

A STALWART DEPARTS

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When, at 95, after a full life, one returns to the elements as all of us must one day, there cannot be much of a grouse against providence. But to those who had known N.G.Ranga closely and for years, his passing away must be a wrench that will take a little time to get over. Perhaps largely unknown to the younger generation and very different from the current crop of political personalities, Ranga belonged to a vanishing breed. Almost the last among the stalwarts, sometimes stern but always unassuming, who had lent lustre to the Indian scene.

Seven years ahead of me in age, Ranga and I had the same `step'-alma mater in St.Catherine's, Oxford (we already had Indian degrees). He took a research degree which I also did after going through the grind (which he had avoided) of Honours school of Modern History. When he was in Oxford it was before the time, the early "Thirties especially, when Oxford and Cambridge" nurtured a new type of deviant pupils-" the dear old days," as James Cameron, celebrated inter-national publicist wrote, "when we all were communists or imagined we were or thought we ought to be, "I caught the infection, but Ranga, with his in-built horror of imperialism, escaped what was thought a sort of 'taint.' He found intellectual solace and political conviction in Social Democracy, a la Herold Laski at its extremest.

Like all sensitive young men, Ranga burnt with patriotic zeal and on re-trun home, did a short stint as Economics lecturer in - unless I am wrong - Pachaiyappas collage in Madras, but he was cut out for politics, especially when patriotic passion inflamed the best of us. He went through the then usual routine of jail-going in the intervals of political work. Naturally, the Indian National Congress, the platform of mass struggle, was the tabernacle of his choice, and though on account of a sort of in-built nonconformity he was, during a long and active career, repeatedly in and out of congress, he retained for that original habitat of so many of us a softness in his heart, and in his thought and bearing he was the quintessential congressman.

There was something delightfully earthy about him, even an endearing rusticity, redolent of the soil of his own dear Andhra with fields of golden corn rolling wavily away to the horizon and a volatile peasantry whose interests remained to the last his prime preoccupation. "Old soldiers never die; they fade away". I thought thus as news came of Ranga's passing away, though there was nothing 'subaltern' about Ranga and wherever he would be it was never far from the head of the table. His talent found appreciation and before long from the then Congress Swarajya Party led by Motilal Nehru and S. Srinivasa Iyengar, and in the Thirties (or was it a little earlier?) he was elected to the Central Legislative Assembly where in no time he established a reputation, particularly as a determined spokesman of India's agriculturists. He was a celebrity much before I came to know him closely, which is why it had hurt me to see that in the last months of his life-he was-as far as I could make out-in a state of undeserved oblivion. Even now, I am not sure, if the great wide public are aware that a stalwart has departed the national scene.

I saw him last in or around March 1991 when the two of us (thanks perhaps to a typical gesture of Prime Minister Chandra Sekhar) were given the Padmavibushan award. The first time I saw him was in Lucknow, at the historic 1936 congress, which I attended as a visitor, and also in a memorable All India Kisan Sabha conference at the same site. Perhaps with his interest in literature he had attended the inaugural session of the All India Progressive Writers Conference where the great Preamchand presided and Sarojani Naidu, Hasrat Mohani and other luminaries gathered. I was there, representing the writers' Bengal unit, for in the meantime, returning from abroad and via an 18-month stay in Andhra University. I had been admitted into the then illegal communist party of India and allotted work with students, cultural workers and trade unions.

To the Kisan sabha session in 1936 I had gone as a matter of course and saw Ranga with other leaders (whom I had known) like Muzaffar Ahmed, Swami Sahajananda, Bankim Mukerjee, Indulal Yajnik - I mention these names because years later Ranga would talk to me about that meeting and refer to his then colleagues from the communist movement in a manner that showed this catholicity, his freedom from the usual social-democratic aversion and allergy towards communism.

A certain innate liberality of outlook which made him a natural-born parliamentarian. He held actually to his own views and yet contended firmly but civilizedly, with its polar opposite. No wonder, he showed over decades his gift as a parliamentarian; it is no accident that he held a kind of Guinness Book record, for with some intermission he had been an elected member of the Central legislature before and after independence for a nearly 60-year stretch!

