

## **George Fernandes ( 3 June 1930-29January 2019)**

### **A profile by Qurban Ali**

*(George Mathew Fernandes, was one of the fire brand Socialist leader of his time. A priest for a short period, a trade unionist, agriculturist, political activist, human rights activist, parliamentarian and journalist all rolled into one. George Fernandes led the famous Railway strike involving 1.5 million workers in 1974, where the entire nation was brought to a halt. Former Chairman of the Socialist Party of India, former Minister of Communications, former Minister of Industry, Minister of Railways and Minister for Defense, George Fernandes was full of surprises. He has distinction of being minister in Prime Ministers, Morarji Desai, VP Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee's cabinet. A politician who long campaigned against the Atom bomb was one of the Champions of India India's nuclear power. Fernandes set new standards as Defense Minister by braving the inhospitable Himalayan heights to visit troops on the battlefield and became the darling of the jawans. But at the fag end of his political carrier George Fernandes' name figured prominently in a corruption case. The scandal caused uproar and Fernandes had to resign to his post as a Defense Minister. George Fernandes was suffering from Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease and his wife Leila Kabir was taking good care of him. He passed away after a very long sickness on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2019 in New Delhi. He was 88).*

George Mathew Fernandes was born on 3 June 1930 to John Joseph Fernandes and Alice Martha Fernandes (née Pinto), in Bijai, Mangalore to a Mangalorean Catholic family. The compound of his maternal grandparent's house on New Road, Bijai, where he was born is even today known as "George Fernandes Compound". The eldest of six children, his siblings were Lawrence, Michael, Paul, Aloysius, and Richard. His mother was a great admirer of King George V (who was also born on June 3) hence she named her first son George. Alice passed away in 1993.

His father Joseph Fernandes, who was known for his integrity and hard work, was employed by the Peerless Finance group as an insurance executive, and he headed their organizing office for south India for many years until his death in 1983. George was fondly called "**Gerry**" in close family circles. Later to be labeled a fiery activist and orator, "**Gerry**" was a soft-spoken student and teenager; recall many of his past associates in Bijai. His childhood was spent in the maternal ancestral house on Dr Casmir Mathias Road (Bijai-Kavoor Road). He completed his Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) at St. Aloysius College, Mangalore.

In the orthodox tradition of the family, George being the eldest son was sent for religious education to St Peter's Seminary in Bangalore at the age of 16, to be trained as a Roman Catholic priest from 1946 to 1948. Perhaps this background paved the way George's joining St Peter's Seminary, Bangalore for priesthood.

Those were the days when it was thought mandatory for every Catholic family in Mangalore to send at least one boy to priesthood and a girl to nunnery. He was very devout and religious. Although he did not take much interest in sports and music, the religious upbringing saw him take an active part in the church sodality, says a close acquaintance of the yesteryear. At the age of 19, he left the seminary due to sheer frustration because he was appalled that the rectors ate better food and sat at higher tables than the seminarians. He later confessed that, "I was disillusioned, because there was a lot of difference between precept and practice where the Church was concerned".

The rebel that he was, George, just over two years through his studies, had a clear inkling that he was not cut out for the holy vocation. He quit the Seminary of his own accord the decision was not taken very kindly by the family. Quite understandably, the society was very conservative those days and such a step would naturally stamp a seal of stigma, not only on the drop-out but the family as a whole. But George had his courage of conviction. Rather than take holy orders and then be suffocated for fear of being branded a renegade, he chose to give up the cassock and face the world head-on come what may. Back in Mangalore, he underwent a period of turbulence and turmoil. He felt alone, aloof and alienated and would spend days and nights near the radio pavilion on the then Central Maidan - now Nehru Maidan - or Felix Pai Bazar.

It was during this period that he came into contact with the great socialist leader and freedom fighter, Ammembal Balappa, who willingly accepted him as his disciple and molded the young Fernandes as a crusader of socialism. Again it was Balappa who introduced him to the late Dr K Nagappa Alva - father of Dr Jeevaraj Alva, another politician of a later era - who was a Congress leader with socialist leanings who later became a state minister. Dr Nagappa Alva offered George every kind of hospitality including breakfast, lunch and dinner and treated him like a member of the family. But, while taking care not to offend the generous benefactor, the self-respecting George thought it fit to visit the Alvas only once a day.

