



# Happy Being Himself

## Mani Shanker Speaks about His Years with Rajiv Gandhi

### Part Two

*This is the second part of an interview I tape recorded with Mani Shanker about two years ago. The issues we discussed – such as Panchayat Raj and devolution of power to the people - remain relevant even today. Mani also provides insightful glimpses into the mind and political life of a key initiator of economic reforms in India, Rajiv Gandhi, who became Prime Minister in 1984. Not many politicians are either able or willing to speak out as openly and with such conviction as does Mani. His conviction is born out of his own actual experience, rather than via inherited political cliches.*

*In the series **Politics as Politicians See it**, we present the insider’s view of politics. We encourage the person to give his or her version without challenging his/her claims. This does not mean agreement with or endorsement of all of that person’s views or version of events, but simply an attempt to understand the world of politics through the eyes of important and leading practitioners. We would welcome our readers posing question to Mani Shanker and all others we interview. -Madhu Kishwar*

#### **How did you come to team up with Rajiv Gandhi?**

I was Joint Secretary in the External Affairs ministry and its spokesman. And that is really what begins the story of my relationship with Rajiv Gandhi.

#### **You didn’t know him in Doon School?**

Though Rajiv and I had been in school together, I did not know him then. He was three years junior to me, which meant he was really very, very junior to me.

#### **Three years is very, very junior?**

When you are in a school for only five years? When the oldest boy is five years older than the youngest boy, to be three years older or younger is, effectively, to belong to a different generation. I didn’t know Rajiv at all in school, but he knew me, for the simple reason that I was the one who was senior, three years senior to him. And a number of school activities are in fact collegiate

affairs, and I was quite prominent in debating and acting and writing in school.

Then we overlapped a year at Cambridge, and many, many years after I came down, I was told by Dalip Mehta, who was a friend of Rajiv’s, that when I stood for election for President of the Cambridge Union, although as I mentioned earlier in another context, canvassing was not allowed, Rajiv went around, apparently, meeting the Indian students and saying, “Look here, there’s an Indian guy standing. Can’t you go and vote?”

#### **Was it the first time that an Indian guy stood?**

No, but he was not canvassing for me, he was canvassing for India. So, one might say that Rajiv Gandhi began his political life by canvassing for me. So it is just as appropriate that I should be ending mine canvassing for him. I knew him so little that when I got married in January 1973, that at the

party held for us by my best man, Sarwar Lateef, he came up to me and said, “Don’t you recognise that couple over there?” So I looked. I said, “Looks familiar, but I don’t know who they are.” He said, “They are Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi”. So, that was the extent of my involvement with Rajiv in our common school and college days and

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subsequently. But when I came back from Pakistan at the beginning of 1982, Vasant Sathe, Minister of Information, asked me as Joint Secretary, External Publicity, to come to a meeting in his chambers in Parliament House where he wanted to discuss external publicity. He added that Rajivji would be there, who had just become an MP

at that stage. Rajiv Gandhi arrived after the meeting started and when he sat down I saw that he was carefully taking in the faces of the other bureaucrats present. When his eyes alighted on me, I saw a spark of recognition.

So when the meeting was over, I went up to him and said I had something very important to say to him, and could we therefore arrange to meet at some mutually convenient time? He gave me an appointment several days later. I went with my wife, Suneet, to see him in his home in Safdarjung Road and the proposal I made to him was this: I said that I've just come back from Pakistan where I had found an enormous reservoir of goodwill and affection for India. But then, given the state of India-Pakistan relations, there seemed to me to be only one way in which the affection of the Pakistani people for us could get transmitted into our drawing rooms here in India; and that was for him to visit Pakistan.

His mother could not go there as PM of India for a variety of reasons, good and bad. But he was, formally speaking, only a back-bench Member of Parliament. But everybody knew he was the PM's son and I made detailed suggestions to him of how he could say he wanted to see Mohenjodaro, which happens to be near Larkana, the home town of the Bhuttos, and that he should drive from there to Karachi via Sehwan so that the Sufi tradition of Sind is invoked. I would get hold of all my political friends and get them to organise a really massive reception for him as he entered the city. Since he was the PM's son, he could take the Doordarshan camera with him and thus bring Pakistan into Indian drawing rooms. And I said to him that this would be like Prince Edward's visit to Paris in 1904, which preceded the Anglo-French *entente cordiale* or Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, which broke

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the ice. He seemed very interested, but nothing came of it.

