



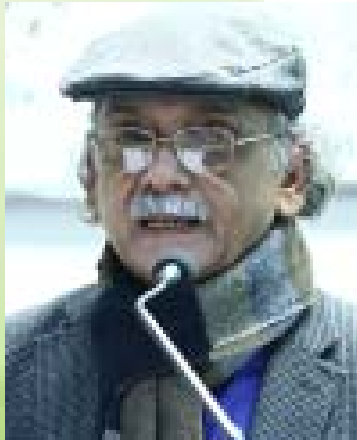
Institute of Social Sciences
New Delhi

Meeting on Legacy of George Fernandes



L to R: Michael Fernandes, Farooq Abdullah, George Mathew, Jaya Jaitly and Paul Fernandes

The Institute of Social Sciences organized a day-long meeting on the life and work of Mr. George Fernandes on 6 March 2019. Senior political leaders and activists who had close association with Mr. Fernandes over many decades, as well as media persons and academics, spoke on the various facets of his life, personality and politics.



Ash Narain Roy

Dr. Ash Narain Roy, Director, Institute of Social Sciences, in his welcome address spoke of George Fernandes as “a person of great warmth and intelligence”. He mixed as easily with intellectuals and heads of state as with the working class and he remained unwavering in his commitment towards ameliorating the conditions of India’s toiling masses, the Adivasis, and the marginalized. His was the impassioned voice of the socialist labour movement. George Saheb has been described as ‘the stormy petrel of Indian politics’ and a ‘rebel without a pause’. A trade union organizer/leader and later a rare kind of politician, who was driven by a strong social conscience, his speeches could captivate even those who didn’t share his ideology and worldview.

In his introductory remarks **Dr. George Mathew**, Chairman, Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), remembered George Fernandes’ invaluable contribution towards the establishment of ISS in the months following the anti-Sikh riots in India in 1984 and the constitution of the People’s Relief Committee led by George Saheb and several other eminent leaders. As an activist for social and political justice George Fernandes made history of sorts by being in and out of prison no less than fifty times in post-Independence India, for periods ranging from a week to a year. During most of these imprisonments, he was denied even such common amenities as books and periodicals and was, more often than not, treated as a ‘C’ class prisoner.



G.M. Patil

Dr. G. M. Patil, Principal, JSS Academy of Technical Education, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, conveyed the blessings of the pontifical head of the Basaveshwara Peeth in Mysore. Revealing a little-known aspect of George Fernandes’ relations with religious heads, he said George Saheb had often gone to meet His Holiness Sri Sri Shivaratri Deshikendra Swami, a high monk of the Lingayat order for his advice.

Kalon Karma Yeshe, Finance Minister, Central Tibetan Administration, recalled his first meeting with ‘George-La’ in 1988 during a hunger strike by Tibetan refugees over the visit of China’s Chief of Staff to New Delhi. Having been among the first to protest against the annexation of Tibet by China in 1959, George had addressed the protest and closely monitored the participants’



Karma Yeshe

health in their 60-day hunger strike. Kalon Karma Yeshe disclosed that His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all Tibetans who knew George Fernandes believed that he would remain a staunch friend of Tibet in his next life and a witness to the return of exiled Tibetans to their homeland one day. He recalled how George Saheb as Defence Minister gave space in his residence to the dissident Burmese students fighting for democracy in Myanmar. The presence of a large contingent of Tibetan youth at the ISS gathering confirmed the great affection for this leader among the refugees settled in India,



Dick Gupwell

Mr. Dick Gupwell, former Senior Political Advisor to the Socialist Group of the European Parliament, who had first met George Fernandes in 1978 in Brussels, highlighted his role as a great internationalist. He mentioned that, on becoming President of Socialist Party in 1973, George had taken the Party into full membership of Socialist International. When he was arrested in June 1976 along with thousands of Socialist workers during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule, eminent Socialist leaders and former heads of state such as Willy Brandt, Bruno Kreisky, Olaf Palme and Mario Soares had all warned Mrs. Gandhi that no harm should come to George. Dick Gupwell described the close relationship which George had maintained with the European

Parliament's Socialist Group over many years, including his participation, in Brussels, at the Groups' Round-Table discussion on Kashmir, along with such personalities as Dr. Farooq Abdullah and Ravi Nair, in October 1993. George's visits to the Kashmir Valley, Gupwell said, had made him aware of the great problem that unemployment among educated Kashmiri youth and serious underinvestment in rural economies across the country would pose in the future. He also related an amusing story of George Fernandes' visit to Col. Gaddafi to ask for aid for India when Libya's policy was to only aid Muslim countries. Stating that, "I can give you 150 million reasons why you should aid India" – a reference to India's large Muslim population then - George had returned with a \$350 million aid package for his country.

