

Acharya Narendra Deva : Life and Politics

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Acharya Narendra Deva, known as the patriarch and doyen of Indian socialism, was born on 31 October 1889 in Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh. But his ancestors came to UP from Sialkot. His schooling took place in Faizabad and higher education in Allahabad and Banaras. He obtained his law degree from Allahabad University and practiced law for some time. But his scholastic mind did not find satisfaction and he became a history teacher at Kashi Vidyapeeth in 1921. He was a serious scholar of history, archeology, religion, philosophy and culture. Having a good knowledge of Hindi, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali, German, French and English languages, the range of his study was quite vast but his mode of teaching was simple.

It is said that Acharya was born to be a teacher. A politician's ambition and strategic skills were not in him, nor did he push his talent and energy in that direction. The role and reputation of Acharya in Indian politics was of a political philosopher at the national level. Simultaneously, he was an international scholar of socialist theory and ideology. However, he confined his academic and political activism to Uttar Pradesh. After teaching at Kashi Vidyapeeth, he became the Vice Chancellor of Lucknow University from 1947 to 1951 and Banaras Hindu University (BHU) from 1951 to 1953. His own life was very austere and he used to help the poor students financially. His relationship with the students was cordial and inspirational. Lal Bahadur Shastri, the second Prime Minister of India, Kamalapati Tripathi, senior Congress leader and Chandrashekhar, socialist leader, were prominent names among his students. Chandrasekhar joined politics with the inspiration of Acharya and continued to honour him as his guru.

Acharya was politically active in Congress, Congress Socialist Party and Socialist Party-Praja Socialist Party after Independence. He presided over the formation conference of the Congress Socialist Party held in Anjuman Ismailia Hall of Patna on 17 May 1934 and was also elected the first president of the new outfit. In the socialist movement of India, Dr. Lohia's 'Pachmarhi Thesis' is well known, in the same way Acharya's 'Gaya Thesis' is a masterpiece. Acharya was inclined to follow Marxism as a contemplative line of thought and method. On one occasion he said that he can leave the party but not Marxism. But he was not a stereotypical or

orthodox communist. This is to say that in the name of the proletariat, a dictatorial attitude of a person or a group within the communist party was unacceptable to his democratic mind. Acharya was a critic of the undemocratic character of the administration of Soviet Russia and the lack of political freedom there. But he was not a supporter of pro-American capitalist imperialism in any way. He did not see any contradiction between Marxism and National Independence Movement of India and the rest of the world under the yoke of colonial rule. In the same way, he saw mutual supplementation between the farmers and workers' revolutionary power. He favored the connection between the agricultural revolution and the socialist revolution. That is why he gave more time to farmer politics. However, he used to understand the dangers of organizing farmers on the basis of caste and religion. Acharya saw the Revolutionary Movement of India, not in terms of divergent viewpoints, but as compatible within the ongoing streams of the Freedom struggle.

Acharya considered much that was of value in the ancient culture of India. He made a serious study of Buddhism and its philosophy. He composed the Sahitya Akademi award-winning book 'Bodhdh Dharma-Darshan' in Hindi. One excerpt from his 1936 speech is: "Our work is not only to end the exploitation by the imperialism but to end the exploitation by all those classes of the society which are exploiting the people today. We want to create a new civilization which will be rooted in ancient civilization, which will have the colors of the country, which will keep the excellent elements of the ancient civilization safe, and, simultaneously, new progressive elements of the contemporary world will also be included, and, thus would like to present a new ideal before the world." ('Acharya Narendra Deva Vangamay', Volume 1)

Like all the important leaders of freedom movement, Acharya was sentenced to jail often. During World War II and Quit India Movement, he remained in jail from 1940 to 1945. In September 1939, when the Second World War broke out, the Congress strongly opposed the unilateral declaration of British government to involve India in the war and resigned from the cabinets. In 1940 when Gandhi launched satyagraha, Acharya, despite his poor health, came forward and went to jail. When he was released in September 1941, Gandhi took care of his health by staying with him in the Sevagram Ashram. Acharya was arrested along with other leaders on the call of Quit India Movement. He was released on 15 June 1945.

On one hand, prison greatly damaged his health due to his asthmatic condition, but on the other it gave him much time for reading and writing. For instance, he started translation of Vashubandhu's 'Abhi-Dharm Kosh' from French to Hindi in Banaras jail in 1932 and completed it in Ahmed Nagar jail in 1945 where he was held captive with many leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru. In the preface of his book 'Discovery of India', Nehru has expressed his debt to his colleagues including Acharya Narendra Deva for their scholarship.

Acharya, like Gandhi, considered ethics as the criterion for both life and politics. The greatest significance of Acharya Narendra Deva's ideas is to enhance the moral values of a person with the revolutionary process of social change. His emphasis on the ethical side of social change is related to Indian view, whereas the scientific analysis of the social forces is related to the Marxist view. He was naturally opposed to the ethics-neutral tendency developed in the Bolshevik stream of Marxism.

When the socialists came out of the Congress and formed the independent Socialist Party in 1948, he, along with his partners, resigned from the UP Legislative Assembly seat won on the ticket of Congress although at that time it was not needed, and no one had demanded it. But Acharya believed that to remain a member of the assembly after forming a separate party different from the Congress would not be morally justified. He lost in the by-polls. Congress leaders, intoxicated by the power, campaigned against him in an undignified manner in the election. Nevertheless, Nehru himself was surprised with his election defeat.

Acharya died in Madras on 19 February 1956 at the age of 67 years. He had made an outstanding contribution to the Independence struggle and later to nation-building as a teacher, thinker and socialist leader. Nehru in his obituary in the Parliament said, "The death of Acharya Narendra Deva means something much bigger for many of us and, I think, for the country than just the passing away of an important person. He was a man of rare distinction - distinction in many fields - rare in spirit, rare in mind and intellect, rare in integrity of mind and otherwise too. Only his body failed him. I do not know if there is any person present here in this House who was associated with him for a longer period than I was. Over 40 years ago we came together and we shared innumerable experiences together in the dust and heat of the struggle for independence and in the long silence of prison life where we spent - I forget now - four or five years together at

various places, and inevitably got to know each other intimately; and so, for many of us, it is a grievous loss and a grievous blow, even as it is a grievous loss for our country. There is the public sense of loss and there is the private sense of loss and a feeling that somebody of rare distinction has gone and it will be very difficult to find his like again."

Remembering Acharya on his 127th birth anniversary, one regrets the state of political-intellectual scenario of today's India. Our leaders, who were engaged in the Freedom struggle were in comparison incomparably inspirational, and so insightful.

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