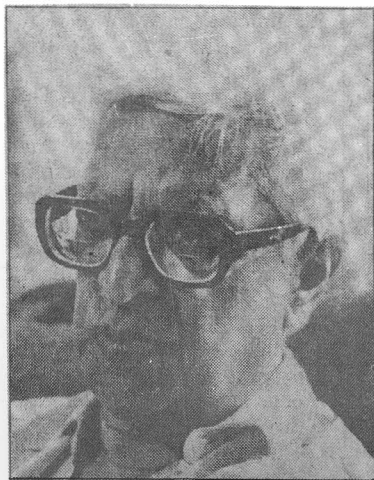


TRIBUTE A Liberal Voice

by V.N. Datta



With the passing away of Professor Sarvepalli Gopal, the cause of history, which he continued to promote with fervour till the end, has suffered a serious blow. As a historian-biographer of Jawaharlal Nehru, Gopal established an eminent position and reached a far wider public circle than any living Indian historian. He wrote half a dozen books, including three on British administration in India and a large number of thought provoking essays and reviews.

It is, however, in the three-volume biography of Nehru, that one finds the real Gopal. It is, I think, the greatest work on Nehru written so far, and a model of the historian's art. He placed Nehru's life in a broader perspective, inseparable from the history of 20th century India. Rising above the crushing weight of ideological baggage, he provided a vivid and critical portrait of Nehru and his times in a grand style. He examined the historical concepts through the mediating mirror of actual life as lived in the topsy-turvy world of politics.

Nehru emerged as his intellectual hero fired by a burning passion for the freedom of India and as a romantic revolutionary challenging British imperialism and the canker of communal politics. Yet, Gopal was detached enough to spot Nehru's calculations and

misjudgments.

Gopal's sensitivity to explore Nehru, both as a historical figure and Prime Minister, arose from his own placement as a witness to pre-and post-1947 India.

He broadened his interest in Nehru into an engagement with contemporary Indian history, which he wanted to promote in the Indian University system. He was perhaps the first Indian historian to offer a perspective on contemporary India.

I think it is the hardest thing for a son or daughter to write a biography of the parent. Gopal's biography of his father, Dr. Radhakrishnan, is bold and provocative. He wrote it not like a son, but as a historian. His editing of the *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* is the best of its kind from the point of view of arrangement, citation and annotation and is an authoritative work of reference of the Indian National movement.

Gopal took to biographical studies within the parameters of political and social history. In times when regional histories became fashionable, he ranged across the whole of modern history in a magisterial style. In an era when economic history became the rage, he showed how political and diplomatic history could be written in a radically new way though historical figures.

Gopal belonged to my generation of historians - free India's first community of professional historians committed to a secular and liberal vision, both for the country and its historical tradition. He was particularly influenced by the western liberal tradition that stood for rationalism, human progress, social and economic justice and the rights of the individual. Gopal's commitment to a mild left-liberal tradition aroused his interest in the study of British political institutions and policies. It was this unique kind of liberalism that informed his sophisticated critique of British imperialism and analysis of Indian nationalism, and fortified his commitment to secularism and modern democratic polity in India.

Gopal was not a historian of struc-

tures, but of personalities. Though he wrote on the rulers, his sympathies lay with the people. The canvas on which he explored these powerful personalities was large, the tools he used to scrutinise them were scientific, and the approach he employed was rational. From Lytton to Irwin and from Nehru to Radhakrishnan, Gopal provided a remarkable insight into the high politics of the times. His characters were human, not swayed by the politics of the times and sufficiently capable of shaping the course of history. He located them in their historical context, understood events through the prism of their lives and displayed remarkable skills and admirable clarity in building a grand narrative of their age.

Gopal did not theorise on history. His method of historical investigation was his own. He asserted that history had to be kept fluid, or else it would become dead. He regarded history as an interim report that could be modified in the light of fresh evidence or new methods. He went his own way as an explorer producing studies that reflected vitality of ideas and the integrity of a historian.

There were many Gopals I knew - a loner, an affectionate colleague and friend, a remote observer and a cricket fan. His conversation was sparkling, never losing its mischief. His silvery hair and unbuttoned collar gave a distinct and unconventional appearance to his personality. Essentially self-contained, he was a private person.

Gopal dismissed those he thought not fit to be professional historians. He left no disciples, but only admirers of his scholarship and conviction. He not only set a highly sophisticated standard for history writing in India, but also tried to place it on an international pedestal. His friends included Christopher Hill, Eric Stokers, Iris Murdoch, David Cannadine and Romila Thapar.

S. Gopal, personally and professionally, possessed a style of which he was the sole spokesman. He is gone but the style lives on.

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