Ranga and I became friends during my 25 years (1952-77) in parliament and though markedly different in our views, our manner, our perception of life and (if you like) of its philosophy, we had come very near to each other. In 1952 and for some years afterwards, he was a pillar of the Congress party, but he struck people as being never partisan. A capable debater, he could rise something to eloquence, and in spite of a kind of mannered way of speaking (which seemed 'dated' even then) Ranga never failed to command respect. For a politician with long experience he always seemed patently honest, even to an extent almost eccentric and by no means just a 'party faithful'. There was along with it a certain, nearly village simplicity –in spite of his Oxford education and he would perhaps be secretly pleased when the prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru would, with naughty playfulness, pull Ranga's leg by calling him 'acharya'. Ranga never sought to retaliate the irony behind the nomenclature and perhaps mildly and a little equivocally enjoyed the Prime Minister's shaft pricking the patent of Acharya Kripalani over the honorific!

It was not possible for Ranga to remain much longer in the Congress. Perhaps he had found the going smooth when the Konda Venkatappayyas and Prakasams dominated the Andhra scene but later incumbents in power and prominence were too much of a cross to bear. May be his gravitation towards the Swatantra party was a misfortune, but anyway he changed sides. I remember the meeting, perhaps in 1961 or so, to celebrate his completion of sixty years (Shashtiabdipoorti) where, speaking on invitation, I did not hesitate to felicitate my friend as a born nonconformist, an inviolable champion of the man- behind-the plough who would not perhaps long relish being in the party he had chosen.

Occasionally in parliament, he appeared un-happy, especially with the antics of his deputy, Minoo Masani who behaved (even sometimes claimed in writing) as if he, rather than Ranga was leader of the then foremost party in the Opposition. There was, of course, nothing mean and petty about Ranga; he did not mind overmuch such deviation from decency. In parliament, he did his Swatantra chores, at times a little aggressively (for he could not altogether resist the atmosphere of robustness) but there was about him a dignity and sense of decorum that never failed.

If Ranga was a politician with a big 'p' his life would have been different and he would have been loaded with office, but his mettle was different. Even his idiosyncrasies had moral undertones; he would never, for instance, attend embassy parties of any description. Unlike most established members of parliament, he would walk to and from the House, go up and down Delhi streets on foot (like I have seen Hridaynath Kunzru do, when he was quite old). With no hint of ostentation he lived a life of uprightness. Though changing parties more than once, he never wanted nor received the rewards of the 'prodigal son'.

No one had upbraided Indira Gandhi's policies and principles (or lack of them) more censoriously, but he could not help admiring her guts, and as he told me once, he could not withhold applause for the way in which Indira had overcome her post -Emergency predicament. For himself, he kept his hands clean. He was so very long in politics, but there never was a whisper of scandal against him. He and Bharatidevi Ranga (whose memory I wish to salute) were an exemplar. How good it is to be able to say about a prominent political personality these days what one can say about Ranga : 'whatever records come to light / he never shall be shamed!'

Ranga's death reminds one how the long-lived among us are vanishing. Morarji Desai stepped on to his hundredth year but it was not given to him to complete it. Perhaps somewhere in Delhi or Haryana, the gentle Gulzarilal Nanda is languishing; Nijalinagappa, similarly, in Karnataka and perhaps Sheelbhadra Yaji is alive and kicking somewhere. Soon there will be no more nonagenarians from among political figures.

For myself, I am 88 and among the oldest surviving ex-AICC members, for, even as a communist in the Popular Front period I was elected (1938) to the All India Congress Committee on the eve of Haripura where Subhas Bose presided. Ranga, thank heavens, had a zest for life which, if I may say so, I have nearly lost, especially in recent years when everything we cherished once seems to be going down, down, down. I crave forgiveness for this intrusion of myself, but I vividly remember Ranga in 1989 or 1991 chiding me for I had told him I wish sometimes for euthanasia-even quoting Shelly;

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight
Fresh spring and summer and winter hoar
Move my faint heart with grief
But with delight? No more, oh, never more!

I know Ranga was right. History has no obligation to the likes of us to make sure our dreams are going to be fulfilled in our time. One should work with courage, with determination and with a fundamental optimism that Ranga had in greater measure than I do.

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