



Smitten by Politics

Mani Shankar Aiyar speaks about his formative years and how he gravitated towards politics

Part 1

Mani Shankar Aiyar is a committed Congressman, a Member of Parliament from Kargudi constituency in Thanjavur District in Tamil Nadu, and a controversy loving columnist. This interview was tape recorded over three late night sessions of four hours each in the winter months of 2001. It has taken so long to appear in print because Mani spent more than a year checking the long typed transcript I sent him for accuracy before we did the editing.

I have enjoyed a very warm friendship with Mani for many years which has survived and strengthened despite differences over important issues. Mani was one of the early life subscribers to MANUSHI and has been very supportive of our endeavours even when they go against the politics of the Congress Party. It is often forgotten that Rajiv Gandhi and Mani Shankar Aiyar were in large part responsible for bringing the issue of women's reservation to the center-stage of Indian politics. In the early years after the Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in Parliament, Mani was among its most avid champions both within his Party as well as in Parliament. However, after he read MANUSHI'S critique of the existing Bill, he came out in open support of our position through his column in India Today and endorsed the need for alternative ways of ensuring an enhanced participation of women in our legislatures. This open-mindedness has been the hall mark of Mani's relation with MANUSHI. It was fun interviewing Mani because he does not come out with pious homilies and phony platitudes for self promotion. He freely admits mistakes, takes a critical look at himself and his Party and can even at times laugh at himself.

In the second part of his interview, to be carried in the next issue, Mani will talk on women in politics as well as what it takes for a politician to develop a political base in a situation where politics has become very venal and very corrupt.

-Madhu Kishwar

How did you end up in politics giving up such a successful career as a diplomat? Do you come from a political family?

I do not come from an influential political family. An uncle of mine, my father's elder brother, was probably the most renowned Congressman of his village, but he never stood for elective office. He enjoyed being present when politicians came to the village.

His official name was Muthuraman, but everybody called him Kunju. Now, 30 years after he died, I still find the occasional older person

introducing me as, "Oh! he is Kunju's nephew". He was known in political circles, but was no politician himself. But, apart from that very, very tenuous connection with politics, there was nobody in the family at all who was in politics. Which is, of course, the reason I took so long to become a politician.

Our ancestral village - I call it ours because we've still got one branch of the family living in the village - is Kargudi in Thiruvaiyaru Block of Thanjavur district, at the head, if you like, of the Cauvery delta. My constituency begins about 30 kms. to

the east of the village and spreads right up to the coast, covering the Cauvery delta. My father being the third son knew that he was not going to inherit much by way of land, so he decided to go in for a profession which required a degree. My grandfather was a landlord with little education. I never met him.

He had land enough to be a 'mirasdar'. But, you know, we didn't have a very effective zamindari system in most of the Presidency of Madras. That was more in Bengal, Bihar and Punjab. But in Maharashtra, or what was then called the Bombay

Presidency, and in Madras Presidency, it was more a Ryotwari system. So the bigger owners and tenants obviously had a lot of land but there were few big zamindars. And my grandfather did not belong to that category. He was a land owning kulak, if you like, the headman of the village, and our house in the village still represents the peak of achievement in the village. But they weren't big in any other way. They were not Rajas or anything like that. That is why my father had to find himself a profession if he was going to have a good life. And he was extremely successful in his profession.

He was the first member of the family ever to graduate. He graduated in 1927, which was also the year in which the British government of the Madras Presidency brought out what was called the "Communal Government Order", in the terms of which the window of opportunity for the upper castes to enter government service was considerably narrowed in order to facilitate the entry of the backward castes. And father, feeling this window of opportunity closing on him, I think in something of a fury jumped on to a train and got off as far as it would go as was possible in that day and age.

Is he the one from whom you inherit your temper?

Very possibly! So, he got off this train in Lahore in 1927, where an Aiyar had preceded him by nine years, a man named P.N.S. Aiyar, who had established a considerable reputation and practice for himself as a Chartered Accountant. My father became his articled clerk and, over a period of time, became a partner in the firm.

As a Chartered Accountant, but more particularly as an Income Tax Advisor. By the time we come to 1947, which was 20 years after he had reached



Mani (second from left) as a schoolboy with his family

Lahore, he had a huge practice extending from Rawalpindi down to Multan into Karachi. He had no intention of leaving Pakistan even after Pakistan was created, because that is where his practice was. By a curious co-incidence, our family was in India on August 14, 1947 and he was in Pakistan, because the Appellate Tribunal in the summer used to go from Delhi to Shimla. So we used to keep house for him in Shimla, and he would come up almost once a week and then go back to Lahore. In August of 1947 he happened to be in Lahore and we happened to be in Shimla. And he, like many others, thought Partition would be a political line of relevance to politicians but not the dividing wall between the people of India and Pakistan. We lived in a set of buildings called Laxmi Mansions, which is still there and is still called Laxmi Mansions. It is bounded on three sides by the Mall, Beedon Road and Hall Road. Beedon Road then and now is a grocers' paradise. One of the *sabziwalas* there told my father that the Partition riots were just a 'junoon' and it will pass. He told my father that if he would just put a padlock on his

door and stay inside, people would think he had left for Hindustan. He said at three in the morning he would knock on the door and provide him with the provisions of the day, he should just remain locked in there. He believed that 10 days or so from that day this madness would be over and they would resume their normal lives. My father took this advice and used to open his door at about 3 o'clock in the morning, until about the 19th or 20th. when the same man pulled a knife on him. That's when he realised that Partition was a reality.

What did he say? Did he threaten your father?

No, father didn't open the door and the man went away. So, my father then rang the Dalmias, who had a cement factory in Karachi; his favourite client was Jaidayal Dalmia. They sent a truck and he filled the truck with whatever he could and crossed the border. That's how he came to India in 1947-48.

