten down by some member of the family inclined to bargain too hard. On such occasions I was always on the other side

book to save this country."

He was happiest when surrounded by young people. Not surprisingly his first and last books were meant for the young. The first was *Our India* and the last was its sequel *We Indians*. If optimism exuded every page of *Our India*, *We Indians* was a confession of failure and a plea to the young to avoid the mistakes of his generation. In the concluding chapter

in *We Indians* he wrote:

"We of my generation have made such a mess of our country's affairs that, in my opinion, we have no right to preach to young folks..."

He was indeed the quintessential dissenter.

His publications include: *Our India*, *Socialism Reconsidered*, *Your*

Food, *Picture of a Plan*, *Plea for a Mixed Economy*, *Our Growing Human Family*, *Cooperative Farming*, *the Great Debate*, *The Communist Party of India - A short History*, *Too Much Politics*, *Too Little Citizenship*, *Liberalism*, *Is JP the Answer?*, *JP's Mission Partly Accomplished*, *Bliss was it in that Dawn... and Against the Tide* (A two-volume autobiography), *We Indians*.

volved. Here again, I reject, as Gandhiji did, the "peace of the graveyard". While war is bad, I believe that appeasement and submission to tyranny are even worse.

I have little love for the status quo. The world needs change. I believe the nonconformist conscience is one of our country's saddest shortages and that heretics are the salt of the earth.

To those timid spirits who are afraid of radical change, I commend the words of G. B. Shaw in his play Major Barbara: "What do we do when we spend years of work and thought and thousand of pounds of solid cash on a new gun or an aerial battleship that turns out just a hair's breath wrong after all? Scrap it. Scrap it without wasting another hour or another pound on it. Well, you have

made yourself something that you call a morality or a religion or what not. It doesn't fit the facts. Well, scrap it. Scrap it and get one that fits. That is what is wrong with the world at present. It scraps its obsolete and its old moralities and its old religions and its old political constitutions."

(*Illustrated Weekly of India*, November 16, 1969)

Homage to Manjula Bhide

Smt. Manjula Bhide is no more. The icy hand of death touched her on June 12, 1998 and her mortal remains went up in the electric flames within a few seconds.

For the last couple of years Waman Bhide and Manjutai were infirm, and were unable to move about freely. Rarely did they go out without the help of someone or the other. It was my practice to speak to both of them on telephone. After my return from my native place, as per my practice, I telephoned the Bhides. After a while Waman Bhide answered the call. I came to know that Manjutai had a fall near their house at Borivli. Yet both of them went to Deorukh and Oani which were their first love. A minor fracture sustained by her earlier accentuated and so she was admitted to a hospital at Ratnagiri. There it was revealed that a blood clot had developed in her

brain. Soon she was rushed to Shushrusha Hospital, Dadar, for a proper medical attention. Unfortunately, she was in coma. When I visited her the oxygen had been administered to her and she was gasping for breath. She was there for a month. Finally she breathed her last on June 12, 1998.

She was the product of Rashtra Seva Dal. Gentle lady as she was, she devoted her life for the service of others. The Bhides offered everything for the Matrumandir, Deorukh and Gokul, Oani. According to Manjutai the Matrumandir was on sound economic footing. But she was bit worried about the sister organisation at Oani.

She was closely associated with Rashtra Seva Dal during her hey days. She worked for Samayakul. As a young lady she was an active

member of the municipal union and was instrumental in starting the women's wing. Above everything the Matrumandir and Gokul were her soul. Those organisations had pervaded her life. She disregarded her own health. But to Wamanrao she was more a guardian than his wife. For the last few years Manjutai was his life-force. Manjutai was selfless, honest, humane, made extreme sacrifices. Service to mankind was her mission. She must have thought-

*Na Tvamaham Kamaye Rajyam
Na Swargam Napunarbhavam
Kamaye Dukkhataptanam
Praninamartinashanam.*

[O Lord, I do not want any kingdom, or heavenly pleasure, or even escape from rebirth. But I do want that the affliction of all beings tormented by the miseries of life may cease.]