After, all I was a mere Joint Secretary making a proposal to a back-bench M.P. who happened to be the Prime Minister's son. I don't know what consideration was given to this completely unorthodox suggestion. Anyway, nothing came of it. But that was when I established my first adult link with Rajiv Gandhi. Barring chance encounters, I did not meet him again during this period.

Then in 1984 I got seriously punished for my virtues. Immediately after Operation Blue Star, I was more or less taken off the UN desk and put in charge of something called the SPG, the Special Publicity Group, whose job it was to let Indian communities abroad, but specifically the Sikh community in South East Asia, UK and most of all the USA, know that the Harmandir Sahab had not been touched during the Army attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar; and that if the Akal Takht had been destroyed, that did not have the same religious significance as the Harmandir Sahib. The stories that were being put about of large scale massacres were terrible exaggerations. My task was to try and put these heated issues in the Government of India's perspective.

I did not know at that time that my daily reports to V.S Tripathi were being sent up to Rajiv. Rajiv had deputed Arun Singh and Romi Chopra to deal with these issues and so they were seeing my work on a daily basis.

Reports of this reached Mrs. Indira Gandhi who then posted me to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting under H.K.L Bhagat, where I suffered untold agonies for the next three or four months. That is what I meant about being punished for my virtues. But nobody was willing to intervene in the matter because I had been posted by the P.M. I had nothing to do and was very, very unhappy. There did not seem a way out.

Suddenly, one morning, we all heard that she had been assassinated. Later that evening, we learned that her son had become the P.M. I was one among millions of others who sent him a brief letter of condolence. While the transition to the new era was on, I went to see Dinesh Singh, whom I had served as private secretary nearly 15 years earlier, and under whom I had got my first exposure to a considerable number of politicians.

Dinesh greeted me with the remark, "So, your time has come, your generation has taken over." "What," I replied, "work in PMO?" He said, "That's what you should do." I dismissed the thought. But when I met Arjun Sengupta later the same afternoon, he made the same suggestion and his deciding line was, "You don't want to be in I&B. The only way of getting out is to go talk to Arun Singh "He had just been inducted into the PMO as a high-flier. So I went to see Arun, and he thought it was an excellent idea that I should leave the I&B Ministry and come into the PMO.

Although my passage to the PMO was by no means smooth, I eventually found myself there. And once there, I was given the one job that nobody else wanted to do - which was to organise the travels and tours of the PM, a job that had been hitherto done by a Section Officer. But owing to my doing just that, I got hours, days, sometimes weeks with Rajiv Gandhi, travelling to all kinds of fascinating corners of India.

*Why didn't the others want to do it? I would imagine this would be a prized assignment.*

They did not understand what the potential was. They wanted to sit in Delhi and be super-bureaucrats. During my five years with Rajiv, we really hit it off. I had great admiration for the man.

*Tell me, what did you think you saw in him which many others missed?*

I don't know what the others missed. I do know what I saw. I saw an extremely lively mind, constantly searching for new solutions, very innovative, and now I can see, almost prophetic; because many of the concerns that he was expressing in the mid-eighties, which were completely unfashionable

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at the time and which were in fact ahead of the time, have today become such conventional wisdom as to be almost hackneyed.

The three ideas which have really endured that I would like to stress are: One, the importance of communications to economic development. We were called the "computer boys", there was sneering at the idea that a telephone in every Panchayat is of any significance, sneering at the need for rural people to have access to STD and ISD. And today, the entire Information Technology revolution, which is at the cutting-edge of the growth of our economy, was foreseen by him years before IT became part of the public consciousness.

The second thing that I would credit him with uniquely was the empowerment of women. I do not think

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even Indira Gandhi, despite being a woman, had as clear an idea of the importance of securing gender justice in politics as Rajiv Gandhi had. He saw that it is not through benignness, it is not through a supportive social system, that women will get justice. It is by becoming as politically empowered as men are that gender justice would be secured. And the third thing, which was related to the second, is the empowerment of the people, through participative development, and his pushing for the Panchayat Raj system as a constitutional provision. I was among the earliest to be exposed to all these ideas.