Soon after he crossed the border he had this serious ulcer problem. So he went to Madras where he was treated, and then he had an invitation to go on the only trip he ever made in his life outside the country, to the

United Kingdom and United States, in the beginning of 1948. He came back in the summer of 1948; we then descended from Shimla. The only place where we could stay was with Members of the Constituent Assembly. That was my first connection to the political world. Because the population of this city had vastly expanded with the refugees, every house was taken, in one sense or the other, and the only place you could find rented accommodation of any kind was with Members of the Constituent Assembly, who didn't really need all the accommodation that had been given to them in Delhi, and they were taking in people who needed a place to stay. So, we were given a room by O.V. Alagesan at 13E Ferozshah Road. He later became the Deputy Railway Minister and finally became Minister of Petroleum and Chemicals, many years later. When we arrived, the whole family, all six of us, moved into that one room. It was impossible to do any studying or anything with the whole family crammed into a single room.

How old were you then?

I was seven. My mother quite literally kidnapped me and my brother when my father was away from town, put us in a bus, took us to Dehra Dun and put us into a boarding school there so that we could begin to have an education. I think the whole of 1948 was just educationally wasted for me. We did go to the Modern School for a test of some kind, and I have a vague memory of how my supervisor shouted at me. My father, who was a bit of a doting father, said he was not putting his son in a school where teachers dared reprimand his son! That is why we had to move to a boarding school to resume a normal education.

We were four altogether: three brothers and one sister. The youngest

brother, alas, died when he was very, very young. Mukund came in to Welham's Preparatory School before he was five years old. I don't think boarding is really a good thing for children. But we were put into this boarding school. In the meanwhile, my father kept shifting house. He went from O.V. Alagesan's house to C. Subramaniam's house and when C.S. became a minister, moved into Thirumal Rao's house.

Was he a family friend?

Not really. It was on the network that everyone we went to stay with became a minister! So my father used to joke saying, "A.K. Gopalan keeps inviting me to come to his home because that is the only way the Communist Revolution will succeed in India." Eventually, we found a flat in Scindia House, but not for very long, because within a couple of years of that, my father was killed in an air crash. My mother shifted to Dehra Dun, pulled us out of boarding school, and made an arrangement with the Headmaster whereby we became day scholars in a boarding school. That was Doon School. That is how my school education was almost entirely Dehra Dun-based, with three years in Welham and then six years in Doon. Then I came to Delhi, went to St. Stephen's College. From there, having stood first in the University in my BA Economic Honours, I went on to Cambridge.

While I was at Cambridge, I appeared for the Foreign Service exam, which I passed before I did my exam at Cambridge, which is my excuse for having done as badly academically at Cambridge as I did. Then I went into the Foreign Service, where I remained for 26 years till 1989; the last 5 years I was Joint Secretary to the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. That is when I asked to quit and he eventually said yes and I quit. I have now

completed eleven years in politics, and am into my twelfth.

What made you take on the hustle and bustle of politics, such an insecure profession as compared to the cushy and secure job you had?

I think the story goes back to an incident that took place when I was eleven years old. We were told that there was going to be a debate and all of us would have to go and listen. I kept asking my peer group, "What is a debate?" And nobody knew what a debate was. That was in Doon School, probably the second semester. So, we fetched up for this debate in the Assembly Hall and I remember the subject as clearly as if it was yesterday, which was that "In the opinion of the House, we should break bounds".

We were not allowed to go into town and if you illegally went out of the school, then it was called "breaking bounds", a punishable offence. So the debate was whether the school rule which prevented you from going to town was a morally justifiable rule or not. And I saw these people getting up one after the other arguing for the motion or against it. I was transfixed. I had never known that such an event takes place, that there is such a forum. And I think my deep involvement right from the age of 11 in arguing on public school platforms really began with that particular debate and my imagination was fired by this rational system of settling an argument.

Partly it began there. But actually even a year earlier to that, in 1952, we had the first general elections. I had seen something of it as a 10-year old boy. I was quite fascinated with the election process and felt very deprived that I was not entitled to vote. So, I remember organising an election in my class and getting the boys there to vote, and I distinctly remember Anand Chakravarty writing

up on the board that “Preetinder’s Mom and Pop are Commies”. And a huge fight ensued between them. So my introduction to life in a democracy took place in that classroom, just in the aftermath of the first general elections.

The class-room election I conducted was a genuine real election, each of us voted for the party we wanted to vote for. We had a ballot box. Each of us wrote the name of the party we wanted to vote for on a piece of a paper. I think in that kind of bourgeois set- up, Anglicised, well-off 10-year old boys like us had been brain-washed to regard communists as truly evil. Anand Chakravarty had overheard Preetinder – a genius chemical engineer, now at MIT - saying that his parents had voted for the communists and he revealed this ugly secret by writing it on the board. This ensured a bitter fight, and that’s what brought democracy to an end in the senior class of Welhams! We were told that we were not allowed to fight in this manner.

Did the school encourage involvement of students in politics at such an early age? From where did you get his idea - there was no T.V then....

You see, the school holidays had fallen during the elections: Jan-Feb 1952. I think it was just the general atmosphere outside - banners, flags, processions.

We had a news-stand near the dining hall in Doon School, where they put out the newspapers, and one went through the ages of 12 and 13 thinking this has no relevance to our lives. Then, after the age of 14-15, one started looking at the papers.

I was 15 in 1956 when the States Reorganisation Commission Report came out. There was wild excitement in the country as to which area would go where, and there was a bitter battle over whether Bombay should stay a



Mani, a quintessential debator, speaking at the UN

composite state or be divided between Maharashtra and Gujarat. That is when I started thinking of my identity and ideological inclination. But even more than that, it was an international event – the nationalisation of the Suez Canal - that drove one to a wild frenzy of anti-imperialist excitement.