- G. D. Moray

in going against all other groups in the house if a particular issue warranted such action. Two instances that come to mind are the "liberation" of Goa when he opposed India's action on the ground that it was unnecessary and that the whole affair was an effort to ensure Krishna Menon's return to Parliament. The other was the abolition of Privy Purses when the Swatantra Party in Parliament was alone in opposing the move as it went against solemn assurances given by Sardar Patel and recorded in "Instruments of Accession". He would often quote the verse to encourage his colleagues to treat issues on their merit without being worried about being isolated or in a helpless minority.

"They are slaves who dare not be in the right with two or three"

He took over the editorship of Freedom First which he had founded in 1952. As editor he fought the censorship imposed during Smt. Gandhi's Emergency and sought the court's intervention against her censors in what came to be known as the Freedom First case. Though the court vindicated his stand he found that there were too many impediments to his exercising editorial freedom. He suspended publication which was resumed soon after the Emergency was withdrawn. Freedom First, now in its 46th year, is a liberal quarterly.

In 1968, when the Janata Party was elected to power he was appointed Chairman of the Minorities Commission but soon resigned over differences on principles and approach.

Minoo Masani the socialist agitator in his twenties became the Liberal par excellence whose contribution to the liberal movement was acknowledged when he was honoured as a patron of the Liberal International. (though he disliked the word preferring to call himself by the more cumbersome description "Non-denominationalist") and an uncompromising champion of indi-

vidual liberty. Starting out as a friend and supporter of Pandit Nehru he began to see in his later years the practical wisdom in Sardar Patel's policies.

Though he had retired from politics he continued to be active in public life. In march 1968, he founded the Leslie Sawhny Programme of Training for Democracy to train young people in citizenship - to be conscious of their rights and their duties as citizens.

He founded the Society for the Right to Die with Dignity and enjoyed being in the centre of a minor storm when he campaigned for passive euthanasia for the terminally ill.

In 1985 he set up the Project for Economic Education in association with the Leslie Sawhny programme and Prof. B.R. Shenoy's Economic Research Centre to educate public opinion on issues relating to the economy in general and the economic reform programme that began in the eighties, in particular.

Masani's reputation as a man with a very high level of integrity in public life, was formidable. This quality by itself was enough to disqualify him from being a 'successful' politician where success is misread in terms of ministerial positions or other similar patronage wielding offices.

He concluded his two-volume autobiography (which he wrote in 1981) with the observation:

"Since our politicians are by and large beyond repair, if India is to be saved, it will have to be saved by the small man, particularly the middle class of the cities and the landed farmers of the countryside who are the backbone of the nation. These classes have suffered cruelly under the so called 'socialist pattern' that Nehru imposed on the country and which is still rampant, but their back is still not broken. It is to these that I would

of the social barricades. I should like to think that this craving for justice and sympathy for the underdog is still a major element in my beliefs. It no doubt accounted for my early acceptance of socialism as a result of being an avid reader of H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw.

To this instinct for social justice my contact with Gandhiji and my arguments with him over the years helped to add an awareness that ends and means are interlinked and that the end does not justify the means even if the end is, in Lenin's words, "a society of the free and equal". Hence my book, "Socialism Reconsidered" (1944) and my renunciation of State Socialism and the acceptance of the Gandhian path to a better world.

Since 1954, I have been, at the instance of my good friend, Jayaprakash Narayan, Sampattidani No.29 on the roll of the All India Sarva Seva Sangh, giving a small part of my income every year to enable the landless to be given a plough or a pair of cattle or some seed to cultivate the land made available as a result of Bhoodan. This modest attempt at "Trusteeship" gives me considerable personal satisfaction, even though it also create a certain amount of financial strain and embarrassment.

I believe in the essential goodness of people. Recently, in the course of a talk with Rajaji, I must have displayed a certain measure of faith in the bona fides and assurances of a certain group of hardfaced politicians. "You seem to believe in God," observed Rajaji drily. In answer to my puzzled and inquiring look, he added: "You behave as if you do. Perhaps you call it Providence or righteousness."

Of all the values, I put Freedom first. I believe with Lord Acton that Liberty is the highest good and that other values, like peace, for example, must yield when freedom is in-



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