George began work at the age of 19, organising exploited workers in the road transport industry and in the hotels and restaurants in Mangalore. Placid D' Mello another legendary Dakshina Kannadiga and George together organized the first-ever strike in Mangalore - beginning with the Canara Public Conveyance, better known by its legendary initials, CPC, Company. It didn't much fire the imagination of the Mangalorean public, as trade unionism and strikes were fairly new concepts those days and were generally believed to be the handiwork of a handful of disgruntled workers or party men. George moved to Bombay in 1949, and joined the socialist trade union movement. After Balappa and Alva, it was the turn of Placid D' Mello, in shaping George's future. D' Mello was a well-known labour leader in Mumbai.

### **Life in Bombay**

After leaving the seminary, Fernandes moved to Bombay in 1949 in search of a job. His life was tough in Bombay, and he had to sleep on the streets, until he got a job as a proofreader for a newspaper. He relates to the beginning of his career by saying, "When I came to Bombay, I used to sleep on the benches of Chowpatty Sands. In the middle of the night policemen used to come and wake me up and ask me to move on." Here he came into contact with the Great Socialist Leader Dr Rammanohar Lohia, who was the greatest influence on his life. Later, he joined the socialist trade union movement under veteran union leader Placid D' Mello and became his disciple. He rose to prominence as a trade unionist and fought for the rights of labourers in small scale service industries such as hotels and restaurants.

Emerging as a key figure in the Bombay labour movement in the early 1950s, Fernandes was a central figure in the unionisation of sections of Bombay labour in the 1950s. As a fiery trade union leader, Fernandes organised many strikes and bandhs in Bombay in the 1950s and 1960s. The most notable agitation he organised was the 1974 Railway strike, when he was President of the All India Railwaymen's Federation. He served many prison terms when his workforce engaged in fights with company goons. He served as a member of the Bombay Municipal Corporation from 1961 to 1968. He won in the civic election in 1961 and, until 1968, continuously raised the problems of the exploited workers in the representative body of the metropolis.

### **Parliamentarian**

Fernandes was first elected to Parliament in 1967. The pivotal moment that thrust Fernandes into the limelight was his decision to contest the 1967 general elections. He was offered a party ticket for the Bombay South constituency by the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) against the politically more popular Sadashiv Kanoji Patil of the Indian National Congress in Bombay. Sadashiv Kanoji Patil, or S. K. Patil, as he was popularly known, was a seasoned politician, with two decades of experience behind him. Sadobaji Kanhoji Patil, was also a powerful minister in the Indira Gandhi cabinet and an unrivalled fund-raiser for the undivided Congress party. Nevertheless, Fernandes won against Patil by garnering 48.5 per cent of the votes, thus earning his nickname, "George the Giant killer". The shocking defeat ended Patil's political career.

Fernandes emerged as a key leader in the upsurge of strike actions in Bombay during the second half of the 1960s but, by the beginnings of the 1970s, the impetus of his leadership had largely disappeared. In 1969, he was chosen General Secretary of the Samyukta Socialist Party and in 1973 became the Chairman of the Socialist Party. In the early 1970's, the late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, was riding the crest of unprecedented popularity after the liberation of Bangladesh. But soon after, with notorious corruption cases like the Pondicherry license and Jimmy Nagarwala scandals, and because of the public awareness created by movements like Navnirman in Gujarat and Bihar, her popularity started waning.

### **1974 Railway strike**

The most notable strike organised by Fernandes, when he was President of the All India Railwaymen's Federation, was the All India Railway strike of 1974, where the entire nation was brought to a halt. Fernandes led the Railway strike involving 1.5 million workers. The strike was the result of grievances by railway workers that had been built up over two decades before the strike. Though there were three Pay commissions from 1947 to 1974, none of them increased the cost of living of the workers. In February 1974, the National Coordinating Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle (NCCRS) was formed to bring all the railway unions, the central trade unions and political parties in the Opposition together to prepare for the strike to start on 8 May 1974. In Bombay, electricity and transport workers, as well as taxi drivers joined the protests. In Gaya, Bihar, striking workers and their families squatted on the tracks.