How did you catch that frenzy?

Through newspapers and what people talked about. I know I was excited, and I must have shared it with fellow students. I wrote letters to the editor, the only letter that I wrote which was published appeared in the *Times of India*. I was 15 years old then. The British had objected to Nasser closing the Suez Canal to shipping by his enemies - who were Britain, France and Israel – saying this was a violation of international law. I wrote this letter to the editor pointing out that during the Second World War the British had stopped German shipping as they were the enemy. So, if it was proper for the British to do that to their enemies, why was it wrong for Nasser to do the same to his? Perhaps that is when my bent towards foreign affairs began and my inclination towards a career in the Foreign Service started developing.

I was bubbling into political consciousness, when an incident took place - I can even date it to the month: it was June 1957.

We were in Hardoi. My mother’s sister had married a superintending engineer of the Uttar Pradesh PWD just a few months earlier. It was a late marriage, she was well over 50 years. He took us on a tour of Sitapur and Hardoi. I remember in Hardoi, in the very, very hot summer, we were sleeping outside, the whole family in adjacent beds (we used to do that in the happy old pre-air conditioner days). I dreamt that my sister Tara had found a rich Parsi husband who would finance my election! Talk of dreams being wish-fulfilment! So, I can certainly say that from June 1957 at least onwards, all that I really wanted to do was go into politics.

So it has nothing to do with your proximity with Rajiv?

No, certainly not then. But there is a big gap between what you desire to do and what you can do.

By the end of 1957, I was now 16 years old, and becoming very conscious of the fact that I was the poorest boy in a rich man’s school. I don’t think I was so aware of that earlier. When I was 12 or 13, partly

because my father had died and partly because my mother was living on a relative shoe-string to be able to put us through a very, very expensive school, we lived very modestly; one, we didn't have fans for the first 2 summers and the other, I was the only boy who didn't have 'home clothes' as we called them, and when I went on our mid-term treks, all these rich boys would show off their fancy clothes, and I had only my white shirt to wear. It was not within the thoughts of the family to be spending money on things like this.

Whatever money was there had to be put into education. Now when I look back, I see that it was really just teen-age envy of the other boys being richer than me which drove me in the direction of becoming a communist. But I started a little bit of reading about it and asking myself questions. We had lots of George Bernard Shaw lying around the house because I think he was the great favourite of my father. I read them and started drifting very strongly leftwards, so that by the time I joined college in 1958 I was ripe for the conversion, and sure enough the older boys who were into the leftist faith picked me up and I was red as red can be by the time I finished college three years later.

Did you join any youth or student wing of the Communist Party?

No, St. Stephen's was completely isolated from Delhi University politics and University politics was on a much lower scale than what it is today. My conversion was ideological. As a student of economics, I was being introduced to Marx, Engels, Japanese economic history – "*Imperialism as the last stage of Capitalism*", Ronald Meek's *Labour Theories of Value*, along with mugging up passages from the Communist Manifesto. By the time I left St. Stephen's College I

was really red. Red in mind, nothing else, no political activism.

But you didn't think of joining any of the left political parties?

At that time there was no question of joining any political party. Unlike today when political parties are very active on campuses, certainly in St. Stephen's College, which consciously distanced itself from university politics, there was no question of joining any political party.

But there were people like Randhir Singh and Bipin Chandra in Delhi University running marxist study circles.

They were in the university, we were in college.

It's just right across the road.

They were across the road but we didn't cross it. It is not why the chicken crossed the road, but why the Hindu College *wala* crossed the road. We had nothing to do with the University.

So how do you account for the fact that this institution produced the maximum number of communist intellectuals?

Bourgeois proletarianism. One of the important things in Marx - which is really the central dilemma of communism - is that it is self-evident to the communists that the working class is exploited but it is not evident to the working class at all that it is exploited; therefore, the whole of Leninism is really inventing methodologies for raising class consciousness and saying that if class consciousness will not rise of its own accord, then a dictatorship of the proletariat will have to be imposed on the proletariat to raise its proletarian consciousness. It is one of the great defects of communism.

But, at that time, if one was intelligent and sensitive and had as large a dose of envy as I had, then it

was a lethal combination that made one feel that there could be an alternative, more just order, and in the search for that alternative mode of order, one explored almost every kind of alternative order. We read Russell, Hemingway, the Communist Manifesto, Huxley, Koestler, Gide, Steinbeck, Orwell. You kept looking for who had the answers that you were searching for.

Is it also that this ideology can only be accessed by people who are well read?

Certainly those who are better read become the *gurus* of those who are less read. There were no teachers among the group who were teaching me communism. It was all fellow classmates, one to two years senior to me, feeding me that most mendacious document, *The China Economic Review*, which was claiming miracles for the Chinese economy at a time when 20 million Chinese were dying of starvation. All of them have, of course, betrayed the cause: one became a well-known diplomat, the other a chartered accountant with a renowned multinational.

Yes, that's right, even those who were in the marxist study circle during my time, almost all are either in American or British universities or they headed for the civil services. So how does that happen?

There is lot of emotionalism involved in going left; and having arrived there - at least that was the story of my life - one discovers what its flaws are. I arrived at Cambridge....

Why did you go to the imperialist West for your studies?

This question, it didn't occur to me whether I should go to the Patrice Lumumba University, possibly because the Patrice Lumumba University did not exist then. The Patrice Lumumba University

was set up in Moscow after his assassination to train revolutionaries.

