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RAJAJI

The Bhishma of Indian Politics

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I consider it a privilege to associate myself with this function which has been organised to honour the memory of one of the Titans of our freedom movement — who held a dominant position in our public life in both pre-independence and post-independence eras for well over six decades. Rajaji did not have what in journalistic parlance is described as a mass political base. But through his sheer intellectual prowess, he strode the Indian political scene as a Colossus right upto his death at the ripe old age of 94. Retaining his mental alertness till the very end, he was deeply immersed in public affairs and continued to offer his wise counsel and advice on problems of significance to the nation. He was heard with respect despite the fact that he had no 'political troops' behind him. His razor sharp intellect and moral ascendancy more than made up for the lack of substantial political following of the conventional variety.

While alive, Rajaji was rightly described as the Bhishma of Indian politics. Yet how I wish like Bhishma, he had been given the right to choose the time of his death. I am sure if he had been endowed with such a right, denied to ordinary mortals, he would have chosen to live upto the day in March last year when the monopoly of power enjoyed by a political party for over 30 years was ended and another party more deeply anchored in the political beliefs and values of Mahatma Gandhi took over. These were the values which has been the lode star of Rajaji's own long political career and which he had ceaselessly striven to propagate through his speeches and writings for nearly 60 years whether in office or out of it. In particular, in the last two decades of his public life, Rajaji fought with messianic zeal for ending monopoly and concentration of power of different kinds and sought to build up public opinion against the creeping tyranny of the ubiquitous State. Rajaji foresaw that with its powerful armoury of controls and regulations, the State was increasingly becoming authoritarian in outlook and behaviour and posed a threat to the liberty of the people. It is a pity that he did not live to see the fruition of the campaign which he had launched against monopoly of political power. He was denied

the addition to his long list of achievements one of being also a *Satayush*.

It is difficult to do justice in a short pre-dinner speech to the multi-faceted achievements of a versatile genius like Rajaji. Dr. Johnson said of Goldsmith that there was nothing which he touched but did not adorn. These words can perhaps be applied with greater force to Rajaji, who distinguished himself as a politician, administrator, statesman, philosopher, social reformer and a man of letters. He interested himself even in the nuclear disarmament programme and undertook, at considerable risk to his health when he was over 80 years old, a special mission to President Kennedy. It was his catholicity of outlook and his outstanding performance in varied fields that enabled him to carve out a unique position for himself even amongst the galaxy of stars that shone so brilliantly in our political firmament during the Gandhian era. He was amongst those closest to Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji himself called Rajaji his conscience keeper. Rajaji derived strength and inspiration from Gandhian thought and in turn imparted strength and momentum to the Gandhian movement. He carried the message of Gandhiji to the nook and corner of the then composite State of Madras and gave concrete shape to the Gandhian ideas through vigorous pursuit of programmes like temple entry for Harijans, removal of untouchability, promotion of Khadi and village industries and prohibition. Rajaji had to face considerable opposition including at times social ostracism in pushing through these programmes in the thirties. He was among the hard core of Gandhians of pre-independence era who sought to bring an ethical approach to bear upon political affairs. They demonstrated through their personal conduct and public policies that politics divorced from ethics was something totally alien to Indian traditions.

Dharma

In the post-independence era too, Rajaji spoke and wrote with great fervour in favour of the continuing relevance of moral values in public life and the need to attach equal importance to means and ends. It was his firm commitment to moral values that gave Rajaji his great stature in our public life despite his lack of a mass political base and sustained him on those occasions when he momentarily drifted away from the main stream of the national political life and had to part company even from his closest colleagues and friends. Even the worst of his critics conceded that none of his actions was motivated by considerations of personal advancement or ambition. He never espoused the cause of a special group or the privileged few. He was never a lobbyist. The

only lobby for which he fought and was prepared to go into political wilderness, if need be, was what he considered to be national interest.

Throughout the freedom struggle and the immediate post-independence era when he occupied many positions of influence and power in administration and, even more so, later when he functioned almost as a one man opposition to the Government of the day, Rajaji gave evidence of the courage of his convictions. When he was convinced that a particular course of action was right, he would adhere to it whatever be the consequence, including severance of relations with those near and dear to him in public life. He was a true and dedicated disciple of Gandhiji and yet did not hesitate to voice his dissent when he felt strongly about any particular matter. We all know how in 1942, when the feelings against the British were running high and the call for "Quit India" was gathering momentum, Rajaji came forward with his formula for acceptance of partition of India in principle with a view to exerting pressure on the British for transfer of power. This line of thought which he advocated with vigour in various forums in the next two-three years when his other colleagues were imprisoned brought him considerable, though unmerited, unpopularity. He was in political wilderness for quite some time but no one questioned the sincerity of purpose underlying the formula which he proposed for bringing about immediate transfer of power from British to Indian hands.

