

Dr. K. M. Munshi - A Shining Star by R. Venkataraman

*In the Galaxy of eminent men of India,
Kanhaiyalal Maneklal Munshi is a shining star that still
beckons humanity to the path of duty and dharma.*

Spruce in his turn out, gifted with intense and penetrating eyes, Munshiji impressed one as a person who had a strong hold on his inner as well as outer life. He struck one as a man with great inner strength which prompted and sustained his external actions. Munshiji was imbued, from the very start, by a strong sense of the expanse and sweep of India-both literally and figuratively. He was similarly imbued with a sense of its inherent greatness. His mother, through songs and stories, had acquainted him at a very young age with the great sages and seers of India's past-Vasishta, Vishwamitra, Vyasa.

The heritage that these master-spirits represented was ingrained in the young Munshi deeply. And then, as a student in the Baroda College, this incipient perception received an adult dimension. I refer to the influence of Aurobindo Ghose who was then in the service of the Baroda State as a Professor of English. Munshiji was fortunate enough to have Sri Aurobindo as his direct teacher. Munshiji found in his teacher intellectual, cultural and spiritual guidance.

Aurobindo's sense of India as "the Motherland of the Spirit" impressed young Munshi irreversibly. And so, as he moved from rung to rung professionally and politically, it was with a sense of pride in the cultural, intellectual and spiritual heritage of India.

We must remember that those were times when the nation had been led to hold its own heritage in contempt. What was indigenous, we had been taught to believe was inferior while what was Western was superior. The Renaissance challenged that. And Munshiji was one of the finest flowers of this Renaissance.

Like most others of his generation and class, Munshiji took to the study of law and rose to the pinnacle in his profession even in the era of legal giants like Setalvad, M.C. Chagla and Bhulabhai Desai. He impressed the Bar and the Bench alike with his persuasive style in which reason and logic were employed with telling effect. Munshiji's entire career, in fact, consisted of tracing a common thread on which the individual beads of his achievement could be strung. And that thread was his awareness of the greatness of India's cultural heritage.

'India, that is Bharat', is a phrase that all of us are familiar with. But, in the case of Munshiji, the phrase betokened much more than the opening words of our Constitution. 'Bharat' was for him not just a nation but an ongoing civilization; not an accident of history but a design of destiny. For him the vitality of Indian culture and its self-renewing greatness constituted a living principle.

It was but natural that law led to politics and politics to the service of our heritage. This faith of Munshiji could be discerned even as a lawyer. He made a conscious and detailed study of ancient religious texts, Mitakshara and Dharmashastras. Munshiji was in his elements in the field of Hindu Law. As with many a legal luminary of the time, the call of Mahatma Gandhi for sacrifice led to Munshiji bidding goodbye to his lucrative practice. The Bench no less than the Bar was unhappy at the turn. Sir Chimanlal Setalvad strongly advised him not to enter politics, but Munshiji plunged headlong into the Gandhian movement. The then Chief Justice of Bombay Justice Beamont said to a lawyer: "Look, what Munshi has gone and done! I was just thinking of recommending him for a High Court Judgeship."

Earlier, Munshiji had been elected to the Bombay Legislative Council as an Independent, a development that brought him into the heart of politics. His training and temperament inclined him to constitutionalism, that is, to lead Opposition from within the Council but fate had other plans. The Bardoli Satyagraha drew Munshiji into its vortex. He felt impelled to give up his style of living in Bombay and visit the peasants in revolt. He witnessed in Bardoli the self-respecting dignity of the peasants who, under Gandhiji's and Vallabhbhai Patel's leadership, were prepared to risk their all in the fight against injustice. Deeply stirred, he placed his time and his legal talents at the disposal of the Satyagraha, marking him out as an invaluable recruit for both Gandhiji and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Writing to Gandhiji in April 1930, Munshiji said: "When the whole of Gujarat and with it India has started on a glorious march to martyrdom, I, who dreamt of their greatness through my literary efforts, cannot stand by and look on." The die had been cast. With Gandhiji as Guru and General, Sardar Patel as Counsellor and Captain, Munshiji became a soldier in the non-violent army of freedom fighters. If Sri Aurobindo had initiated Munshiji into jnanayoga, Gandhiji initiated Munshiji into karmayoga. Munshiji became thereby an example of wisdom through action, and action through wisdom. Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar rightly described him once as "a philosopher in action".

Munshiji was invited in 1937 to join the first popular Ministry in the Bombay Presidency under B.G. Kher. His own preference was for the Departments of Law and Education, but it fell to Munshiji's lot to take up the onerous Department of Home. A student of the Gita does not flinch from duty.

Munshiji's stewardship of the Home Ministry was memorable. We must remember that those were times when the British were only too keen to prove that Indians were incapable of rising to the occasion, particularly in the matter of handling the growing communal problem. Munshiji made it clear that he and his Ministry would be totally impartial instruments and would admit of no disorder.

It was only natural that Munshiji's political insight and legal acumen should be harnessed for framing free India's Constitution by the Constituent Assembly. He became one of the Assembly's most active members.

The framing of the new nation's supreme statute called for the gift of idealism as well as realism. Munshiji was possessed of both. Small wonder that as a Member of the Constituent Assembly he became a member of as many as eleven Committees-the largest tally for any single Member of the Constituent Assembly. The Drafting Committee headed by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was one of the important Committees of which Munshiji was a member and he made invaluable contributions to its deliberations. I cannot but refer to the fact that the principle of guaranteeing to every person equal protection of the laws was the result of a draft written jointly by Munshiji and Dr. Ambedkar.