The fact is I was living my contradictions without being too aware of them. When I arrived at Cambridge, one of the things I was very keen on doing was to get a more refined version of Marxism, and so I joined the Marxist Society. That was in 1961 when ideology mattered more than it ever has before or since.

In 1961, Khrushchev had said, "We shall bury you" to the capitalist world and John F. Kennedy had arrived in Berlin and said "*Ich bin ein Berliner*". The Berlin Wall went up the month before I sailed, and when I was on the high seas to England, Dag Hammarskjöld's plane was brought down, probably by the CIA in association with Moise Tshombe, who had murdered Patrice Lumumba, the first Head of State in the Congo (as it was called then, later called Zaire, now again the Congo). So it was a very turbulent time, ideologically and intellectually.

Cambridge too had become a microcosm of the Cold War. It was widely anticipated that Cambridge would do what Oxford did in the 1930s, when the Oxford Union voted that "This House will not fight for King and country" which is said, at least in legend and myth, to have encouraged Hitler in his policies of aggression, believing that the British were too weak-willed to fight back.

At this very, very exciting time, I went up to Cambridge. I had read all about Donald MacLean, Guy Burgess and their group of upper class communist spies, all recruited at Cambridge as undergraduates by the economic historian at Trinity College, Maurice Dobb. MacLean, in fact, was at my college. I was given Frank Hahn, a great friend of Amartya Sen's, to be my supervisor, that is, tutor. In fact, I was among the first group of students

that Amartya Sen ever had, because he started teaching at Cambridge the year I went up. I used to know him quite well then.

Hahn, who is now at the London School of Economics, was my supervisor of studies and I rather shyly asked whether he could arrange for me to have tutorials, or what we called "supervisions", with Maurice Dobb, the author of the standard economic history of the Soviet Union which I had read while I was at St. Stephen's College. He arranged for me to go and meet Dobb. Dobb began the conversation with me by asking whether I wanted supervisions about the Soviet Union and communist history. I said yes, but I can't pay for it. He replied that supervisions had to be paid for. But if I would like to have a glass of sherry with him every Thursday at six in the evening, I was welcome for that! So, I used to go and meet Maurice Dobb, the ultimate Marxist guru, and asked him all the questions that disturbed me. But he gave such unsatisfactory answers to my questions that I slowly started pulling out of my communist shell. The break came when I asked him to explain the justification for Soviet imperialism in Hungary. He replied that a socialist state, by definition, could not be imperialist. This was totally unsatisfactory. I asked him to refute Ken Berrill's argument that it was not the interests of British traders which had led to the British laying the railway network in India, as Marx had famously argued, but trade which followed the routes laid down by the British after the Mutiny of 1857 to be able to move their troops quickly to quell any military challenge to their Indian Empire. Dobb had no answer. Then, abruptly, he said one Thursday evening as we adjourned after sherry that he did not think these conversations were taking us very far. Thereafter, I stopped going.

I had read that immortal line in Maurice Dobb's *Soviet Economic History* where he says four million kulaks were killed in implementing Stalin's agrarian reforms. This, he says, "caused adverse comment in the hostile western press" and passes on without further comment as if the killing of four million people does not warrant any further consideration or recognition. It is then that I began to realise that I was not cut out for this violence, so integral to communism. In the dining hall, we used to have trout every Friday and I could never eat it because the trout was served whole and there was this beady eye of the fish looking at me as I picked up fork and knife to cut it. I couldn't bear the thought of this. I mean I could be non-vegetarian only to the extent that the animals had been killed out of sight, disfigured and then put on my plate as a dish to be eaten. But not this live-looking fish. So, I asked myself if I was capable of this violence, inescapably linked to communism, and if not how could I be a communist? In the meanwhile, I had been, in fact all of us had been, reading Gandhiji and Nehru.

I was finally able to break this emotional bonding with Marxism, and start trying to find a very leftist but still alternative non-violent philosophy. I am still a leftist looking for an alternative philosophy. My anchoring, I think, is pretty much with the sentimental left, what Marx would have dismissed as Utopian Socialism. These certainties with which the Marxists live, these mechanistic predictions they make, the kind of theology that communists have to fall into, the need for a Communist Pope, the fact that communism is really the Church without God, I think that's what drove me away from communism, if not necessarily away from certain basic intellectual approaches that are associated with Karl Marx.

It was at this time that the war with China broke out in October 1962. When I appeared for my Foreign Service exam at India House, London at the end of October, the day Tawang fell, one of these ex-communist friends of mine sent me a telegram to India House saying, "Best wishes for all success in the Chinese Administrative Service exam!" My old Cambridge Marxist friends were particularly upset at my having left the cause, and in compensation for having done so, I agreed to serve at the Marxist book-stall in Market Place once a week, hawking this magazine called *Marxism Today*. Publicly I hawked it. That is probably one of the reasons why I got into trouble subsequently.

After having passed the Foreign Service exam - that too with flying colours - I stood seventh in the country and therefore mine was one of the 10 names announced on All India Radio which was the only mass media at that time as there was no television. I came back to Cambridge with a job for life and not interested at all in the rest of my studies. So, I did what little I could just to pass my exams. Thank God, I did pass. President Radhakrishnan came on a state visit to England in June 1963 and accompanying him as his minister-in-waiting was Shrimati Lakshmi Menon, Minister of State for External Affairs, who knew my mother well because they had been virtually contemporaries at Queen Mary's College, Madras. She was informed by the High Commissioner, Mr Chagla, that the British Police had sent in a very adverse security report on me.

