

EVERYBODY'S DADA: PRANAB MUKHERJEE

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How does one summarise the life of a patriarch who strode the stage of Indian politics for over half a century? As a titan, he towered well above the rather diminutive height that god given him, along with a razor sharp mind and a phenomenal memory for details and numbers.

When he was picked up by Indira Gandhi in 1969 after his skilful campaign in West Bengal that ensured the electoral victory of her father's favourite, Krishna Menon, little did either of them realise what life had in store for them.

The lady soon outmanoeuvred the hitherto invincible Congress 'establishment' and the young man of just 34 was next to her, as she rode the crest of the wave she had unleashed — with 'Garibi Hatao', Bank Nationalisation and abolishing Privy Purses of former rulers. He was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1969 and continued to be elected to that House till 2004, when he won his first Lok Sabha seat from Jangipur in West Bengal. Taunts that Mukherjee avoided direct elections were cruel and untrue, as he was entrusted with his party's overall electoral strategy as its head in all the Lok Sabha polls from 1984 onwards. Never during his stewardship did the Congress face the drubbing it received in 2014 and 2019. The manner in which he could rattle off the electoral margins with which his party won or lost in several important seats, even in many past elections, left everyone dumbfounded.

He handled every important ministry — Finance, External Affairs, Defence, Commerce — but the Home ministry always eluded him. If he felt bad about not being entrusted this responsibility, he never showed it or spoke about it, even though I kept badgering him about this. What must have hurt him more than Rajiv Gandhi sidelining him in 1984 was the manner in which he was kept out of the Prime Minister's post in 2004. He was the senior-most minister with the longest experience who had helped manoeuvre the party in the beleaguered post-1996 years. He had guided Sonia Gandhi most sincerely when she finally joined politics in 1998. Those like us who have seen the working arrangement after Manmohan Singh was made prime minister in 2004 know that the political burden was largely on Pranab Mukherjee — as chair of the innumerable number of Groups of Ministers (GOMs). Basically, whenever a problem or sensitive issue arose in the rather-vocal and wobbly coalition government of the United Progressive Alliance, the matter was referred to a GOM under Mukherjee to resolve. It was an adroit combination of politics and governance that he managed as the Congress had to be nimble enough not to tread on the many pink toes of its allies.

In fact, when discussions in the cabinet meetings started emanating more heat than light, the prime minister would often request Pranab babu to step in. Watching him ticking off the most loud members and giving them lessons in political science were real treats for some, who enjoyed with complete deadpan faces.. He went on to summarise quite remarkably all the points raised by ministers; then narrowed down the areas of discord. He invariably came up with the most preferred path — so that the PM could end the meetings and babus could record the pith and substance of the decisions taken in that awful haze. That was Pranab Mukherjee — everyone’s dada, in every sense. After the meeting, he would walk up to the most miffed minister, give him his broadest smile and thump him on the back to assuage him. But the deed was done and the government moved on, for ten full years. When the Left parties withdrew support from the UPA, it was again Pranab babu who acted as the safety valve. Any one who has seen him operate was invariably charmed at how he merged his role as a deadly serious but thoroughly knowledgeable college teacher (which he was, earlier) and a master politician in the mould of Chanakya — who could always negotiate a way forward.

Life has its ups and downs and Pranab Mukherjee did not have roses all the way. Frankly, behind his carefully managed visage, one could see wisps of sadness in 2007 when the party chose the lacklustre Pratibha Patil over him for the President’s post. His lot was to manage the toughest of assignments in the government, but he would not be rewarded as the PM or the President. Incidentally, despite whatever people say, I have seen the prime minister and him at close quarters and interacted separately and what really impressed me was the sheer respect they showered on each other. But matters changed in 2012 when he was nominated for the Presidential elections. The party may have been surprised at the number of votes he garnered from all corners. This was his charisma at work — right across the political spectrum.

Even as President, politics continued to be his first love. I am not sure whether I should say it, but what I saw when I had gone to Rashtrapati Bhavan to inform him about the progress of the national celebrations of the 150th birth anniversaries of Tagore and Vivekananda fascinated me. As FM, he had contributed a lot to both celebrations and to Malviya’s as well. I saw his sofa empty and found him glued to the TV. He waved his hand to pull up a chair and then I saw the man who had been the former Leader of both the Houses of Parliament, for many, many years. He was devouring the parliamentary debate that was being shown on TV like a cricket match and was all eyes and ears. He smiled broadly whenever a member said something interesting and was crestfallen when a minister made a remark that he shouldn’t have. “Not done, not on!” he murmured in English that he invariably delivered in his chaste Bengali accent. Pranab Mukherjee had left politics, but politics never ever left him.