Munshiji's sense of equality did not confine itself to mere legal protection. He was a great champion of women's rights to social, economic and legal equality. Aided by his talented wife Lilavati Munshi, he carried on a crusade for raising the status and dignity of women. The struggle for freedom directed itself not merely to shedding the foreign yoke but also towards emancipation of Harijans, women, labour-agricultural and industrial. Everyone of the oppressed section of the community found a glimmer of hope and joined the movement enthusiastically. And the women of India played a notable part in the national movement for freedom.

The main thrust of Munshiji's work in the Constituent Assembly was, however, towards the making of a strong Centre. A student of the history of the subcontinent that he was, Munshiji knew that a weak Centre had always led to a weakening of the nation as a whole. Munshiji saw the history of India not as a record of dynasties or battles but rather as a record of the progress of our people in time. He saw that periods of strength, confidence and self-reliance alternated with periods of decline, weakness, subjugation and drift. He regarded 1947 as an opportunity for India to begin an ascent once again. He believed that we had it in us to climb up into a new millennium. He wrote:

"The Egypt of the Pharaohs, the Greece of Pericles, the Iran of Darius and the Rome of the Caesar are all dead; their life and culture are mere materials for scholarly research. But India has stood the shocks of time. Manu, Buddha, Panini, Bhasa and Kautilya are still living influences operating on life; Sri

Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna still inspires the thought, hope and conduct of millions."

Munshiji's palpable devotion to the concept of a strong and unified motherland must definitely have weighed with the Government when it appointed him as Agent-General of the Government of India in Hyderabad. The Nizam's province was trying hard to fly in the face of history and become a Third Dominion. That step would have been not merely retrograde but disastrous. Fortunately for us, our leadership did not allow personal ambitions to trifle with destiny in Hyderabad. If Sardar Patel was the architect of Hyderabad's accession to India, Munshiji was surely the engineer in the field. Acknowledging Munshiji's role, the Sardar wrote: "On behalf of the Government, I wish to say that we are deeply conscious of the high sense of public duty that induced you to accept this office and the very able manner in which you discharged the duties entrusted to you which contributed in no small measure to the final result."

Back in Delhi, Munshiji was soon called upon to fill the seat in the Council of Ministers vacated by Dr. Rajendra Prasad on his election to the office of President. Munshiji's services as Union Minister for Food and Agriculture between 1950 and 1952 saw him in yet another nation-building role. Munshiji showed that a man with pride in the past could also have a faith in the future through the instruments of science and technology. It was Munshiji who laid the foundations of a self-reliant agricultural economy, through an interlocking of agricultural research and extension. My friend Sri C. Subramaniam, who later heralded the Green Revolution, vouched for this. Today when we are all so conscious of the environment and of ecological factors, it is instructive to note that as much as half century ago, as Union Agriculture Minister, Munshiji said in a letter to Prime Minister Nehru:

"I find that trees are being cut down thoughtlessly by the villagers and the process practically connived at by the authorities. (I wish) ecological studies and the relation of our national existence to our land, water, rivers and forests, is more closely studied."

The original impulse for preserving ecology came with Munshiji's Vanamahotsava scheme.

The Governorship of Uttar Pradesh, which Munshiji held from 1952 to 1957 saw him establish the healthiest of conventions. Munshiji's relationship with the Council of Ministers headed by Pantji and later by Sampurnanandji was, by any standards, exemplary. Respect was reciprocated by trust. The Ministers valued his erudition and turned to him, as to an elder, for advice. He, in turn, strove to discharge his due constitutional role with maturity combined with a

becoming modesty. Where others, out of office, are known to flounder like flightless birds, Munshiji flew out of public office for the last time in 1957. The 'release' from government gave him more time than ever for public service.

With the solidarity and support of Smt Lilavati Munshi, he toured extensively, wrote and lectured. His canvas was wide; the paints on his palette many. Culture, literature, the arts, legal issues and of course politics continued to interest him. Whether in Gujarati or in Hindi or English, he expressed himself prodigiously. Even those who did not always agree with him admired him. His integrity, his patriotism, his scholarship and his vision of India were what mattered. The foremost vehicle of Munshiji's expression was the Column 'Kulapati's Letter' in the Bhavan's Journal. Like Rajaji's 'Dear Reader' column in Swarajya, 'Kulapati's Letter' covered a wide range of subjects, with a vitality that was almost exuberant.

As M. C. Chagla had observed, a silver thread of continuity ran through all his scintillating comments. And that thread was a passion for India's greatness, be it in the past, present or future. Munshiji built the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan with the devotion of one engrossed in raising a temple. The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan is a Somnath of Learning. For sixty-four years, people have sought it out from far and near in what has verily been a pilgrim's progress.

Of this Somnath, Kulapati Munshi was the sthapati (sculptor-architect) no less than the Kulapati. He conceived of the Bhavan, raised it brick by brick, combining as he did so, both breadth of vision and a grasp of detail. Naturally, both the design and its execution turned out to be masterly. It would be instructive to remember that Kulapati Munshi, founded the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan a full decade before the advent of Independence. He foresaw that Independent India would need the binding force of a pan-Indian movement, a pan-Indian spirit and a pan-Indian ethos which would present to contemporary Indians, a glimpse of the composite magnificence of ancient times. Kulapati Munshi knew that a Government and a Constitution are one thing, the people's own inner vision is another. And so the Bhavan was launched to supplement the political unity of India with the cultural and spiritual unity of India.