They were wondering what to do about it and came to the conclusion that they could clear me at the Foreign Service interview, which is more or less a formality held after you pass the exam. It is really meant to



Mani with his wife Suneet Vir Singh

introduce you to the Foreign Service. Unless there is something grossly wrong with you for which they may chuck you out of the job, it is a formality. So, when somebody on the panel asked me what I thought of the Chinese invasion, I asked, "What invasion?" He said, "You mean you have never heard of the Chinese invasion?" I said, "Well, what I have heard is that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said at Delhi airport on the 12th October on his way to Colombo that he had ordered the Indian Army to throw the Chinese out, and that the Chinese had riposted. I don't think a riposte is an invasion." Unsurprisingly, within a few weeks of that interview, I received a telegram saying I had been rejected from all the services. I knew immediately why this was so.

You had calculated that was the most inappropriate answer?

No, because I belonged to a generation that had not gone through the trauma of that invasion, we belonged to a free country where you could express your thoughts freely. *Would you describe that whole episode in the same manner today?*

I would describe 1962-63 as a period of international paranoia. I can

validate that assessment with what happened to me personally in that year. I came back to India on the 15th of July in the morning and in the evening I went to see President Radhakrishnan. Why did I do that? When filing out my civil services application form, I was a communist but my mother was a snob, and she had insisted that the two most important Indians we knew should be put down as my referees. One was C.Subramaniam (with whom we had stayed earlier) and the other was Radhakrishnan. That is a story which I would like to share with you.

My mother was orphaned at the age of ten and her entire education was through scholarships; so, when she arrived at a marriageable age, as they say, there was nobody to get her married. She was all alone in the world. So she became a teacher, and joined the educational service of the Presidency. Her first posting was to Vishakapatnam at the age of 21 or 22 and nobody at that time knew what to do with a grown-up, single, non-married woman, what to do for her accommodation in a strange town. So they asked the vice-chancellor of Andhra University, who had an

enormous house, whether he would take her in as a paying guest. That vice-chancellor was Radhakrishnan. That is how she made me put his name down. But between my putting him down as a referee in 1961 and my appearing for the exam in 1962, Dr Radhakrishnan had ceased being Vice-President of India and had become the President of India.

So, we went that evening to Dr Radhakrishnan's house, that is, Rashtrapati Bhawan. As usual he received us in his bedroom and he was on his bed. He cut my story short without being interested in the details of what I wanted to say to defend myself. He said as the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, Jawaharlal Nehru had stated in his presence, on the floor of the House, that a person's political opinion had no bearing on eligibility for the civil services; the only thing is that he must not be a member of any political party, not even the Congress. So, you were allowed to have a political opinion unless you brought a party line into the work that you are doing. So he told his son, Dr S. Gopal, to tell Lal Bahadur Shastri, who was the Home Minister, that what he was doing was completely illegal and unconstitutional and flies in the face of assurances given by PM on the floor of the House, and I must, therefore, be taken in. With that the conversation in Rashtrapati Bhawan ended and Dr Gopal told me that I could be in touch with him on a daily basis and he would see what he could do. In a week or so, he rang me to say that the Home Minister had come to meet his father and that his father had given him a real wiggling. He said that Shastriji had agreed to taking me in. I thought the whole thing was over.

Then came the August 4 1963, a few days after the wiggling had taken place, which anyone of my generation will tell you was a milestone in the

history of India, the day on which the 'Kamaraj Plan' was announced. Under the plan, Lal Bahadur Shastri resigned his Home Ministry. So the man who was to take me into the service left his portfolio. Gulzari Lal Nanda, who took over, was much more hardcore and refused, I think till the end, to have anything to do with me. But I had gone to establish contacts with the Additional Secretary dealing with administration in the Ministry of External Affairs, Mr Rajeshwar Dayal, who passed away last year, a wonderful man. When I went to see him, he began the conversation by saying that he had married the daughter of the richest industrialist in Uttar Pradesh and that had made him a communist for life. He said at Oxford he had ensured that there was always a pink card on his mantelpiece. He wanted me in. A friend of mine posted to the NGO section, which is where secret papers are stored, read up these papers and told me, many years later, what was in it. Two people wrote in very, very strongly straight to Jawaharlal Nehru about me. One was the High Commissioner in London, M.C. Chagla, who had been invited to Cambridge on what was

luckily for me the day on which I made my best speech ever in the Union.

Were you the President?

No, on that occasion I was on the executive, and later became an office-bearer. It was just after the Chinese thing and just after the Cuba missile crisis. The subject was, "In the opinion of this House, non-alignment is sanctimonious rubbish". Chagla had been invited to speak against the motion. After he spoke, I was the next speaker against the motion and Chagla was just thrilled with the five-minute speech I made. And on that basis, Chagla had written to Nehru that I must be taken in.

The other letter was a bit of pure luck. The Master of my college was also the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University, none other than Sir Ivor Jennings, the Jennings who wrote the constitution of Sri Lanka (which failed) and Pakistan (which also failed). He was very well-known to Nehru, because ours was the only constitution the man didn't write. Ivor Jennings wrote to Nehru, very, very strongly, saying how can a young sensitive Indian not be a communist? If he continues being a communist



