

An unrelenting patriot

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The Sangh's mouthpiece, *Swaraj*, in its issue of June 23, 2019, insists that Syama Prasad Mookerjee had actually saved Hindu Bengalis from "imminent annihilation", and its powerful social media repeats this claim incessantly. The PM renamed Kolkata Port Trust in his name and there appears a renewed interest in Mookerjee — the founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh that later metamorphosed into the Bharatiya Janata Party.

As the son of the most powerful Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University — Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee — Syama Prasad's academic achievements were under a bit of a cloud in the 1920s. A Lok Sabha publication mentions that "he had been assisting in running the Calcutta University from his student days, (which) brought him into the educational field even while he was still a student." Immediately after Sir Ashutosh's death, he was 'elected' to the Senate, the highest body of the university, though he was only 22 years old and was still studying. By the time he was 33, Syama Prasad became the youngest Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University and, in all fairness, he did introduce several new courses and departments. These covered agricultural education, Urdu, Assamese, communication engineering, public health, home science, teachers' training, and Chinese and Tibetan studies.

Syama Prasad entered the Bengal Legislative Council in 1929 on a Congress ticket but when Congress members resigned in 1930 as a mark of protest, he got himself re-elected from the 'university constituency' as an independent. In 1937, he won a seat in the first provincial elections held under the Government of India Act of 1935. Though the Congress emerged as the single largest party, with Jinnah's Muslim League trailing far behind, the Congress refused to form a Hindu-Muslim government in Bengal. It pushed a more liberal Muslim leader like AK Fazlul Haq to seek Jinnah's help in forming a government. In 1939, Syama Prasad joined VD Savarkar's Hindu Mahasabha and was made the working president and then its president between 1943 and 1946. In February 1941, Mookerjee declared quite loudly that if Muslims wanted to live in Pakistan they should "pack their bag and baggage and leave India ... [to] wherever they like". This 'line' enjoys popularity even now.

In 1941 when the Muslim League withdrew support from Fazlul Huq's coalition government, Syama Prasad stepped in as a partner. Syama Prasad became Huq's Finance Minister from December 12, 1941 to November 20, 1942. It was during this period that the Congress embarked on its massive civil disobedience movement. Syama Prasad opposed this decision and the imminent 'Quit India movement' and

wrote to the Governor of Bengal on July 26, 1942, pledging total support. He stated that "as one of your Ministers, I offer you my whole-hearted cooperation" and "anybody who, during the war, plans to stir up mass feelings, resulting in internal disturbances or insecurity, must be resisted by ... government".

He resigned from the cabinet, however, in November 1942 — severely criticising the British government that just did not care much for him or his ministerial status. In the elections of January 1946, the League captured all the 'Muslim reserved' constituencies while the Congress bagged the 'general' or unreserved seats, but the Mahasabha was routed decisively. This is when prominent Muslim leaders like HS Suhrawardy and Huq joined Subhas Bose's brother and former Congress leader, Sarat Bose, to demand that Bengal be separated from India and Pakistan as a third secular Hindu-Muslim nation.

Jinnah then declared his 'Direct Action' on August 16 to hack Pakistan out of India at any cost, and launched communal riots. This helped the Hindu Mahasabha re-emerge after its electoral debacle and, at its Tarakeshwar Conference in mid-April 1947, Mookerjee was authorised by the party to take steps to ensure that the Hindu-majority areas of Bengal were not included in the proposed Muslim-dominated Bengal province. In May 1947, Syama Prasad wrote to Lord Mountbatten to divide Bengal and strongly opposed the 'unity plan' but national events moved faster. On June 3, Mountbatten got the leaders of the Congress, the Muslim League and the Sikhs to agree to partition India. The final resolution to partition Bengal into Muslim-majority and Hindu-majority areas was taken on June 20 in the Bengal Assembly. Syama Prasad strived to ensure that Kolkata was at a safer distance from the Jessore border along East Pakistan.

Nehru inducted Syama Prasad into the Interim Central government of Independent India in August 1947, but the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu Mahasabha fanatic on January 30, 1948, changed the picture. Home Minister Sardar Patel promptly banned the RSS on February 27, 1948 and blacklisted the Hindu Mahasabha, saying that "it was a fanatical wing of the Mahasabha" that had conspired to kill the Mahatma. Patel's letters to Syama Prasad during this period express his undisguised annoyance, declaring plainly that it was "as a result of the activities of these two bodies (RSS and Mahasabha) that an atmosphere was created in the country in which such a ghastly tragedy (Gandhiji's assassination) became possible."

Syama Prasad kept pressurising the government on protecting Hindus in Pakistan and opposed it on the Kashmir issue. As a conservative Hindu, he was critical of Nehru's efforts to reform obscurantist parts of Hindu laws and he was opposed to the introduction of monogamy and divorce. He resigned from the cabinet in April 1950, to voice his opposition to the Nehru-Liaquat Pact which, he felt, did not protect refugees or their lives and their property. Though Syama Prasad had walked out from Nehru's cabinet, Pandit Nehru organised a grand ceremony in the Kolkata Maidan to

honour him by handing over the relics of two of Buddha's disciples. Nehru also gave Mookerjee the unique distinction of escorting these relics to Cambodia, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam, where they were received with delirious joy

By October of the next year, Mookerjee had moved away from the Hindu Mahasabha and had become so close to the RSS that he was given a free hand to found its political arm, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, in 1952. Thereafter, the RSS started guiding his operations in Kashmir, bitterly opposing the Nehru government's decision to confer special status on Kashmir, despite being explained that it was a Muslim majority territory contiguous to Pakistan that necessitated a 'soft touch'. Even four years after Article 370 conferred limited autonomy to Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah kept all his options open and Nehru had to dismiss his government in August 1953. He was jailed for the next 11 years.

A few months before Abdullah's dismissal, Mookerjee led a joint agitation of the Jana Sangh, Hindu Mahasabha and the Praja Parishad — demanding the repeal of Article 370. The protesters were refused permission by Abdullah's government and when Syama Prasad entered Kashmir, he was arrested on May 11, 1953. His health deteriorated after a month of incarceration and he wrote a letter on June 6 to his sister-in-law, Tara Devi, saying that he was feeling miserable. He started suffering from fever and the treatment prescribed by the doctors of the Kashmir government did not help much. He recovered a bit but on June 22 and June 23, he had two heart attacks, leading to his death. There was an immediate hue and cry and despite his mother's plea, neither Nehru nor Abdullah ordered any inquiry. Obviously, they remain open to charges of giving inadequate attention and health back-up to an ailing leader. He was only 52 and the Hindu right was gifted one of its prominent martyrs. It is too early for us to judge his contribution in today's charged atmosphere, but history may be fairer to him later — when maturity overtakes passions.

Views expressed are personal