*So, are you saying, he exposed you to all these ideas or were they your interests?*

I would like to use this opportunity to clear up the misconception that is often promoted that I was the puppeteer and Rajiv the marionette. I was not the originator of the ideas. I could never have survived in my job as speechwriter, amanuensis, articulator of his thoughts, if, with my words, I

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Rajiv Gandhi had a very clear idea of what he wanted, even if he was not always the originator of the ideas. So when we did a draft for him for serious speeches, they sometimes got to the seventeenth draft. It was a relentless, bone-crushing exercise.

My job was to get the technical information from everybody concerned, prepare a first draft, take it before my peers in the PM's office and the ministries concerned. They would go through it paragraph by paragraph, relentlessly sometimes, always cruelly and sometimes mischievously, tearing what I had put together to shreds. Then rewriting the whole thing, taking into account the criticisms that had been made, and then going with this peer group into the presence of the PM, where everybody was concerned not only with giving him a good draft, but with getting themselves portrayed as the know-it-alls, the ones who were making a genuine contribution. So here it was a very destructive - constructive exercise. Then, I had to take those criticisms into account, drawing up yet another draft. Finally, in the wee hours, there would be only Rajiv and me, sitting there giving final shape to what it was that he wanted to say and exactly how. Sometimes even this phase went through two or three drafts.

I think I only got the better of Rajiv once, and that was when we were getting his speech ready for his Lok Sabha intervention on the Panchayati Raj Bill. We had been working on it to well past midnight. Then he went home and I was left putting the finishing touches to it. At about 4 o'clock in the morning, the phone rang. I picked it up and said, "Hello". It was Rajiv at the other end. And he said, "What! You're still there!" I seized the opening: "While the world sleeps," I

intoned, "India awakes to life and freedom!"

These speeches were sometimes drafted with each other on the phone. He would be reading them and I would be on the RAX at the other end in my office or at home. Paragraph by paragraph he would say, 'I don't like that.' 'That's not what I meant.' 'What I mean is this .....'. And then I would have to do my revision and ring him back to say, 'Well, what does it sound like, like this?' And he would say, 'Yes, this is okay, but what about this paragraph?' And this would go on and on.

***How is it that this image has not made a dent in the popular consciousness?***

Because I think the media got antagonistic to him very early on. Maybe because they were too much on his side in his first year. In 1985 it was Camelot, like in John F. Kennedy's years. That went up in smoke in a series of decisions stretching through 1986 into 1987. Once Bofors came on the scene.....

***No, there were also the 1984 riots and his handling of the anti Sikh massacre-that shameless chapter in Congress history...***

Well, the riots were in 1984, just as he assumed power and that should have stained his early years, but he remained popular in the early years.

***The human rights biradari and the entire Sikh community never forgave him that.***

No, because of the Punjab Accord a lot of that went away, and part of the Punjab Accord was to establish a Commission to look into the riots. So, while there is no doubt that the riots did stain his record and did create him some enemies, many enemies, the fact is that 1985 was a honeymoon year, climaxed by his power brokers speech, which was very widely welcomed, except by Girilal Jain, who had a front page

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editorial condemning it in *The Times of India*.

I think the negative press he started getting from 1986 onwards, which just snowballed over the next three years, resulted the projection of a very distorted image of him. Of course, with regard to the speeches, I am telling you an inside story.

Rajiv's inveterate enemy in the press was Arun Shourie. And people started inventing their image of him. The fact is that his Hindi was weak. Do you have to have good Hindi in order to be the Prime Minister of India? No. But because he used this expression "*Hum Dekhenge*". Arun Shourie set his reporters on to counting the number of times he said it in some August 15<sup>th</sup> speech. And they were dedicated to denigrating the man.

***But wasn't that speech a prepared text?***

In English, that's how I used to do the Hindi speeches. Preparing the notes in English; and then he would do the translation and elaboration himself from the podium.