Administrator

As an administrator who held high office both in his own State and at the Centre, Rajaji displayed ability, vision and administrative acumen which have now become legendary. Like Sardar Patel, he recognised the valuable contribution which Civil Servants could make in assisting in the formulation of sound policies and in their effective implementation. As Chief Minister of Madras during 1937-39, Rajaji won the esteem of the civilians who had earlier entertained grave misgivings about the ability of Indian political leaders in administration. Rajaji drew a close distinction between policy making which was the prerogative of the politician and the administration of law, rules and regulations which fell in the province of permanent civil servants. Having given the civil servants full opportunity for expressing their views, he would take decisions assuming full responsibility for them and ensure that they were scrupulously carried out. He never left the civil servants in doubt on who was running the show. He could lay down a clear line of policy, if necessary, in defiance of conventional wisdom as he did when he

removed all controls on foodgrains in Madras in 1952. At the same time, he gave full protection to the civil servant against political interference and unfair and unjust attacks based on political and personal prejudices. He thus set norms for the conduct both of the politician and the civil servant which, had they been followed by those who succeeded him, would have averted the type of situation which the country has witnessed in the last few years. We would not have had aberrations of the kind which we noticed during the Emergency.

Man Important

Rajaji's political philosophy was a judicious blend, if one may say so, of Upanishadic wisdom and British liberalism. For him, man as an individual was all important. He was concerned with man's dignity, his freedom and his right to realise his full potential. Rajaji, therefore, set his face against the omniscient and omnipotent State presuming to know everything and seeking to dictate in detail to the individual what he should do and what he should not do. It was his conviction that the all pervasive modern State of the kind which the Congress Party was seeking to build in the deceptive name of socialism and economic growth would lead to the erosion of individual freedom, liberty and human dignity.

It was that conviction that led him to part company from his friends of long standing and establish a new party when he was nearly 80 years old. He was fully aware that in a country where the vast majority of the people were steeped in poverty and illiteracy and could easily be led astray by promise of utopia, his emphasis on individual initiative and freedom would not appeal to the masses or pave the way for capturing political power. It was not political power which he was seeking but political education of the masses. He set about the task of educating the people against the evil consequences of an all-embracing State which in his own pithy language he described as the "permit, licence and quota Raj". As he said in his quiet but fine language "the permit-licence-administration must be replaced if we want this country of ours — which has become a cramped prison house — to be restored to its condition of freedom where everyone will have fair play and where honest and diligent men have not to cringe before arrogant and ignorant officials or seek the favour of go-betweens for reaching Ministers".

Evil of Controls

He did not minimise the importance of the task which he had undertaken and characterised it as the

second struggle for freedom. The persistence and vigour with which he sought to expose the evils of a regime riddled with controls and licences — particularly through his weekly articles in *Swarajya* — had an impact even on those who were politically opposed to him. The rationale of controls and regulations came to be widely questioned. One did not have to agree with Rajaji wholly to recognise the basic validity of the main thrust of his arguments. It came slowly to be realised that controls and licences could not by themselves usher in socialism or even improve the chances of success of the small man in his eternal struggle against the powerful. On the contrary, it became clear that the system only bred corruption and led to the perpetuation of a political and economic oligarchy.

Rajaji could carry on his crusade against the growing power of the State without being dubbed the champion of big business because his public life was an open book and his integrity was unassailable. He was against gigantism whether in the public or the private sector. He attacked in forthright language the emerging alliance between Government and industry which could only result in the exploitation of the poor. He stood for decentralisation of power and initiative in economic and political matters. He believed in a genuine federal system which would leave the State Governments ample power and resources to enable them to discharge the responsibilities in all fields assigned to them under the Constitution. Many of the ideas which he propounded in the last fifteen to twenty years of his life are reflected in some measure in the manifesto of the party now in power in the Centre and in most of the States.

Writer

Any assessment of Rajaji's life and work will be incomplete if it is confined to his role as a politician and as an elder statesman. Long after all the events of the recent past have become part of history, Rajaji's achievements as a writer both in his own language and in English will endure as monuments to his scholarship, his catholicity of interest and his immense persuasive skills. He is acknowledged as a great writer in Tamil of the present century. He cultivated a simple but captivating style which appealed to the common people and the sophisticated alike. His articles, short stories and commentaries on contemporary affairs run into several volumes. His Tamil versions of Ramayana and Mahabharata which have also been rendered into English will last as long as the original classics themselves. Through these writings he made the younger

generation aware of their rich cultural heritage and tried to instil in them the basic ethical values without which no nation can hope to survive.

Rajaji never encouraged the people around him to create any kind of memorial for him nor even celebrate his birthdays. I understand that he kept his date of birth a closely guarded secret for a long time. I am not therefore sure how Rajaji would have reacted to the concept of a Foundation named after him. But I feel that we would be justified in ignoring the grand old man's wishes in this matter. We and the succeeding generation need to keep reminding ourselves of the ideas and ideals which he sought to put forward before his countrymen in his life time. He was a teacher all through his life propounding human and moral values which are of lasting significance. I hope that the Foundation will promote systematic study of Rajaji's ideas and teachings so that these may continue to influence the minds of our people and enable them to build an India as envisaged by him — an India in which people would be free, fearless and self-reliant.

(Text of speech delivered on the occasion of a subscription dinner organised by The Rajaji Foundation in Bombay on Sunday, January 22, 1978.)