As a popular diplomat in Pakistan

after he is some years older, then there is something wrong with him. But, he said to Nehru, you yourself were called a neo-pink when you went to the Soviet Union in 1927. While all this was going on, L.P Singh who was Additional Home Secretary, sent for me. I went to see him. We began this conversation with his saying, "Aiyar, I don't want you to regard yourself as a prisoner in the dock." Then we started talking about various things and before I knew what was happening I was engaged in a furious argument with him over the meaning of democracy. I held that Nasser was a more democratic leader than Alec Douglas-Hume, who was just been nominated as the Prime Minister in the United Kingdom in succession to Harold MacMillan. My argument was that if an election were held in England, Alec Douglas-Hume was going to be defeated whereas if elections were held in Egypt, Nasser would be elected with a majority as high as 95 percent. L.P Singh was saying to me that he had only been abroad once to the USA and on his way back he had stopped in Cairo, capital of Egypt, to stay with Apa Pant who was our ambassador there. On the only night that he had spent in Cairo, Nasser had put all his opponents behind bars. How could I accept Nasser's regime as more democratic? I stuck to my view that Alec Douglas-Hume was a Prime Minister without a mandate, whereas Nasser had his people's mandate. When this argument became very heated, I lost my head, went berserk, and told him that there were three privileges accorded to even a prisoner in the dock which were being denied to me. L.P Singh said, "What?" I said, first, he is assumed innocent until proved guilty; second, he is told what are the charges against him; third, he is provided counsel by the court but you are not even allowing me to call

my witnesses. L.P Singh pulled this big cigar out of his mouth, flicked the ash from it, looked at me and said, "Aiyar, you're in. Now, out." That is how I made it to the Foreign Service! The system was getting paranoid, but because it was so Nehruvian, so enthused already with the democratic ethos, that notwithstanding all our fears about China and communism, we did not go the extremist way and the country went back to its normal track. I am sure there were special security checks being done on me all through my career, but nothing else. I had a normal diplomatic career, and a friend of mine remarked that this was because I was, of course, a Marxist - but less the Karl, more the Groucho variety!

Did you keep having such outbursts throughout your tenure?

In the Foreign Service, I had two types of relationship with my bosses: either I was the apple of their eye or the most hated figure. So, with two of my bosses, I had a very, very bad time, but with the rest I had a wonderful time. Now, at the age of 60, my great guru is still Dr. K.B. Lall, who was my first ambassador.

You are certainly not very diplomatic as diplomacy goes. You are very forthright. How did you handle your relations with foreign governments?

I had a very good career in Foreign Service and was regarded as a potential foreign secretary, but I recognised my limitations. In the first few years, until I reached the level of Joint Secretary, my virtues as an officer were the ones which I later realised, when I became a Joint Secretary, were going to stand in my way at higher levels of seniority: I was too opinionated. I greatly enjoyed meeting people, I greatly enjoyed writing about things, I greatly enjoyed expressing elaborate opinions to my bosses, but I was

disciplined when it came to official discussions with any host government. There I tried to be within the boundaries. I found the Foreign Service a very exciting service to be in - lots and lots of work to do. I stretched myself a great deal. My climactic posting was Karachi.

I had lots and lots of friends wherever I went. Of course, it was easier to make friends in Brussels because I speak French and where I lived for seven years, in two separate postings, and in Pakistan, than it was in Baghdad and Hanoi, which were my two other foreign postings. There the local regimes discouraged contact between the diplomatic community and the people. But one overcame that. I had lots of Iraqi friends and some Vietnamese friends, friends made from within the consulate itself, who were working there.

But you are now working for the Congress Party. Don't you think you have missed your calling as an economist?

I'm not an economist. I am a lapsed economist. But, I still think and write about economic matters, attend seminars. I know that my view of the Indian economy and what it requires is not the current orthodoxy and that most economists are persuaded that dismantling the socialist state and promoting a market economy, which is well-integrated with the global economy, is the answer to our problems. I remain unconvinced. But I have always believed that one must listen to what the other side has to say. So I attend as many talks and seminars as I can where I hear opinions contrary to mine. I attempt, up to a point, to read what the other side has to say. I am not ideologically against reforms. What I want to know is: what reforms, for what purpose, what will we succeed in achieving, and what if we don't achieve it, what

will be the consequences? And to recognise that any process of development, including reforms-based development, is disruptive for some people. All development has a price to pay and what you have to compare is the price that has to be paid with the benefits that come from it, and not to say that because benefits come from it, therefore we are not concerned with the price to be paid. Too many of those who are ideologically in favour of reforms are so fixated on the beneficial results that they do not look at the dire consequences.

But you don't think that these can be balanced?

They ought to be - and that is what the debate ought to be about. But I find that, having been myself an ideological Marxist in my day, I can recognize the ideological fire that burns in the hearts of the reformers.

They seem to think, like I used to think, that there is a magic key to prosperity. And that key having been found, why aren't we turning the lock with it, is the attitude of the reformers.

They tend to be extremely dismissive of alternative views, and of the economists or non-economists who are attempting to enter their domain.

But wouldn't you say, that's a very small lobby, those who couldn't care less what the outcomes are...

I think everyone is very concerned with what the outcomes are. But the ideological reformers say with certainty that they know what the outcomes are and because the outcomes are so desirable they tend to either be blind to or dismissive of the immediate adverse results, and tend to argue that you can't make an omelet without breaking an egg, and if a couple of



Mani with his hero, Rajiv Gandhi

eggs get broken, well why not get on with making the omelet? As a politician, and even more as somebody who has a heart that beats in his breast, I don't think we can be so dismissive of present discomfort as against the comfort that we reach with our grandchildren.

How did your final entry into politics happen?

During the time that I was telling you about when C. Subramaniam said, "I have not seen the boy since he was eleven" and allowed the intelligence report to go against me while Radhakrishnan saved the bacon for me, I had asked C. Subramaniam, because I had thought it was a golden opportunity, whether he could take me into politics. He just sneered at the suggestion and thus ended my first attempt to get in.

Then, in Pakistan, where first I met so many politicians, I discovered that I felt completely at home with them as a breed, as a genus. I also learnt to speak some Urdu which, superimposed on my Hindi, meant that I came back from Pakistan in January 1982 with much

more Hindustani than I had ever learned or used in the past. This facilitated interaction with politicians when I came back to India.

I was then a joint secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs and its spokesman. And that is really what begins the story of my relationship with Rajiv Gandhi.