***But why didn't people write them in Hindi for him?***

Because then he'd have to read it, and I think he preferred extemporising to reading from a platform. Most of his speeches were extempore, from notes; the process I was describing was for set speeches on formal occasions. For other occasions, the points would be set out in telegraphic language, typed like lines of poetry, so that, as he went along, he could pick and choose what to include, what to leave out, what to elaborate. And I would sit in the audience, very carefully listening to

him, and when he left out something substantive or brought in something substantive which wasn't there, then I would leave out that thought from his next speech or weave in his sort of additional words into his next speech. So it was a very interactive process, a very dynamic interaction.

***Were you the only one or were there other speech writers as well?***

He decided at the end of 1985, specifically in November, 1985, that everybody writing up speeches relating to his particular area of specialisation meant that there were a number of disparate speeches, there was not a conjunction of ideas, common themes running like a thread through his speeches. So I was tasked with being the only speech-writer, so that thoughts which were relevant to his view of the world, but not perhaps self-evident in the context of the subject that he was talking on, would get woven into his speeches, and that the language would hold a certain consistency.

There were some speeches written by some others. But I would say something like 95 per cent of what he said had been put together by me or at least served up as the basis on which he would be speaking. Since he spoke very, very often, at a rough guess I would say I must have been involved in about a thousand speeches on every subject under the sun. What subject does a PM not deal with? With the result that, by the time I had gone

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through my five years with him, I did not know which thought had originated with me and which one had originated with him, which phrase had come from him and which phrase was mine.

By 1988-89, it really was one head sort of throbbing in two different bodies. There is a film by Ingmar Bergmann called "*Persona*", about this great actress who has a nervous breakdown on stage and the doctor tells her to go off to an island with her very mousy looking secretary to recover; and the climactic moment in the film comes when he superimposes half of this mousy secretary's face on half of the famous actress's face and you suddenly find that they are really a composite persona.

Let me give you some stories about Rajiv. They are all true stories. I accompanied Rajiv to the Golden Jubilee of the Doon School - that was in November 1985, his first year as P.M. On the eve of this Golden Jubilee, which was preceded by a regrettable amount of exposure in the media, there was an extract from a book by Mady Martin, the wife of our common headmaster, John Martin, about Rajiv. In it she says that Rajiv was painfully shy and deeply embarrassed at being the grandson of the Prime Minister and had, therefore, hidden himself in the clothes basket when his grandfather first came visiting. So there was a moment of panic when they could not find the boy.

We had these huge clothes baskets that you might still find in a really old fashioned bungalow. He just hid himself in there and pulled down the top. He was embarrassed about the hype and therefore kept his light well hidden under a bushel. There was something to this effect in one of the extracts in the newspapers. So when we had a quiet minute together during this Golden Jubilee celebration, it was

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in the post-lunch period when we were sitting in the headmaster's house, there was nobody else around, I asked him about the extract from Mady Martin's book and he said, "It is not that I didn't have political opinions of my own, but I didn't want people to think I was just parroting my grandfather's views. All of my views were, of course, not those of my grandfather, but if I expressed them, they would say, 'How dare you own these views when your grandfather doesn't share them!' "So, he said, "I was going to lose both ways, expressing them or not expressing them. So I just kept completely quiet and kept out of the public eye".

And, therefore, perhaps it is not without significance (I wrote this somewhere after he died) the only place where Rajiv shone at school was in the dark room of the photography class. He was an outstanding photographer, and it all started in school. It was the one place where he could give expression to his talent without anybody knowing and he could be himself. I think this anti-intellectual image was a cultivated one.

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such an intelligent man should have done the most difficult thing it is possible to do at Cambridge, which is not getting a starred first but failing the exam, because almost no one ever fails. And yet Rajiv succeeded in failing. For a bright chap, he was not academically up to the mark. I don't know, there might be a psychological explanation; there could even be a medical explanation. I have a nephew who is as bright as a pin but he has difficulty reading and writing. Yet, he has one of the most brilliant minds that ever attended that school. I've just seen this film, *The Rainman*, in which Dustin Hoffman plays an autistic man, and they say the

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characteristic of an autistic person is that he does not connect in some spheres but is a genius in others. There are various ways compensation takes place. That is why I say there may be a psychological or a medical reason for his poor academic performance.

