

## GEORGE FERNANDES

A trade unionist, agriculturist, political activist and journalist all rolled into one, Minister for Defence, Shri George Fernandes is full of surprises. After all who would have guessed that India's nuclear power is in the hands of a would-be priest who long campaigned against the bomb. During the Kargil conflict, Fernandes set new standards as Defence Minister by braving the inhospitable Himalayan heights to visit troops on the battlefield, and rightly became the darling of the jawans and a good number of average citizens. Following the Tehelka defence scandal, undoubtedly India's most popular Defence Minister, also became its most controversial one.

Born in 1930 in Karnataka, Defence Minister George Fernandes has long confounded expectations. Military officers initially distrusted him, with ample reason. Throughout his life, he has had problems with authority. As a young man, Fernandes rebelled against church fathers, offended that teachers at his seminary feasted while the students ate swill. Later, as a Bombay labor organizer, Fernandes frequently found himself in jail after his strikers brawled with hired company thugs.

Fernandes was first elected to Parliament in 1967. As President of the All India Railwaymen's Federation he led the Railway strike involving 1.5 million workers in 1974, resulting in thousands being sent to jail. This was one of the events that led to the imposition of the Emergency in June 1975.

In June 1976, during Indira Gandhi's emergency, Fernandes went underground and fought her rule. He was once detained on charges, later dropped, of smuggling dynamite to blow up government establishments in protest against the state of emergency, in what came to be known as Baroda Dynamite conspiracy case. However, that didn't stop him from becoming India's railways minister 13 years later.

Earlier, as industries minister in the late '70s, he tangled with the multinationals, kicking Coca-Cola and IBM out of India. Fernandes was brilliant as a railway minister during 1989-90 - the Konkan Railway, easily the most illustrious of railway projects in independent India, was his brainchild.

Fernandes founded his own Samata party in 1994. He is the only Christian minister in Prime Minister Vajpayee's cabinet and has held several ministerial portfolios including communications, industry, railways and defence.

After appointment as Defence Minister in March 1998, Fernandes won the soldiers' respect for his honesty, administrative savviness and frugality--he himself uses just one room in the mansion for working, eating and sleeping.

When Fernandes tours army operations, he shuns military pomp. He hitches rides with soldiers on army trucks and makes a point of eating the same things the rank-and-file are consuming. Even around his generals, he wears sandals and kurta pajamas that he washes himself, by hand.

Fernandes is particularly popular among soldiers on the front. He has made 18 visits to the icy heights of the 6,600m Siachen glacier, "the world's highest battlefield" where Indian and Pakistani troops guard their respective stretches of the glacier throughout the year. When bureaucrats were sluggish in sending snowmobiles to the battlezone at Siachen, he helicoptered the officials to the area so they would experience the icy misery themselves.

India's military brass has been equally impressed by Fernandes' outspoken criticism of perceived Chinese attempts to tighten the clamps on India. While most politicians have avoided risking Beijing's ire, Fernandes has openly accused the Chinese of providing parts for Pakistan to build its missiles. He also has criticized the Chinese for strengthening their military might across the Himalayas in Tibet.

Beijing finally protested in April 1998, after newspapers reported that Fernandes had called China India's "Enemy No.1." Fernandes says he regrets the remark. "A TV interviewer wanted me to categorize the threat to India in the language of Bombay films: Hero No.1, Villain No.1. I replied I wouldn't say that, but that I'd say China is India's potential threat No.1." What about Pakistan? "I look at a Pakistani as the flesh of our flesh and the blood of our blood," says Fernandes. "We are two different nations but one people."

Considered the patron saint of nearly lost causes, Fernandes is a supporter of Human rights and civil liberties movements all over the world and anti-nuclear and environmental campaigns. He backs the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka (reportedly is second only in popularity to LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran), supports the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet and lets Burmese student refugees camp out in his cavernous government mansion.

Fernandes is literarily gifted and has published numerous books including - "What Ails the Socialists", "Railway Strike of 1974 " and "George Fernandes"(his autobiography). He is also the editor of "The Other side"(an English monthly) and the Chairman on the editorial board of "Pratipaksh" (a Hindi monthly).

Fernandes is perhaps the only defense minister of a nuclear power who hangs a picture of Hiroshima in his office. It's a familiar image: the skeletal dome standing above an ocean of destruction left by man's first nuclear storm. It stares Fernandes in the face every time he meets with his many-starred generals and his nuclear bomb-makers.

And it was staring down on May 11-13, 1998, when India carried out the series of underground tests that shocked the world. "I'd been a campaigner against nuclear weapons all my life," explains Fernandes. "I was even against nuclear power." Such fervor had even led him to study for the Catholic priesthood, but he dropped out of a seminary in Bangalore when he decided organized religion was "humbug."

So how did an old-time ban-the-bomber like Fernandes turn into an advocate of India's nuclear punch? "With tremendous anguish," he says. "I was breaking away from my convictions of almost five decades, but I felt that my country had to keep all of its security options open."

His turnaround occurred in 1997, he says, when India was being strong-armed by the Clinton Administration to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. "It became obvious to me that five countries in the world wanted to hold onto their nuclear power to dominate others," Fernandes recalls. "They couldn't care less about what happened in the rest of the world."

Fernandes' opinion didn't matter much back then. He was a political maverick whose leftist Samata Party had only six of 545 seats in the Indian parliament. And he never dreamed that India would explode the bomb while he led the nation's defense. But when the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP) formed a coalition government in March 1998, it needed support from the Samata party. Fernandes was rewarded with the post of Minister of Defense.

The two parties were coming from radically opposite directions, but the Hindu nationalists and the socialist Fernandes agreed on India's need for an atomic bomb. Says he: "Nobody can tell us what our security concerns should be."

With Fernandes as Minister of Defense, India isn't likely to sign the test ban treaty. The rest of the world may complain, but Fernandes takes a loftier stance. "India is in a better position(after its tests) to build up pressure to create a nuclear-free world," he says. For Fernandes, that photograph of Hiroshima is a reminder that he should stick to his guns--and his bomb.

After the Tehelka defence scandal broke out in March 2001, Fernandes quit as defence minister accepting moral responsibility. However less than eight months later, after being cleared of any wrong-doing, he was reappointed to the post.The Politics "come-back kid" is re-energized and rearing to do battle with India's enemies again.

(Excerpts taken from an article in "Time Asia" magazine, 30/11/98;

Book Published by George Fernandes

(i) 'What Ails the Socialists'

(ii) 'Railway Strike of 1974';

(iii) 'George Fernandes Speaks'

Contemporary Political Leadership in India: George Fernandes, Edited by Shiri Ram Bakshi, Sita Ram Sharma,

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