More than 10,000 workers of the Integral Coach Factory in Madras marched to the Southern Railway headquarters to express their solidarity with the striking workers. Similar protests erupted across the country. The great railway strike organized by George Fernandes really gave the ruling party the creeps. That was the time when Indira ordered the well-known Pokharan nuclear explosion in the deserts of Rajasthan. There are political analysts who believe even till today that the much controversial step was taken by her out of sheer despair, and with the sole intention of breaking the railway strike. The idea was to divert national attention and drum up support for herself, argue the analysts. (It is a historical irony that while Pokharan I was prompted by George's strike, Pokharan II was executed with him as the defense minister in the Vajpayee government).

The strike, which started on 8 May 1974, at the time of JP Movement and economic crisis, provoked strong government reactions and massive arrests. According to Amnesty International, 30,000 trade unionists were detained, most held under preventive detention laws. Those arrested included not only members of the strike action committee and trade unionists, but also railway men who participated in the strike. The strike was called off unilaterally on 27 May 1974 by the Action Committee. As explained later by Fernandes, "the strike was called off because those conducting the strike had started speaking in different voices." Although large numbers of prisoners were released, among them Fernandes, thousands remained in detention, charged with specific offences. The strike led to a sense of insecurity and threat that led to Indira Gandhi's imposition of the Emergency era in 1975. Previous strikes were aimed at companies or industries, but this strike was aimed at the government, and from its ramifications, proved to be the most successful of disastrous industrial actions in Indian history.

### **Emergency era and union ministry**

With the Allahabad High Court ruling Indira Gandhi's election to the Lok Sabha void on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1975, the anti-corruption and anti-government wave in the country reached its peak, with vociferous demands for her resignation booming across the whole of India. The reigning Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, declared a state of emergency on 25 June 1975 due to internal political disturbances. Accordingly, all fundamental rights enjoyed in the Indian Constitution were suspended and draconian laws like press and media censorship imposed. Thousands of opposition leaders, newspaper reporters, who opposed the emergency, were jailed indefinitely without trial.

A momentous phase in the life of George Fernandes was to follow the soon after. It was the notorious Emergency era. By 1975, he was accused by the government's propaganda machinery of being in touch with the Chinese leader, Mao Tse Tung, with motives of sedition. George Fernandes, along with like-minded leaders, opposed what he saw as a blatant misuse of power. A warrant was issued in Fernandes' name and subsequently he went underground to escape arrest and prosecution. Hence his family was harassed. In an attempt to get clues of his whereabouts, his brothers Lawrence and Michael were arrested, tortured and holed up in cells in distant places. His whole family including his aging mother was harassed.

Besides the Fernandes, the family of Kannada film-maker Pattabhi Reddy too suffered because of their proximity to George. Reddy's actress-wife Snehalata, a chronic asthmatic was arrested and detained in the company of female anti-social elements. She succumbed to the trauma as she was not given adequate care in the prison and passed away soon after her release in early 1977.

George was believed to have widely traveled all over India, galvanizing the underground resistance movement and also visited his home-district in disguise, without being spotted. Rumors were around that he visited a famous pilgrimage centre in Dakshina Kannada and also took shelter in the farm-house of a family friend in the district. In spite of a virtual dictatorship in force and a captive security and intelligence system in operation, he could not be traced for almost a year. This speaks volumes of the man's temerity and mercurial personality.

In July 1975, Fernandes arrived in Baroda. There, he met Kirit Bhatt, who was president of Baroda Union of Journalists, and Vikram Rao, a staff correspondent of The Times of India at Baroda, both who opposed the Emergency. They used to meet and discuss on what could be done to topple the autocratic Indira Gandhi Government. An industrialist friend, Viren J. Shah, Managing Director of Mukand Ltd., helped them find contacts for procuring dynamite, used extensively in quarries around Halol (near Baroda). They aimed at blowing up toilets in government offices and cause explosions near the venue of public meetings to be addressed by Indira Gandhi. The idea was not to injure anybody, but only create a scare. The explosions were to be carried out either late in the night or hours before the public meeting were to begin to avoid injury. A plan was

hatched to blow up a dais four hours before Indira Gandhi was to address a meeting in Varanasi. The conspiracy later came to be known as the infamous "**Baroda Dynamite Case.**".

According to Bhatt, there were two more plans that never worked out. Fernandes also wanted to rob a train used to carry weapons from Pimpri (near Poona) to Bombay. The weapons were to be used to blast government offices. Yet another plan was to take the help of other countries by using ham radio.

