



Remembering Lal Bahadur Shastri : The Little Big Man of India

Siddhartha Dash

Lal Bahadur Shastri is a towering statesman. He is best known for his qualities of simplicity, leadership and unblemished career. The Great Little Son of India is a model for the youth as he has been an enchanting force to many of our nation builders. He was a giant amongst the generation that fought for freedom. We may

not see a person of his high ideals in the days to come.

Lal Bahadur Shastri was born in an ordinary family on October 2, 1904, at Mughal Sarai in Uttar Pradesh. His childhood was spent in want and penury. But, he was a man full of honesty, humanism and straightforwardness. After education at Kashi Vidyapeeth, he devoted his times to social service under 'Servants of People Society' founded by Lala Lajpat Rai.

That was the time when the freedom movement was at its peak. Shastri plunged into freedom struggle. He actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930. Nehru was so much impressed by the organizational abilities of Lal Bahadur that he appointed him as the General Secretary of Allahabad District Congress Committee in 1930. In 1937 he was elected to the legislative assembly of United Province. During the Quit India Movement of 1942 he incurred the displeasure of the British government and was imprisoned. He was several times imprisoned by the British rulers before Independence. At first, he got into UP politics. It was Pt. Nehru who took him to the Centre. When India

achieved independence (1947), he became a minister in the state government of Uttar Pradesh, and he later served in the federal cabinet as a minister of transport (1952-1956), industry (1957-1961) and home affairs (1961-1963). He resigned from the cabinet owning moral responsibility for a railway accident, thus setting a rare example for politicians. Shastri became the Prime Minister on the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964. Shastri held the office for a period of 582 days, from June 9, 1964 to January 11, 1966.

On June 9, 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri (1964-1966) succeeded Nehru as the second Prime Minister of India. In his style of functioning, Lal Bahadur Shastri was an effective Prime Minister. During his short period he faced enormous problems but he was remarkably firm yet flexible in handling them. He delicately handled the strained centre-state relations, accommodating the demands of state chief ministers. He demonstrated remarkable flexibility in agreeing to the indefinite continuation of English along with Hindi as the official language of the country, as demanded by southern states.

He was instrumental in formulating the Green Revolution strategy with the purpose of increasing agricultural output and achieving self-sufficiency in food in the long run. It was though only later, in Indira Gandhi's regime, that this strategy was pursued vigorously. Shastri also set up his own Prime Minister's Secretariat, as a source of information and advice to the Prime Minister on policy matters, independent of the ministries. The Secretariat, which came to be known as PMO (Prime Minister's Office) started acquiring great deal of influence and power in the making and execution of government policies. The way Shastri acted in combating corruption through the institution of Central Bureau of Investigation, the way prompt follow-up action was taken on the Das Enquiry Report against Punjab Chief Minister Pratap Singh Kairon and, above all, the way he conducted affairs during the days of war against Pakistan revealed that in a very short time the second Prime Minister managed to surpass the achievements of his predecessor and mentor Nehru. He looked upon the opposition as an important part of the democratic set up and

made them feel their partnership in the government decisions. He preferred cooperation to confrontation. He gave genuine impression of sincerity and seriousness in consultation. At cabinet meetings he would ask every member to express his personal views. He would listen to them quietly and attentively as they were being expressed. As in the cabinet so in the parliament, Shastri maintained all norms of a democratic system.

Within a year of taking office Shastri had proved himself capable of filling Jawaharlal Nehru's place. But one who persisted in underestimating the little man was Field Marshal Ayub Khan of Pakistan. He had not been in power for long when he had to attend the difficult matter of Pakistani aggression along the Rann of Kutch in April 1965. Though a ceasefire under the auspices of the United Nations put a temporary halt to the fighting, the scene of conflict soon shifted to the more troubled territory of Kashmir. In August 1965, Pakistani-backed infiltrators began fomenting trouble in the Kashmir valley. When Indian army units chased them back over the border, Pakistan mounted a massive offence in the Chamba sector of Jammu.

The enemy tanks rolled menacingly on. Now Shastri pulled off a master-stroke, by asking the Indian Army to march into the West Punjab. This at once relieved the pressure on Jammu sector and took the Indian troops tantalizingly close to the great city of Lahore. A ceasefire was called, to be followed by a peace agreement brokered by the Soviet Premier Aleksee Kosygin, which mandated that both sides pull back to the positions they had held before August 5, 1965. Shastri agreed to these unfavourable terms as the other option was the resumption of the mutually disastrous war; that would have also meant losing Soviet support on the Kashmir issue in the UN Security Council and in the supply of defence equipment, especially Mig planes and medium and heavy tanks. Shastri's conduct during the 1965 war made Shastri a hero-and justly so. Lal Bahadur Shastri died on the night of January 10/11, 1966 in the Uzbek city of Tashkent, hours after signing a peace agreement.

The war, however, took a huge toll on the state exchequer. Ties with the US, which had taken a hit, meant that wheat was in short supply. Shastri hated the idea of going around with a begging bowl.

So he hit upon a novel idea. He went on air to appeal to his countrymen to skip a meal a week. The response was overwhelming. Even restaurants and eateries downed the shutters on Monday evenings. Many parts of the country observe the 'Shastri Vrat' even today. On October 19, 1965, Shastri gave the seminal 'Jai Jawan Jai Kishan' slogan at Urwa in Allahabad that became a national religion.

Lal Bahadur Shastri enjoyed blotless career spanning over four decades. His honesty has no parallel in the world history. At the time of his death, he owed a few thousand rupees to the bank from which he had taken a car loan on instalment basis. The loan was repaid by his widow out of her family pension. He used to sell Khadi cloth from door to door and that too bare footed and later rose to the dizzy heights to occupy the

highest chair of the biggest democracy of the globe. Shastri never allowed his children to exploit his name. His son Anil sought admission to St. Stephen's College, New Delhi. After getting admission he was standing in a long queue to deposit his admission fee. The summer season was at its peak. He was perspiring and his tongue and throat had become as dry as chalk. As ill luck would have it, he fell on the ground and became unconscious. Two students carried him to the dispensary. A handful of water was sprinkled on his face. After sometime when he came to his normal self, one of the teachers asked him about his father's name and address and telephone number, if any. Anil in a feeble voice gave the name and address of his father. All the students and teachers present there spoke with one voice "Lal Bahadur Shastri our Prime Minister" and stood

motionless with their mouths wide open.

Lal Bahadur gave the nation the slogan of 'Jai Jawan Jai Kishan' and exhorted the people to make all sacrifices in the honour of adversity. More than three decades later, A B Vajpayee added Jai Vigyan to the slogan. Lal Bahadur was posthumously conferred with the Bharat Ratna award in 1966. A memorial was set up at Vijay Ghat, Delhi, which shall always remind us about this Great Son of India. Now the UPA Government use the 'aam aadmi' slogan to justify its rule in the Centre. But if ever there was someone who epitomized this philosophy it was the 'little big man' called Lal Bahadur Shastri.

Siddhartha Dash lives at N-4/205, IRC Village, Bhubaneswar-751 015.