But the extent to which Rajiv was self-taught came to me when Rajiv was to make a speech on nuclear weapons in November 1988, at the start of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Jawaharlal Nehru's birthday, at an international conference arranged by the Ministry of External Affairs. When I produced a draft replete with quotations from Jawaharlal Nehru, the Additional Secretary at the time, who later became Foreign Secretary, Muchkund Dubey, spluttered with indignation and rage as we opened the drafting session. He said, "What sort of a

stupid speech is this, full of all these quotations!” So I told Muchkund to please hold his breath, turned to Rajiv and said, “I am asking for permission to read through this entire speech without interruption. And after I have done that you can do what you like. But, at this time, please, Sir, I insist that I must read it right through.” So, a somewhat amused Rajiv Gandhi told Muchkund, “Don’t interrupt this guy, let him finish reading it.” And as I read it, replete with these quotations from Jawaharlal Nehru, occasionally I would look up and see a completely transfixed Rajiv Gandhi, his eyes opening wider and wider until I finished. And then I turned to Rajiv, requested Muchkund Dubey to stop spluttering for a moment, and said to the Prime Minister, “Do you see how closely what you are saying resembles what Jawaharlal Nehru argued?” And Rajiv quietly nodded, “I can hardly believe my ears.” So then I promised, “Muchkund, this is not my draft of the speech. This is for the PM’s ears only. I will come back with another draft tomorrow, and you can stop worrying.”

And after he and the other civil servants left, I walked out with Rajiv into the garden and asked him from where he had picked up his political vocabulary. I said, “I know you have not read much Nehru. I’ve read a lot of Nehru. Did you discuss these things with your grandfather at the breakfast table?” He said, “Well, I was only 11 when they sent me to boarding school. And he was so busy that we could only meet sometimes at the breakfast table. And there was this rule that we had to speak only in Hindi at meals. And when we went on holiday, who was going to talk about nuclear weapons when we were diving off the houseboats into the Dal Lake? So,” he said, “I don’t know where it came from.”

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He had simply absorbed the argument through the pores of his skin, as it were. I cannot give you an explanation as to where it all came from. But as somebody who worked so closely with him, I assure you the man had a first-class mind. It was a bubbling mind, full of ideas. I have identified some of the areas for you, but they are only some of the areas. We dealt with questions of health, we dealt with the voluntary sector, we dealt with education, with his new education policy, we dealt with oil seeds. He initiated a policy that was a work of genius, where India was converted from edible oils being the second largest import after crude oil into becoming a net exporter of edible oils.

***But we are back to the same crisis in edible oils...***

That’s a different matter, because Rajiv is not here; that’s why we are back to the same crisis. But the man’s achievements, his contribution over a huge range of activity, including, I must particularly mention, the zonal cultural centres, are unrecognised. They are all buried under the debris of Bofors. People do not remember what his contribution was. There is

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only one year in the history of 5000 years of India where we have grown in double digit figures: 10.7 percent was the rate of growth of our GDP in Rajiv Gandhi’s last full year: 1988-89. The rate of growth of the Indian economy in the first decade of reforms, leaving aside the particularly bad years like 1991-92, has ranged at around 6.6 percent. Under Rajiv, we had reached 10.7 percent. So, this denigration that has contemporaneously taken place of his achievements is one which, I am convinced, will be retrieved by history when we have gone beyond the controversies of the time.

Regarding Panchayat Raj, Rajiv Gandhi (and, as far as I know, at that level only by Rajiv Gandhi) said in effect, “If you rely on political whims to bring about the empowerment of the people, you are never going to get that empowerment because the political will of the political classes will never work in that direction”.

***Is he the most important love affair of your life?***

Look, you can have a love affair with an equal. He was a Prime Minister and I was a civil servant, a mere Joint Secretary. I never called him anything but “Sir”. I had no relationship with him outside of an official relationship.

***Why, weren’t you one of his friends?***

No, I could not possibly claim that. I did ask his permission to describe myself as that or let me be so described when I found how useful that could be after he allowed me to come into politics and gave me a ticket for my constituency. Indeed, almost the last conversation I had with him was, I said to him, “Sir, I am a bit embarrassed that everybody there is describing me as your friend.” And he laughed and he said, “You can call yourself my friend, too.” I think that

was about the last substantive conversation I had with him.