George Fernandes was implicated in the much-publicized "**Baroda Dynamite Case**" along with several others including journalists, Kirit Bhatt and Vikram Rao. He could not be traced by the intelligence bureau or the police. When George was finally nabbed on June 10, 1976 in Calcutta (Now Kolkata) on charges of smuggling dynamite to blow up government establishments in protest against the imposition of emergency, in what came to be known as the Baroda dynamite case and brought to trial with his hands in chains, he thundered slogans in the court against the misrule. (A picture of George Fernandes during his arrest in 1976, standing defiantly with his shackled hand raised, became one of the most iconic images of the Emergency era. Photographs of his with raised, but bound hands were splashed by the world print media, mainly TIME and NEWSWEEK, which stirred the international public opinion and the conscience of human right activists against the Emergency rule in India. Three world leaders from Germany, Norway and Austria were believed to have cabled Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and cautioned her against harming Fernandes. After his arrest, Amnesty International members cabled the Government requesting that he be given immediate access to a lawyer and that his physical protection be guaranteed.

Although fresh elections were announced by Indira Gandhi in early 1977, many prominent opposition leaders were still under detention. George was skeptical of the nature of elections that Indira Gandhi was planning to hold after the Emergency. He termed it a sham and even gave a call for a boycott. "It will be suicidal for the opposition parties to oblige Mrs. Gandhi, by participating in the kind of election she is planning," he wrote from his prison cell. Yet, in keeping with the national mood for an instant change, George fought the election from behind the bars, contesting from Muzaffarpur in Bihar and won the seat by an over 300,000 vote margin with flying colours despite not even visiting his constituency.

### **Janata Party ministry**

The Congress Party, led by Indira Gandhi, suffered a defeat at the hands of the Janata Party, a coalition created in 1977 out of several small parties that opposed Gandhi's Emergency era. The Janata Party and its allies came to power, headed by Morarji Desai, who became the first non-Congress Prime Minister of India. George initially was appointed the Union Minister for Communications and later as Minister of Industries. During his minister ship, he clashed with American multinationals like IBM and Coca Cola insisting them to implement FERA, the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, which had

been passed under Indira Gandhi's government. Under the FERA, foreign investors could not own more than 40 per cent of the share capital in Indian enterprises. The two multinationals decided to shut down their Indian operations, when Fernandes pressed ahead with rigid enforcement of FERA.

Within two years, the government became a sacrificial lamb at the altar of political brinkmanship. Petty men with vaulting ambitions ruled the day and Morarji had to face a no-confidence motion. George presented a spirited defense of the government, but resigned the soon after.

During his tenure as a minister in the Janata Party, he continued to be uncomfortable with certain elements of the broad-based Janata coalition, especially with the leaders of the erstwhile Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jan Sangh in the Union Cabinet. In a debate preceding a vote of confidence two years into the government's tenure in 1979, he vehemently spoke out against the practice of permitting members to retain connections to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) while being in the ministry in the Janata Party. The leaders of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, among them Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, refused to give up their allegiance with the RSS, leading to a split within the Janata Party. The issue of "dual membership" caused Morarji Desai heavily and his government was reduced to a minority in the Lok Sabha.

It has remained an enigma for many political observers even now as to what made George to do that. As a former Janata associate observes, "He is so complex that he defies analysis. He resigned on the question of the famous dual membership along with the late socialist leader Madhu Limaye in 1979 and later he was siding with the same people he criticized those days. After the Janata Party started disintegrating in 1979, Charan Singh left it to form the Janata Party (Secular) and with support from the Congress Party, replaced Desai as Prime Minister.

In the seventh general elections held in 1980, the Janata (Secular) ministry failed to maintain a majority in the Lok Sabha, and Congress once again became the ruling party.

George Fernandes retained his Parliamentary seat from Muzaffarpur in 1980, and sat in the opposition. He contested for the Lok Sabha in 1984 from Bangalore North constituency against future Railway minister and Congress candidate C. K. Jaffer Sheriff, but lost the election by a margin of 40,000 votes. He then decided to shift his base to Bihar again in 1989, when an anti-Congress wave was sweeping the country in the wake of the Bofors scandal, he won Muzaffarpur in the 1989 and 1991 general elections. He later joined the Janata Dal, a party which was formed from the Janata Party at Bangalore in August 1988.

