

Remembering Netaji Raj Narain (1917 – 1986) during his birth centenary year

Prof. Anand Kumar

The socialist stream of Indian freedom movement, particularly its initiatives to organize students-youth, Kisan and workers and the heroic role of the socialist leaders during the Quit India Movement (9th August, 1942 -1946), attracted many courageous and patriotic students and youth leaders towards it on the eve of independence from foreign rule. Such young patriots got associated with the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) and occupied leading roles after the Party decided to leave Congress to work among the masses to take India towards complete Swaraj. Shri Raj Narain (1917 -1986) was one of such student leaders who came from Banaras Hindu University and became famous for his heroic leadership during the August Revolution forcing the British to end their colonial rule by 15th August, 1947. He chose the path of peoples' politics under socialist banner after independence. His sincerity, courage, and honesty made him one of the architects of socialist movement of post-colonial India.

'Netaji' Raj Narain was an iconic socialist mass leader who was a movement for justice, dignity and equality in himself. Most of the time, either he was touring the country in rail or agitating for a peoples' problem in jail. He was as relaxed during multiple imprisonments for a cause as in parliament. He converted his jail terms into training camps for his colleagues. On the other hand, he used the floors of UP Assembly and LOK Sabha and Rajya Sabha for educating fellow politicians about the visions and approaches of Marx, Gandhi, Narendra Dev, Lohia and JP and the promises of the national movement. He was equally comfortable with national leaders and grass roots workers which made him one of the most accessible leaders of our time. He trained countless students-youth, Kisan activists, trade unionists and other men and women and helped in their evolution into political leaders in the Indo-Gangetic zone of national politics.

Raj Narain ji was an example of a de-caste and de-class leader. He was very sensitive to the issues of caste atrocities of the dominant castes and communal discriminations against minorities. He led the movement for temple entry for the ex-untouchables at Kashi Vishwanath Temple and badly beaten by the Pandas and police. The orthodox forces took revenge with him by defeating him in 1980 when he contested for Lok Sabha from Varanasi. He was one of the first national leaders to reach any site of communal violence and always encouraged the programs of communal harmony in all circumstances including the Indo-Pak war of 1965, communal riots during the SVD Governments and Janata Raj. He

was subjected to physical removal from the UP Assembly for demanding relief from famine for the rural masses. His mobilizations against landlords made him a class enemy of the rural rich. He was also a 'caste enemy' for advocating and promoting the cause of Backward Classes and Dalit communities.

At the same time, he always attracted ridicule from the middle classes for his rural ways in public sphere. He was very adamant about promoting of Indian languages and Angrezi Hatao as a continuity of the principles of Gandhi and Lohia towards decolonization of the Indian education and intelligentsia and it made him rejected by the urban elite. Politically, he was never forgiven by the authoritarian and bureaucratic forces for defeating Indira Gandhi and helping JP in his quest for Total Revolution during the '70s. He invited violence from the followers of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh for resisting the take over of state apparatus during the Janata Raj and pulling down the Morarji Desai Government on the issue of 'dual membership' with help of Congress in 1980. It made everyone ignore his pro-people health initiatives and transparent functioning as a union minister. On the other hand, he was not forgiven by the Communist Parties for challenging them on issues of their role in the national movement including the Quit India Movement, their support for the Emergency Raj of Indira Gandhi and his unqualified support to Jaiprakash Narain and his efforts against corruption in 1974. Of course, he was always criticized by a section of socialists for being a Lohia loyalist and then Charan Singh's Hanuman in the post-Lohia years of his public life. He faced these expected adversities with stoic indifference. But he felt betrayed and deserted after many of his time tested colleagues left him to fend for himself in his last political battle of his selfless public life when he parted ways with Charan Singh after the electoral debacle of 1980.