And you don't regret having quit the Foreign Service and joined politics? You think it was the right move, the right choice? Even through your downs?

I have never taken one backward look, not one regret, not even once, not even through my downs, because two things had become clear to me. One, that having become Joint Secretary, the Peter principle was operating, that my maverick ways which were so endearing in an Under Secretary or a Deputy Secretary were becoming very dangerous at the policy level. And second, that in the years ahead, which at that stage were about twenty years ahead, would be twenty years in which I would either be articulating policies that I did not believe in - and that insincerity

would, therefore, lead to inefficiency; or that I would be articulating my own, not the government's policies, which would be even more disastrous.

So I knew by the time I became Joint Secretary - and I held three rather key portfolios as Joint Secretary, as External Affairs spokesman, UN desk-head and, finally, Joint Secretary in charge of India-US-Canada relations, for a short time - I knew through that experience, through those three years, that I was skating on thinner and thinner ice, and that I would have to make a conscious choice to be myself or to cease being myself, that for further advancement I had to cease being myself, and that by ceasing to be me I would become less efficient than I wanted to be. The five years I had with Rajiv were unconnected with foreign policy, except for his foreign policy speeches.

I was much more involved with domestic policies, and so I was able to unleash a number of bees that had been buzzing about my bonnet from my college days. My fascination with co-operatives goes back to the Gorwala Report of 1954, my belief in small business, tiny industry - khadi and village industry - to what I had learnt in St Stephen's in my Indian Economy lectures.

Was Panchayati Raj politically fashionable when you were a student of St Stephen's?

Oh, it was very, very fashionable just then. It was at the height of its fashion then because the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Group report had come out in 1957, which was the year before I went to St Stephen's. And the Panchayati Raj movement was launched by Panditji in 1959, which was my second year in college. And as a probationer, I was posted for my district training to Gujarat, and so was involved, in that sense, with the first

Panchayat Raj elections that took place in the Rajkot area. I had always been deeply convinced that local government held the key, grassroots development through grassroots democracy. Luckily, as a Joint Secretary, I found a Prime Minister who believed in exactly this.

What was your route into electoral politics?

Just as the Foreign Service does not take kindly to political appointees as ambassadors, the political system does not take kindly to people who do not come up from the grass-roots but get helicoptered in from above. And that has certainly been my biggest handicap in politics.

But you went through developing an electoral constituency and winning elections. It's not that you got yourself nominated to Rajya Sabha due to your proximity to Rajiv.

That's fine. These are all the extenuating arguments I can claim today and thus put my claim forward for the Congress Working Committee, saying I am only one of two Congress M.Ps elected from Tamil Nadu and that I have a very good constituency record. I can say all that. But anyone who looks at me, anyone who looks,

in fact, at this pin-striped suit that I am wearing on this cold winter evening, would know that I am not to the manner born. I have forced my entry in and although I think I have succeeded in large measure in making myself acceptable as a politician, albeit of doubtful origins, the fact remains that I am not one of them, in the manner in which all of them feel that they are part of the system, that they were born into the system, that they grew up in the system, whereas I forced an illegal entry through the back door.

I knew that even then, I had anticipated these arguments, because people on the fringes or on the interface of politics in the administration, when I was struggling to come out of the administration into politics, had been telling Rajiv, and it got reported back to me, that this guy has no loyalty to you or the party or anything, he's not satisfied with being Foreign Secretary; he wants to be Foreign Minister.

While all this was on, my mother-in-law, for whom I had very, very high respect and who never attempted to interfere in my life in any undue manner, she said to me, '*Bete tumhara*



Campaigning in his constituency with Sonia Gandhi

to koi baap nahi hai aur Suneet ka bhi baap nahi hai. Do buzurg hain, K.B. Lall aur Dinesh Singh jinki baat tum sunte aaye ho, pehle ja kar unse rai lo." So I first went to K.B. Lall, a man I very highly respect. He said to me the key sentence that helped make up my mind. He said, "Why do you want to do it now? Why don't you wait till the elections?" I said to myself, "What he's saying is, if Rajiv wins then do it, if Rajiv loses don't. That's not the condition on which I am coming in."

Then, when I went to Dinesh Singh, he told me, "Look, Rajiv needs you much more than you need him. So make it your condition that unless and until you are actually given the ticket for the Rajya Sabha, you will not leave the Service." I came out and told Suneet, "Now I know why this guy never got to the top, because he always wants something in return, whereas I am willing to say, let the returns come in the fullness of time. In the meanwhile, let's do what one has to do or wants to do for itself." It's not for the rewards that you get, not the results that you achieve, but because of the sheer pleasure of doing what you have to do, and the sheer satisfaction of doing what you perceive to be your duty, that you do it.

What was the response of your wife and family? Were they then nervous?

I could not have made the move if Suneet, years earlier, had not said to me, knowing what my ambitions were, that, "Why do you want to wait until you retire to go into politics? You want to go into politics, go ahead now. Why do you want to go when you are a doddering old man?" So I knew she would back me.

For the kids, my biggest fear was, supposing it all collapses and I neither have position nor income, what do I do? And what happens to

their education? That was what worried me the most, because I had this wonderful mother who had put all her money into, if not giving us the best education that India has to offer, she certainly gave us the most expensive education that India has to offer. With that in my mind, I did not want to let down my kids. I expressed this fear to my brother Swaminathan. And Swami said to me, "I've got all the money that is required. And you please tell your children that in the highly unlikely event of your not being able to finance their education, I guarantee to underwrite it."