### **Minister of Railways**

His second tenure as Minister of Railways in the V.P. Singh's government from 1989 to 1990, though short-lived, was quite eventful. He was the driving force behind the Konkan Railway project, connecting Mangalore with Bombay. The project happened to be the first major development in the history of Indian Railways since independence. He gave India's western coast a gift of the century - the Konkan Railway. Indeed, success has many fathers, but failure always remains an orphan, nay a destitute. Today there are umpteen numbers of politicians taking credit for the dream that come true. But it is only the grit and determination of George Fernandes that laid the firm foundation for this project.

Fernandes broke away from the erstwhile Janata Dal and formed the Samata Party in 1994, which became a key ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a party which is the current form of the erstwhile Bharatiya Jana Sangh. BJP formed a short-lived government in the 1996 general elections along with the Samata Party and other allies. The government survived only for 13 days, since BJP could not gather enough support from other parties to form a majority. Fernandes later served in the opposition along with BJP during the two United Front governments (1996-1998) led by Janata Dal Prime ministers H. D. Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral. After the collapse of the United Front ministry led by Gujral, BJP and its allies won a slender majority in the 1998 general elections. The government lasted only for 13 months, due to the non-cooperation of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) leader Jayalalitha.

After the collapse of the second BJP-led coalition government, BJP and its allies formed a 24 party alliance called National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which became the first non-Congress coalition government in post-independence India to survive a full five-year term (1999–2004). Later, Fernandes became the convener of NDA. On 27 July 1999 the Janata Dal again split into two factions, the Janata Dal (United) and the Janata Dal (Secular). In 2003, Fernandes reunited with the Janata Dal (United), and also merged his Samata Party with it.

### **Pokhran-II and Kargil War**

Fernandes served as the Defense Minister of India in both the second and third National Democratic Alliance governments (1998-2004). In May 1998, India conducted five nuclear tests at the Pokharan range in Rajasthan. Earlier, a staunch supporter of nuclear disarmament, Fernandes openly endorsed the NDA Government's decision to test the nuclear bombs. Interestingly, Fernandes has been the only defense minister of a nuclear power who has had a picture of Hiroshima bombing in his office. (It was a familiar image: the skeletal dome standing above an ocean of destruction left by man's first nuclear storm. It stared at Fernandes in the face every time he met with his many-starred generals and his nuclear bomb scientists).

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 a 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 anti-nuclear crusader 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 socialist Samata Party had only six of 545 seats in the Indian parliament.

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.

It was during his tenure as the defense minister, when the Kargil war over Kashmir broke out between India and Pakistan in 1999. The war began when heavily armed Pakistan-backed intruders dug themselves in at heights of 16,000 feet (4,900 m) 18,000 feet (5,500 m) on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LOC) along an 80 kilometers (50 mile) stretch north of Kargil. They began attacking the strategic highway linking Srinagar and Leh. As a result, the Indian army undertook '**Operation Vijay**' to push back the Pakistani intruders and regain the occupied territories. The inability of the Indian intelligence and military agencies to detect the infiltration early received criticism, both by the opposition as well as the media. However, Fernandes has refused to acknowledge the failure of intelligence agencies in detecting infiltration along Kargil sector.

He was also involved in skirmishes with the then Chief of Naval Staff of the Indian Navy, Vishnu Bhagwat, over promotion of Vice-Admiral Harinder Singh as Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff. Bhagwat was subsequently sacked over the issue. After the Tehelka defense scandal broke out in March 2001, Fernandes quit as defense minister, but was reappointed to the post later.

The NDA Government lost power to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in the 2004 general elections. Later, political observers alleged that Fernandes was locked in a bitter party rivalry with his one-time friend and disciple, Samata Party co-founder, Nitish Kumar.

In the 2009 general elections, he contested from Muzaffarpur as an independent candidate after being denied a ticket by the Janata Dal (United) on health grounds, but lost the election.

On 30 July 2009, Fernandes elected to the Rajya Sabha from Bihar, on the seat vacated by Janata Dal (United) president Sharad Yadav. The Janata Dal (United) leader and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar felicitated his election to the Rajya Sabha unopposed. He was sworn in on 4 August 2009.

