

Working with L. K. Advani



V. S. Gopalakrishnan

V. S. Gopalakrishnan, Ph.D., retired from the Maharashtra IAS cadre in 1995, and was subsequently the Director General, World Trade Centre, Mumbai, 1995-2005. He is fluent in French, and knows German, Italian and Spanish. He has a diploma in cartooning, Madhyama in Hindustani vocal music, and a certificate in music composition and direction. He has published five cartoon books and two books of poem, apart from a professional book WTO and India: Some Insights. He is now interested in social causes such as fighting injustice, corruption, etc. He lives in Mumbai.

Editor's Note: This story is slightly adapted, with the author's permission, from the original published on www.sulekha.com.

I will say that if ever there was a thorough gentleman I have seen, it is Mr. L. K. Advani. It was only for two years I worked with him in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I & B). That was in 1977 to 1979, but I don't think he would since have changed as a human being, whatever his political thinking and actions.

For a politician, he had this unusual instinct of thinking before speaking out. He would address you with a respectful *ji* even though he was a Minister in the Government of India. He addressed even lower ranking officers in the Ministry this way; for example, Sharmaji, Tripathiji etc. He would call me Gopalakrishnanji. A Bannerji or a Chatterji would have posed him problems. How do 'Bannerjiji' and 'Chatterjiji' sound?

Advaniji was humility personified. No airs about him. No question of arrogance. A gentleman to the core.

After I returned from my Paris deputation for studies, in mid-1976, I got a posting as a Director in the I & B Ministry in Shastri Bhavan in Delhi. I was in charge mainly of Information Policy (IP) and Media Coordination (MC). IP involved framing of National Media-Information Policy, and dealing with UNESCO; and MC involved coordinating all the media agencies like the All-India Radio, Doordarshan (State-owned TV channel), PIB, DAVP, Films Division, Publications Division, FTII, IIMC, etc. Besides, I was handling many other matters, including the

Central Information Service, Vigilance and the like.

I joined the Ministry in mid-1976 during the hot days of the Emergency, with Mr. V.C. Shukla presiding over the Ministry. My God, he was on a lofty pedestal. He presided over the Weekly Top Policy Meetings, and I was the junior-most officer present. I had to record the secret decisions and convey the concerned extracts to the Media-Heads. The officials were generally like quiet sheep and the imperious V. C. Shukla would trot out his decisions.

Kissa Kursi Ka (literally 'Tale of Chair', with 'Chair' denoting political power) and Kishore Kumar were two well known instances of Shukla's decision-making ethos. *Kissa Kursi Ka* was a movie made by a private party that was critical of the Government. The negatives were stolen/smuggled out and destroyed at Government's instance. In Kishore Kumar's case, his songs were banned from AIR and Doordarshan as he did not cooperate with the I & B Ministry when it asked him for a free performance.

In early 1977, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi lifted the Emergency (originally set in 1975), and ordered fresh elections, as many may recollect. The Congress Party suffered a mighty defeat at the hands of the Janata Party. And then there was to be an Opposition Victory Rally at the Ramlila maidan in Delhi.

It was morning hours and I received a frantic phone call from my Colleague, Mr. T, who was a Deputy Secretary in charge of AIR and Broadcasting. He said that L. K. Advani had called him on phone and told him that the Opposition Victory Rally should be covered by Doordarshan and other media. The practice until then was to publicise rallies of only the Congress party – Indira Gandhi’s party. After we talked briefly on the phone, we decided to meet the Ministry’s Secretary – the highest ranking civil servant in the Ministry – Mr. B as soon as the offices opened. We met and told the Secretary saheb that Advani’s request was very reasonable and there should be no bias against Janata and other opposition parties in media coverage. This was approved and executed. We never had any idea that the same L. K. Advani would subsequently become our Minister too, succeeding V. C. Shukla.

As the new Minister, Advaniji announced at once that he would submit to the Parliament a “White Paper on the Misuse of Mass Media during the Emergency”. He appointed a one-man Committee composed of Mr. Das (ex-ICS) to prepare the White Paper, and nominated me as full-time Secretary for the Committee. I was surprised and even embarrassed at my nomination. I met Advaniji, and told him: “Sir, I was a part of the Emergency Regime, though only for about seven months. I feel that morally I should not be associated with the White Paper as possibly there could be even one or two mistakes by me.”

Advaniji could not be convinced. He told me: “Gopalakrishnanji, you have a reputation for objectivity that I have heard of. And as Director of IP and MC, you are familiar with all the agencies under the Ministry. So, you should not worry.” The die was cast for me. But Advaniji had paid me compliments. My name was repeatedly flashed on Doordarshan with the message that people could write to me if they had contributions for the White Paper. My father at Madras got the jitters seeing the Doordarshan messages as he was scared for my life!

In the evenings, Advaniji would have a meeting with Mr. Das and me, and consider the fresh drafts. The initial draft was generally mine, then vetted by Dasji. I remember, one sentence in my draft began like, “In a meeting held by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ...” Advaniji wrote

excellent and correct English, and he was meticulous with his own notings and phrasings. He insisted on changing my draft into “In a High-powered meeting chaired by the PM ...” I told him that there was no need to add “High-powered” as any meeting by the PM was obviously high-powered.

On this minor and negligible point, we had foolishly long arguments! Ultimately, Advaniji gave in and said, “OK, Baba, let us not call it high-powered. Any official meeting not attended by Sanjay Gandhi (Indira Gandhi’s son) cannot really be called high-powered!” His sense of humour was great.

After the White Paper, once I went to the Minister's chamber for some discussions, accompanied by Mr. T who had received that famous phone call from Advaniji regarding Victory Rally coverage. While our discussions were going on, we happened to refer to that phone call by Advaniji. He asked, “What phone call?” And after hearing us, he said “I was not the one to have made that phone call.” Mr. T and I sheepishly sank under the Minister's table with terrible shame! It was brought home to Mr. T that in such cases, the caller's phone number should have been noted for a return call and discreet verification! Even the Secretary in the Ministry had missed this point! So, who was the real mysterious caller? An unsolved puzzle!

The Minister's affable demeanour ensured that we bureaucrats were never ill at ease in his presence. Advaniji admired my cartooning ability. My cartoons used to appear in the Shankar's Weekly and some other Delhi publications and I took the liberty to show them to him. After all, Mr. Advani had started life as a journalist, and he could appreciate cartoons.

At a Reception thrown (I could never understand why receptions are 'thrown') by Advaniji for the visiting Afghan Minister of Information and Broadcasting, I was introduced by the former to the latter. And introducing the Afghan Minister, Advaniji told me that he (Afghan Minister) too was a cartoonist!

Advaniji, myself and one other person formed a 3-member Indian delegation for a UNESCO Regional Conference on Information Policy held at Kuala Lumpur. One Mr. G.N.S. Raghavan and I prepared the ‘Country Paper’ on India’s

Information Policy. The Kuala Lumpur one-week Conference revealed to all the Regional delegates what a great draftsman Advani was. Very many Conference Resolutions were drafted by him. The UNESCO Secretary General Mr. M'Bow (a Senegalese) was quite impressed by the contribution of the Indian delegation.❖

© V. S. Gopalakrishnan 2008