*So, why did you ask for leave to quit and go into politics...*

Here was a chap whom I enjoyed working with. He was right on the top of the heap. Then we got into this Panchayati Raj business and 1988-89 was largely given over to this massive constitutional amendment that was going to change the political face of India. And I said to myself, "What are you doing? Here is the golden opportunity to make this happen; what was only in the realm of fantasy till now, you can make it happen." And I knew that if I hesitated I wouldn't be able to make it.

We were flying to Bangalore on our way to a tour of Karnataka on August 17, when suddenly a great home truth struck me - that next morning we were flying from Mysore to Cuddapah in Andhra Pradesh; so, the Karnataka politicians would not be getting into the helicopter and the Andhra politicians would be waiting at the other end. Rajiv would be all alone with me in the helicopter for an hour and a half from Mysore to Cuddapah. So, somewhere between Hassan and Mysore, I walked up to him and I said, "I have something very important to talk to you about. Can we talk about it on the flight tomorrow morning from Mysore to Cuddapah?" He got very intrigued and asked, "What is it?" I said, "No, no, I will tell you tomorrow, not just now." And when he got into the helicopter at 7.30 in the morning next day, before I could seat myself, he said, "Come here and sit down next to me." We used to leave the seat next to him empty. So I sat down. He said, "What's it about?" I said, "I want to leave the Foreign Service and come into politics." He was astonished. He said, "You're mad! You've got such a good job." I said, "You know, Cambridge, the Union.. I always

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wanted to be in politics and it seems to me this is the golden opportunity." He said, "You know what the problems are..." I said, "Well, I have some dim vision of them. But I feel that with the elections coming up, you think you are going to win, but everybody I know tells me you are going to lose. So I'm not attempting to hitch my star to your wagon because your wagon is going up. But, win or lose, it seems to me that I should link my political life to yours." And then I added, somewhat fatefully as it turned out, that, "My only real concern is that these guys who are shadowing you all the time will get you." I said, "I have thought about this..."

*What did you mean by "shadowing you?"*

They were always around, they were part of our lives, they were all there in the penumbra, not even in the umbra, and there had been attempts on his life and we all knew that this was always in the cards. There was Kashmir coming to a boil, there was Punjab already on the boil, there was Assam which was deteriorating. So, in these circumstances, it was possible for me to say to him that,

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"There are these guys who are out to get you. But I have said to myself, 'Before they get you, they're gonna get me, because I am always in the open jeep in front of you.' So, perhaps that's not too serious a consideration. I have thought it through and I want you to give me permission to resign."

As it turned out, there was a Rajya Sabha seat coming up. And I said to him, as it was a partial term, I said, "Maybe I could come in there." While he listened at that time, for the next two months he kept me completely *latkaod* (dangling). I was not given an opportunity to even discuss this with him.

Despite repeated attempts by me, in India and abroad, because we also traveled abroad at that time, and in Delhi or outside Delhi, because we were constantly on the move, I just could not get him to talk about it. Then, eventually, at the end of September, this was a month and a half after I spoke to him, he said I could talk to his Principal Secretary, B.G. Deshmukh, about it. I talked to Deshmukh and then came back to him. Rajiv said to me, "You know the system won't accept you. They wouldn't even accept Arun Nehru, let alone Roon" - which is what he called Arun Singh. "So," he said, "I'm afraid I will never be able to make you a minister". I said, "Okay". He then said, "I can't give you that Rajya Sabha seat you were thinking of." I said, "I know because you have already given it to somebody else." He said, "I don't know whether I will ever be able to bring you into Parliament." I said, "We'll see about it."

And then it was that he said, "What do I do in my work without you? Will you agree that, immediately, you will be brought back into the PMO, as a political appointee, as an OSD?" (Officer on Special Duty). I would mostly do the work that I had

already been doing and everything would be left to the future. I said, "All conditions accepted. I have made up my mind. I'm going to leave the Service".

*The popular perception is that he asked you to leave the Foreign Service.*

Lots of Congressmen praise me saying, 'Aapne kitni kurbani di'. (You made such a sacrifice). I gave no kurbani, I wanted to do it. And he did his best to discourage me.