### **Supporter of the Secessionist Groups**

Fernandes has supported and endorsed many secessionist movements and groups. He has been a long-time supporter of The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist organisation which sought to create an independent state in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Before joining the Vajpayee government in 1997, he organised a controversial public convention of pro-LTTE elements in New Delhi. In July 1998, he reportedly stopped the Indian Navy from intercepting ships suspected of carrying illegal arms to Tamil guerrilla groups. Fernandes was also a patron of the LTTE-backed Fund Raising Committee, set up to help the 26 accused in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. The Sri Lankan government apparently stated that the "LTTE's biggest supporter in India is Defense Minister George Fernandes."

Mr. Fernandes was an active supporter of many Burmese anti-government movements. Quoted regularly on exiled Burmese radio stations, he often criticises the junta and its members on a wide array of topics. He opposed the military government's drive to root out anti-Burmese insurgents along the Burmese-Indian border. During his tenures in office, gun runners were allowed to do business using Indian territories, often as stopovers en route from Thailand to Bangladesh.

He also revealed the infamous "**Operation Leech**" incident, which resulted in the capture of Arakan Army insurgents on one of India's islands in the Andaman Sea. He also fought for the welfare and release of anti-Burmese rebels held by the Indian

Government. Once, when the National United Party of Arakan complained to Fernandes of its members being captured in Indian waters, while carrying arms, he issued orders restricting Indian military movements, and all counter-terror/counter-insurgency operations conducted in the region to be asked for approval from the Central Government.

He also claims that the several islands in the Andaman Sea, including the Coco Islands, which belong to Myanmar, were gifted by the former Prime Minister of India, Nehru to the Burmese, rather than part of the original territory gained at Independence.

Considered the patron saint of lost causes, Fernandes was a supporter of Human rights and civil liberties movements all over the world and anti-nuclear and environmental campaigns. He backed the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. The Tibetan refugees fighting for freedom against China and Burmese rebels group, fighting against the military government in Myanmar had their offices at George Fernandes official residence even when he was Indias Defence Minister. A human rights activist himself, Fernandes has been a member of the Amnesty International, People's Union for Civil Liberties, and the Press Council of India.

### **Operation West End**

Fernandes' name figured prominently in '*Operation West End*, a sting operation in which a group of reporters, armed with hidden cameras, from an investigative journal, Tehelka, posing as representatives of a fictitious arms company, appeared to bribe the Bharatiya Janata Party President, Bangaru Laxman, a senior officer in the Indian Army and also Jaya Jaitley, the General Secretary of the Samata Party and Fernandes' companion.(BJP Former President Bangaru Laxman was arrested in this case and awarded four years sentenced by a Delhi Court on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2012).

The scandal caused uproar all over India and Fernandes voluntarily resigned to his post as a Defense Minister. He was subsequently cleared by the one man commission headed by retired Justice Phukan. However less than eight months later, after being cleared of any wrong-doing, he was reappointed to the post of defense Minister. The Phukan Committee Report was rejected by the UPA Government headed by the Congress Party and a new committee headed by Justice K Venkataswami was appointed. The Committee, after lengthy investigation, also absolved Fernandes in the case.

### **Barak Missile scandal**

On 10 October 2006, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) registered a First Information Report (FIR) against Fernandes, his associate Jaya Jaitley, and former navy chief Admiral Sushil Kumar for alleged irregularities in purchasing the 7 billion (US\$139.65 million) Barak 1 system from Israel in 2000.

Fernandes, however, claimed that the scientific adviser to the Defense Minister in NDA Government (1998-2004), who later became the President of India, APJ Abdul Kalam, had cleared the missile deal.

### **As defense minister**

After appointment as Defense Minister in March 1998, Fernandes won the soldiers' respect for his administrative saviness and frugality. He himself used just one room in his mansion for working, eating and sleeping. When Fernandes toured army operations, he shunned the military pomp. He hitched rides with soldiers on army trucks and made a point of eating the same things the rank-and-file were consuming. Even around his Generals, he used to wear sandals and kurta pajamas that he washed himself, by hand. He was known for overseeing a huge increase in India's defense budget as compared to the allocations made by previous governments.

Fernandes was particularly popular among soldiers on the front. As defense Minister he made 18 visits to the icy heights of the 6,600m high Siachen glacier in Kashmir, "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 battle zone at Siachen, he used to send the officials in helicopters to the area so they would experience the icy misery themselves. India's military brass was equally impressed by Fernandes' outspoken criticism of the perceived Chinese attempts to tighten the clamps on India. Following the Pokhran nuclear tests in 1998, he openly branded China as "India's enemy number one". 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 regretted 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."