He said, "My objection to your going into politics or joining the Congress party is not that you wouldn't be able to make your living. I am absolutely sure you will, and these fears of the education of the children are completely misplaced." He said, "I don't want to see you in jail." I said, "See me in jail?" He said, "Yeah. As soon as Rajiv is defeated, and he is bound to be, he'll go to jail. Why do you want to go into jail with him?" I said to Jam (that's what we call Swami) "You are completely wrong. The man is innocent on Bofors and nothing can happen. It's all a cooked-up story."

But that takes us into a different realm. The point is that I had discussed it with my wife, with the kids and with two respected elders, one of whom, alas, is no more, but the other is happily still with us. Ultimately, while they were laying down conditions, in my mind there were no conditions. You either became a politician and took the risks that went with it, or you didn't become a politician and remained with the boring certainties of the Foreign Service. After Karachi, where I had effectively been the Viceroy of India, any posting in the Foreign Service was very, very small beer compared

to the opportunities that lay outside. *Now, you and your brother do differ a lot on various issues don't you? Yet, you have this very close relationship...*

Well, I think it was my mother - in retrospect - I mean I would have to give her the credit for this, when she was around. She created a completely democratic ethos in our household. While she was so dedicated a woman to spirituality - notwithstanding having three sons in really well-off positions - she spent the last seventeen years of her life in a six by four room in the Sivananda Ashram and died quite literally penniless, there was no money in her account number 379 with the Union Bank of India, when she passed away - yet, she allowed us to express very agnostic, atheistic views and didn't attempt to convert us. She held her beliefs, and we were entitled to our beliefs. She was a very religious woman, but totally secular. For her, there were many paths to God. Her preferred path was the one easily recognised by the colour saffron. But she saw genuine spirituality as having the utmost respect for everybody else's form of religion.

So there was absolutely no question of any doubts being cast on the fact that so many of my friends were Muslims. We had people of all religious persuasions coming into the house and going out of the house, and she was not hung up on your religious profile being determined by rituals like whether you were a vegetarian or not, whether you ate beef or not, whether you ate pork or not. None of these was really important to her. What was important to her was her belief for herself. That mattered more than even the children to her. But as far as the children were concerned, they

could have their own views, even if they were wrong views and they could consort with anybody. And thus in our household, there was a long tradition of argument and disagreement and so forth which never affected adversely the unity of the family. On the contrary, it reinforced it.

Do you still remain as close to your brother, as you were as an adolescent?

Yes, I mean there are many reasons why we cannot be as close as we would like to be. He has his family, lives in Washington. He has his own profession. He has pressures on his time and I certainly remember one of my deepest moments of regret was the last night before he got married. We used to share a bedroom and used to come in at odd hours of night, and we would lie awake, talking about things till 3 or 4 in the morning - which I can't do now! I realised that all our conversations, these many conversations that had filled my adolescence and my youth, were going out of the window, because from tomorrow night onwards, he would be sharing the bedroom with somebody else, not with me. Therefore, obviously, we are no longer in as close interaction as we used to be at one stage.

And my sister hates the Gandhi family. Her loathing of Rajiv Gandhi is of such visceral proportions that it's almost impossible for me to be with her - unless by unspoken mutual agreement we keep the Gandhi family out of the argument. I think within the family, whether it's Swami, whether it's Tara or my late brother Mukund, who was really my very best friend ever, we have had a tradition of argument and discussion which, at the height of the argument, might affect the personal relationship, but with which we can accommodate ourselves.

I'm going to ask you something that's always puzzled me. You know very well that I've been very vocal in my criticism of the Congress Party as it has functioned in post-Independence India. It has always puzzled me that with most other people you get very combative when they critique the Congress, but with MANUSHI you have had this very special fondness. How do you explain that?

I greatly admire the fact that you know what you stand for and you have the guts to stand up for it. You have immense intelligence in manoeuvring to secure these ends. In other words, you have got real political skills. You've got real skills of communication. I admire you for your ability to hoe your own furrow in a very difficult world. It's remarkable. You were telling me at dinner just now about how you got beauty contests abolished at Miranda House. You secured a 95 per cent vote, and the 95 per cent vote didn't just materialise out of nowhere. It was organised - and that's what I see as your talent.

I see that again and again, particularly with respect to what is now generally called the MANUSHI Proposal on Women's Reservations. I had watched your ideas start from a thought, and I've seen how there has been a process of interaction, an evolution. There is an imaginative reach there, you have very strong negotiating skills. And then there is this anchored conviction, which ultimately convinces people more than argument; seeing that somebody knows her mind, so just follow her. I would love to see you in real politics. I think if we were ever able to catch you for our party, it would be a boost for ourselves.

I have, as a student of history, great respect for what the Congress stood for. I think it is one of the most

outstanding historic political formations. But this lack of inner party democracy distresses me...

It distresses me even more. There are, however, two things that I would say in extenuation. One, that no other party aspires to the level of inner party democracy that we do. Secondly, I am hoping that we will eventually come to the path of genuine inner party democracy, which, in my view, has suffered a setback by our not having elections to the Congress Working Committee. But that's like complaining at the end of a sinful evening that the wine was not of good quality. Because there were other earlier steps of inner party elections which were not held. I deeply regret that, but I do think that there is an inner momentum in the party which wants inner party democracy even as it is being fiercely resisted by an opposite momentum which would apparently like to concentrate everything in the hands of the President, but really give the opportunity for the power brokers to continue their mischief.

But they seem to be weakening...

From time to time. I think the long-term trend is really in favour of an alternative inner organisational culture, and the profile used for that is the Anthony Committee Report and its major recommendations with regard to taking decision-making on election-related matters closer to the grass-roots. I would be the first to admit that a year after the recommendations were accepted, our actual progress in that direction has been virtually nil. But I also know that when certain decisions are taken, while they may take much longer than what was hoped for to be implemented, it is very difficult to reverse mindsets and upset vested interests. □

(To be continued)