*But why did he think that the system won't accept you?*

I think what he meant was - because he brought in Arun Nehru and Arun Singh - that this club of politicians does not like interlopers. 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.

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 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

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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, 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.

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."

And while it did not reach quite that stage between me and Rajiv Gandhi, I think, at the end of the day, we really knew each other so well and we were so much on the same wavelength that I asked him for permission to quit the Foreign Service and follow him into politics. For two long months, he denied me the permission. When eventually he was tending in the direction of letting me go, he said to me, "What do I do? You anticipate what I want to say. You are able to convert a little suggestion from me into a complete report. You never come back to me for clarifications. And when the work is complete, I never have any complaints." I was, of course, both touched and flattered. He then said I could leave the Service but on condition that I would return to the PMO as a political appointee, like V.S. Tripathi under Indira Gandhi. Thus, I would more or less continue doing the same work as I was doing already.

*A lot of people tell me that you have more enemies in your Party than outside of it.*

That is true of every single politician. It is inevitable. But I don't think I have personal enemies within my Party. Anurag Mathur made a telling statement about me several years ago. He wrote in an article that at a book

launch function Mani Shankar Aiyar had invited only his friends. Therefore, the hall was half full. Had he invited his enemies, he would have had to book the Jawaharlal Nehru stadium! I personally don't think I have all that many enemies in the Party, even though some think that is the reason I have not risen very high.

**Why have you not risen very high?**

Because I have not been long enough in politics. Take Madhavrao Scindia, for instance. He came into Parliament in 1967 or 1971. [This was said before Scindia died. MK] Mr. P.M. Sayeed certainly arrived in 1967, and I joined in 1990. I know of no one who came in after 1990 who has overtaken me. [Since this interview was recorded Mani has been systematically pushed to the margins of his Party. Now he admits it openly. MK]

**Anurag Mathur wrote in an article that at a book launch function Mani Shankar Aiyar had invited only his friends. Therefore, the hall was half full. Had he invited his enemies, he would have had to book the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium!**

**But you do a lot for your Party ...**

I am well rewarded for that. I am, after all, a Special Invitee to the CWC. I am virtually a General Secretary. I know that everything has been given to me with less than a set of full hands, but, nevertheless, I am sure there are a million compulsions that stand in the way. Who does not know that I am in the Congress? There are very few faces seen as often as mine; there are very few voices that are heard louder than mine; and there are very, very few whose written words are read as much as mine. Luckily, I have had a good innings.

**Although non-violence is a much neglected tenet of the Congress Party, it is still an espoused value, whereas, among the Communists violence is a way of life.**

**Would it have helped if you were less combative and less brazen?**

“To thine own self be true, and it follows, as day the night, that thou canst be false to no man.” Amma loved this line - Polonius, in “Hamlet.” Although Shakespeare put the line in Polonius’ mouth to show up Polonius as a bogus braggart, the fact is that there is something about those lines that calls out to me. I think what I am is best summed up by a *ghazal* sung beautifully by Munki Begum:

“*Kabhi saath saath chalna*

*Na hua naseeb mujhko.*

*Kabhi badh gaya mein aagey,*

*Kabhi badh gaya zamana”*

*Aur isliye, woh aage gaati hein:*

*“Mujhe dar hai hanste hanste*

*Kahin ro na de zamana!”*

I experience that all the time. I am quite happy being just myself. I don't think I have done myself too much harm just being myself.

**Why are you obsessed with the Nehru-Indira dynasty?**

To my mind, the Congress Party embodies a number of fundamental values relating to our nationhood, which are not reflected in any other party. These include secularism and *ahimsa* (non-violence). Although non-violence is a much neglected tenet of the Congress Party, it is still an espoused value, whereas, among the Communists - that is the main reason why I cannot be with them - violence is a way of life, and a much touted way of life. Between their attachment to violence and my own virtual pacifism, I find it impossible

to be a Communist. The communist dialectic also says that it is only out of conflict that consensus arises, I am persuaded that dialectic does operate in a number of circumstances, and there are some circumstances in which it should be encouraged to operate, but there is also the consensual path that should not be ignored.