Of course, his politics was not always a series of successes. He had his share of victories and defeats; failures and achievements; controversies and conflicts; alliances and splits. He never cared for personal gains and popularity. He was almost indifferent to his family members. His volunteers always received generous support. But all of his children and grand children remained nearly strangers for him. Politics is often associated with power and glamour but he was almost indifferent to personal fame and power; to electoral successes and defeats. He was twice successful (1952, 1957) and then defeated twice (1962; 1964) in the contests for UP Vidhan Sabha. He came to Rajya Sabha in 1966. But faced defeat in his second attempt due to split in socialist votes in 1972. Similarly he was four times un-successful in national electoral battles: in 1971 against PM Indira Gandhi, in 1974 against fellow socialist Madhu Limaye, in 1980 against veteran freedom fighter Kamalapati Tripathi, and in 1984 against his close ally

and leader Charan Singh and only one time successful in 1977 against PM Indira Gandhi in his efforts to enter Lok Sabha. If he was passionate about making alliance to promote a cause then he was equally merciless in breaking bonds to protect a principle. But he was never blamed for casteism, communalism, nepotism or corruption. He always maintained cordial relations with his adversaries in his own child like ways. But he was uniquely unfortunate about loyalty of his colleagues which made him a lonely warrior in the last years of life as he unsuccessfully tried to resurrect the banner of socialism in the era of 'identity politics'.

But his tragic last days did not diminish the significance of his outstanding contributions towards politics of social transformation as pillar of socialism through a judicious combination of civil disobedience movements and parliamentary power in most adverse circumstances. In his eventful political journey of more than five decades as a selfless and fearless militant socialist leader from anti-imperialist struggle to post colonial socialist movements, there were many moments of historical significance as he was relentless crusader for the socialist causes. But 1977 was his 'year of global glory' when he achieved electoral victory against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in most insurmountable circumstances of dictatorship. He had already got her disqualified in a landmark court judgment for electoral corruption in June,1975. But she had refused to resign and put total opposition leadership including Raj Narain in jail for long 19 months without trial under the provisions of 'internal emergency'. He was one of the few examples of the efficacy of ballot power which catapulted him from prison to not only parliament but also gave him one of the front seats in the national government from 1977 to 1980.

He made his mark very early in the politics of socialism by getting elected to Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Sabha in 1952 from rural Varanasi and establishing himself as an impressive parliamentarian who was equally effective as a Satyagrahi socialist. He was one of the main socialist leaders who made Satyagraha and socialist politics synonymous in India after independence. He was an example of courage of conviction on issues of caste, communalism, colonial mind set, national unity and power to the people. A law graduate and post graduate in political science, Raj Narain was born in a landlord family of Varanasi. He belonged to the lineage of Maharaj Balwant Singh, the founder of the princely state of Banaras. He received his first lessons of patriotism and socialism from the founders of Indian socialist movement like Acharya Narendra Dev and Dr. Sampurnanand at Kashi Vidyapith, the nursery of freedom fighters and socialist activists. It inspired him to become member of the Congress Socialist Party which gave him opportunity to receive training in political leadership from two of the most charismatic

socialist leaders - Jaiprakash Narain (JP) and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia. Retirement of JP from party politics in 1954, and split in the Narendradev led Praja Socialist Party made him closely associated with the Lohia line of socialist politics. After untimely death of Dr. Lohia in 1967 he took command of socialists and made bold moves for the next nearly twenty years in pursuit of Lohia's call of Congress Hatao- Desh Bachao. He led the socialists through several movements and electoral alliances after Lohia till complete uprooting of Congress Raj in 1977 national election. It has to be appreciated that much maligned Raj Narain was one of the main architects of the Janata Revolution (1974 -'77) under the leadership of Loknayak Jaiprakash Narayan, after the nineteen dark months of Emergency.

There is no denying that Raj Narain ji was an extra-ordinary socialist who pursued path of socialist mass politics in selfless and inspiring way by transcending the barriers of caste, class and religion in most fascinating manner. He also achieved great fame as one of the pillars of socialist politics in post-colonial India. It is expected that the centenary year of such a hero will be an occasion of studying his complex life journey and its ever changing contexts. So that there is learning of appropriate lessons to be able to meet the present challenges of Indian politics and society, including the much fragmented socialist movement and politics in its multiple manifestations from electoral battles to social mobilizations.

Prof. Anand Kumar,
Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla.
Anandkumar1@Hotmail.com