

Kulapati Munshi - The Man and His Mission by S. Ramakrishnan

The Bhavan and Kulapati Munshi are synonymous.

The Bhavan, his lengthened shadow, is the vibrant symbol of the continuing modern Indian renaissance which Raja Ram Mohan Roy pioneered in Bengal in the 19th century.

Little would anyone have imagined that the "puny, penniless, friendless" youth who, seeking a career, came to Mumbai from Bharuch in Gujarat in June 1907, at the age of 20, would leave behind in Mumbai, which was then and still is mini-India, what has been described by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan as the "greatest monument to his life" - the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The Gita and the Durga Saptasati proclaim that God bodies forth to re-establish righteousness, Dharma-Dharma Samsthapanarthaya.

Munshiji clearly saw the many facets of Indian renaissance - political, cultural, literary, religious and spiritual - and was "hypnotised by all of them into becoming a nimitta matra-vehicle of its expression, feeble and imperfect though he was." This was the reason why Munshiji's first concern was the winning of the political freedom of India for which he fought valiantly, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhiji, his master and the indomitable Sardar Patel, Gandhiji's "executive arm", undergoing many hardships including jail terms.

Simultaneously, he found a sense of fulfilment in associating himself with the social revolution aimed at the emancipation of women and the removal of untouchability. On the positive side, he created several shrines of learning and culture of which the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan is the most outstanding. Three things, he felt, were necessary for the revitalisation of Indian Culture: First, the other-worldliness in our outlook, the curse of the past, had to be replaced by a sense of joy in the life as it is lived; Secondly, such of the traditions as were outmoded and stifled the creative vitality of the individual and the collective life had to be replaced by a vigorous, constructive and flexible attitude on life; Thirdly, the fundamental values which had given ageless vitality to Indian culture had to be captured afresh for the younger generation.

He conceived the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, which he founded, 64 years ago in 1937. He was then just 50. In 1938 the idea concretised on holy Kartik Sud Purnima. The basic object was the propagation of Bharatiya Vidya which in essence is Dharma in its triple aspects of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram - Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Endowed with a fertile imagination, firm conviction and infectious dynamism, Munshiji sought to give form and content to his aspirations through his literary works including the re-telling of the Krishnavatara in 8 volumes.

He conceived the idea of the "Book University" as part of his mission of furthering the Indian renaissance, and the very first book in the series was Bharata Ratna Shri C. Rajagopalachariar's condensation of the "Mahabharata" - the Book of Life, the peerless, comprehensive epic of "ethics, philosophy and history." Centuries ago it was proclaimed, "What is not in the Mahabharata is nowhere". This was closely followed by the publication of "Ramayana" and many other titles, too numerous to mention.

Now the circulation of "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata" crossed one million and its demand is increasing day by day.

The culmination of his tapas, Munshiji has averred, was in his developing an attitude of Iswara pranidhana - "learning to live in His presence by a total surrender to His Will." Outgrowing his extreme sensitivity to success and failure, tulya ninda sthuti, as the Gita has decreed in difference to praise and blame in the discharge of duties, Munshiji came to the ultimate

realisation that "God's Will alone determines both the adventure and the outcome; we are but mere instruments."

As it happened, the benign Gods made me cast in my lot with Kulapati Munshi in 1946 whom I was privileged to come in close contact with since 1942 and it was given to me to live in close contact with him for over a quarter century till his passing away on February 8, 1971.

Munshiji had bequeathed the copyright of all his very popular works in Gujarati numbering over 100 and also several in English and also almost all his post-1932 earnings and property to the Bhavan but he felt that he had hardly done anything for the loyal and dedicated staff of the Bhavan whom he counted as the greatest asset of the Bhavan. In 1962, during the Bhavan's Silver Jubilee he had still two residential buildings christened Naimisharanya, in the holiday resort of Matheran and these he willed for the benefit of the Bhavan's loyal and dedicated staff so that they could go and spend at least a few days there in the peak of summer when the exodus from sultry Bombay begins to the cool heights of health resorts.

In 1962 for the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the Bhavan, Rajaji and Dr. Radhakrishnan, both Bhavan's founder members and active supporters had come to Bombay to participate in the event.

Rajaji, who was known for his austere living all through his life, happened to remark that "Munshiji is verily a Raja Yogi and that royal living was almost his second nature". Dr. Radhakrishnan nodded his head in approval. I who happened to listen to this banter, quietly gave to Rajaji the document gifting his Matheran properties that Munshiji had given me that morning. One quick glance at it and Rajaji exclaimed "Here is a worldly man living the ideal of "tena tyaktena bhunjita - enjoying in renunciation." Rajaji passed on the paper to Dr. Radhakrishnan who congratulated Munshiji and said "With all my philosophy I certainly could not have steeled myself to do such a thing like this!" That was the philosopher's way of praising a worthy act even at the cost of making himself look small.

I may add here that Munshiji in his last will and testament had specified that there should be no funeral oration during his last rites which he wanted to be performed according to Vedic rites. His instructions were carried out in letter and spirit. Munshiji had also mentioned that he should not be given any blood transfusion even under strong medical advice or even under pressure of his family members and he had charged me with the responsibility, if I am overruled, of producing his written instruction if ever any occasion arose for giving him blood transfusion. Fortunately, such an eventuality never arose.

In the post-Munshiji era, the Bhavan has launched many significant projects which include the opening of Bhavan's first overseas centre at London (1972), the Ancient Insights and Modern Discoveries (1976), Critical Edition of the Principal Upanishads under the Chairmanship of Dr. P.B. Gajendragadkar (1977), the Department of Foundation and Cultural Courses (1978), the Rajaji Institute of Public Affairs and Administration at Bolarum, Hyderabad (1981), the Shriyans Prasad Jain Institute of Management and Research at Andheri, Bombay, (1981) the Sant Jnaneshwar Hari Katha and Kirtan Mahavidyalaya at Alandi (1984), the birthplace of Sant Jnaneshwar, the Swami Prakashananda Ayurvedic Research Centre at June, Mumbai (1985), Bhavan's Gandhi Centre of Science and Human Values at Bangalore (1989), Bhavan's Sarva Dharma Maitri Pratishthan (1990), Bhavan's Shikshan Bharati (1992), Sadachar Bharati (1994) Bhavan's Gandhi Institute of Computer Education and Information Technology for giving free computer training to the educated unemployed of the economically weaker sections of society (1996). We, in the Bhavan, re-dedicate ourselves to the cause which was dear to his heart - the integration of Indian culture to suit modern needs in an attitude of Iswara Pranidhana