Therefore, it is not ineluctable that we go through conflict resolution. We can also go through consensus resolution. I am also dead against dictatorship. I have experienced dictatorship. I am a democrat first and foremost. While the inefficiencies of democracy stare us in the face in a country like India, the horrors of dictatorship have stared me in the face for six years of my life. A Communist, for opportunistic reasons, might opt to be a democrat as in India, but, deep in his heart, he is persuaded that, since he has found the right path, that is the only path to be followed and that all those who do not follow that path must be eliminated. So, dictatorship is related to violence. Violence is related to intolerance. Intolerance is related to conflict resolution only through conflict. I am, therefore, not a Communist.

But the ethical idea, that you take from each according to his ability and give to each according to his need,

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and that the purpose is not just to understand the world but to change it - all these Marxist values inspired me very deeply. At the same time, it seemed to me that Gandhiji was right in saying that the worship of *Daridranarayana* (the poor) is really the essence of politics. But I believe you cannot really serve the poor by individual acts of goodness, which is what I see in an *ashram* or NGO, but by a systemic approach towards dealing with poor. To give priority to the poor, and wish to be judged by this overwhelming criterion by which you wish to be judged - that is the essence in Gandhian socialism that attracts me very much.

So, I find that in the Congress Party we have a secularism that runs very deep. We have our form of indigenous socialism that is not only un-Marxian but would be derided by the Marxists. We have this deep belief in democracy and, more importantly, in the second-half century of our Republic, in strengthening our democracy by introducing democracy at the grassroots, by empowerment through Panchayati Raj. We have a form of national self-respect that comes from Non-Alignment, which we seem to have completely lost in the last few years. All these attracted me to the Congress Party in contradistinction to any other party.

Now, let me come to the so-called Dynasty. I find through the experience of the last 50 years that it is completely a coincidence that the Congress Party has been headed by four members of the same family, each of whom have come into prominence entirely on their own, and not because of dynastic succession, and always with the endorsement of the Party all of the time and that of the nation most of the time. These values were cherished and promoted during their stewardship; during the in-between period of seven years, from Rajivji's death in May 1991, to Sonia Gandhi's assumption of the

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Presidentship of the Party in March 1998, we went through a period in which all these four fundamental values were diminished, very considerably diminished. I don't think that the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the manner in which it took place, and the facilitation of it, was done by the negligence of the Central Government. It was the consequence of an abandonment of secularism in governance as we had understood it since Nehru's time; it would not have happened in Rajiv's time.

I just do not believe that this wholesale abandonment of even the word 'socialism' in the pursuit of economic reforms would have taken place in his time. I do not, for a moment, believe that we would have drifted as far away in foreign policy from Non-Alignment as did happen in this interregnum. Although the highest tribute paid by the Narasimha Rao Government in the 10<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha to Rajiv Gandhi's memory was the passage of the Constitutional Amendments on Panchayati Raj, the complete indifference to its implementation is a reflection of a lack

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of sincerity on the part of Rajiv's successor PMs.

So, in those seven years we saw such a sharp diminution of the Congress Party's commitment to its own principles that I believe the accession of Sonia Gandhi to the stewardship of the Party, signals a return, with, of course, modifications - we never step into the same river twice - it signals a return to certain fundamental values that I hold dear, and that, I believe, none but the Congress Party is willing to embody.

I think the proudest thing about being a Congressman is that we have never, never, never been on the same side as the BJP, which cannot be said of any other political party. We are the only ones who can say we have never, never, never, whether in the States or at the Centre, ever been on the same side as the BJP.

***What has gone wrong with the Congress that the Party is attracting such poor quality workers?***

That is happening especially in Tamil Nadu, where the two overwhelmingly dominant parties are the Dravidian parties. We have not been in power there for the last 34 years, and we are not going to be in power for the next 34 years. The best, the most ambitious prefer to go where the prospects are brighter. When I ask bright young boys in my constituency why they have chosen to be in the Congress, they usually say, "Our family has always been with the Congress." There is no other, better reason given.

In a State like Nagaland things are different. I go a lot to the Northeast for my work. I see good material there, good quality workers. I just take it that where a political party is strong, you are likely to get a larger pool from which to catch the bigger fish. In Tamil Nadu, we have to make do with whatever we get. □

***To be continued...***