Fernandes has claimed that he was strip-searched twice at Dulles Airport in the US Capital area, when he was defense minister—once on an official visit to Washington in early 2002 and another time while en route to Brazil in mid 2003. The details of the strip search were mentioned in American foreign policy analyst Strobe Talbott's book *"Engaging India- Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb"*. However, the US embassy in Delhi issued a formal denial that Fernandes had not been strip-searched, and said that, "Fernandes was not strip-searched but a security wand was waved over him when a key in his pocket set off the metal detector." Subsequently, the then United States Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, personally apologised to Fernandes over the

incident. He was accused into the 2002 coffin scam, following allegations that 500 poor quality aluminium caskets were bought from the United States at rates 13 times more than the actual price, to transport the bodies of slain soldiers, after the Kargil War. However, the CBI gave a clean chit to Fernandes in the scam in its 2009 charge sheet.

### **Writings, journalism, and other work**

Fernandes liked writing even during his student days. He was the editor of a Konkani language monthly *Konkani Yuvak* (Konkani Youth) in 1949. The same year, he was the editor of the *Raithavani* weekly in Kannada. *The Dockman* weekly in English, which had ceased publication, reappeared under the editorship of Fernandes in 1952-53. George Fernandes was also Member of the editorial board *Mankind*, a monthly who's Chairman of the editorial board was Dr Rammanohar Lohia. Though not a prolific writer, Fernandes has penned several books on politics such as *What Ails the Socialists* (1972), *The Kashmir Problem, Railway Strike of 1974, Dignity for All: Essays in Socialism and Democracy* (1991), and his autobiography titled *George Fernandes Speaks* (1991). He was also the editor of English monthly, *The Other Side*, and the Chairman on the editorial board of the Hindi monthly *Pratipaksh*. Fernandes used to speak in ten languages-Konkani, English, Hindi, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Tamil, Urdu, Malayalam, and Latin. Konkani was his mother tongue. He learnt Marathi and Urdu in jail and Latin while he was in the seminary in his early youth. He was extremely fluent in Hindi and English.

### **Family and personal life**

Fernandes met Leila Kabir, the daughter of educationist and former Union minister Humayun Kabir on a flight back to Delhi from Calcutta. Fernandes, then the General Secretary of the Samyukta Socialist Party, was returning from Bangladesh while Kabir was on her way back from the battlefield where she had gone as an assistant director of the Red Cross. They began dating and were married on 21 July 1971. They have a son, Sean Fernandes, who is an investment banker based in New York. Fernandes and Kabir separated in the mid-1980s. Jaya Jaitly was Fernandes' companion since 1984, but in 2009 Leila again reappeared and joined Fernandes took her home and nursed him till his last breath.

Fernandes was suffering from Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, and in January 2010 underwent treatment at Baba Ramdev's ashram at Haridwar for the diseases at the request of Leila Kabir, who had recently returned to his life. In February 2010, Fernandes' brothers were reported to have been considering a court order for medical treatment and visitation; Kabir and Sean Fernandes are alleged to have forcibly removed Fernandes to an undisclosed location. In July 2010, the Dehli High Court ruled that Fernandes would stay with Leila Kabir and that Fernandes' brothers would be able to visit.

---

Qurban Ali is a senior broadcast journalist and can be contacted at [qurban100@gmail.com](mailto:qurban100@gmail.com)

### **Book by George Fernandes**

- 1) 'What Ails the Socialists?'
- 2) 'Railway Strike of 1974'
- 3) 'George Fernandes Speaks'
- 4) Contemporary Political Leadership in India: George Fernandes, Edited by Shiri Ram Bakshi, Sita Ram Sharma, S. Gajrani – 1998-334 pages.

George Fernandes was the Editor of now defunct "The Other side" (English monthly); and was Chairman, Editorial Board of Pratipaksh (Hindi monthly).

Socialist Communist Interaction in India by Madhu Limaye on his friend and Comrade George Fernandes on his 60th birthday.

Festschrift honoring George Fernandes, born on 3rd June 1930, politician and former union minister of India, on his 60th birthday.  
Ajanta Publications (India), 1991-393 pages.