Mr. Paul Fernandes, George Fernandes' brother settled in Toronto, Canada since 1966, said that in 2007 when he brought George to Toronto for a medical check-up, the doctors confirmed that he had Alzheimer's. Then his friend Hans Janitschek from Socialist International who worked in United Nations came to meet him. Next day there was fund raising dinner for Bihar Viklang Kalyan Parishad. Earlier there was a similar fund raising for Viklang Kalyan Parishad in 2004 also. The first time George came to Canada was in 1969. During his various visits, he had meeting with provincial and federal leaders of New Democratic Party, which was considered

as Canada's Socialist Party. Now they don't use the term socialism at all. Many people in Canada were impressed by George's commitment to socialism and they learnt a lot from his life time experience as to how to work for their community.



Ms. Dolma Gyari, former Deputy Speaker, Tibetan Parliament in Exile and Minister, Central Tibetan Administration spoke from the heart as one who, along with her brother Lodi Gyari, had received constant encouragement and advice from George Saheb, who, Tibetan leaders have always described as “the strongest voice for Tibet in India.”. Besides leaving the Tibetans bereft, she felt that his departure from the political arena had created a huge vacuum in India's democratic system. During the joint Tibetan-Indian protests of 1991 in New Delhi when she, along with hundreds of people of all ages had been arrested or placed in preventive detention, George Saheb had consulted Justice Rajinder Sachar for remedies. A suo moto order had been passed saying

the Tibetans had a right to protest though living in exile. She felt it was necessary to keep an annual remembrance day for George Saheb to keep his thought and spirit alive.



K C Tyagi

Speaking on this occasion, **Mr. K C Tyagi**, Member of Rajya Sabha, said that he had the fortune of being associated with George Sab and to observe his role from close quarters.

I see him as an unparalleled leader of post-Independence India.

George Sab had his views and perspectives on all major national and international issues. He believed that an autocratic Congress party under the leadership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi would disintegrate and the socialists of various denominations will come together.

We all know that he lost in the 1971 General Elections. I believe, he was not meant for elections because elections in India had become an 'ism' in itself. People who generally win belong to a particular caste, locality and region; George Sab was for entire humanity. Wherever people suffer, or were exploited, George Sab fought for them. When after the Emergency, the Janata Party was founded, George Sab was against that idea. In fact, in one of the letters he wrote from jail, he said that he was against the idea of fighting elections.

At the international level, he was well-known for his ideological clarity and uncompromising stand. He was respected as one who was committed to fighting for the poor and oppressed. History will remember George Sab as someone who holds a special place in the hearts and minds of the people.

Mr. Sumit Chakravarty, senior journalist and editor, *Mainstream*, spoke about meeting George Saheb when he was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1968, a tumultuous time which saw the rise of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, a group that was particularly antipathetic to Socialist ideas. One path breaking effort of his had been the initiation of a dialogue with youth and the so-called 'separatists' in Kashmir following the onset of armed insurgency in 1989. But the government backtracked from this initiative by sending a governor to the troubled state who was a proven administrator but not suited to start a channel of dialogue with the separatists, militants and disaffected youth there. Thus an opportunity for a just solution to public discontent and alienation in Kashmir had been irretrievably lost, he said.



S Chakravarty

In joining the coalition government led by the BJP, George Saheb had told him that he had no problem with that party, led then by a senior leader like A. B. Vajpayee. He did, however, have have a problem with the right wing views of its members and mentors.



Neerja Choudhary

Neerja Chowdhury, senior journalist, said that if one were to assess George Fernandes' contribution, it was to deepen democracy in the country.

He fought for the rights of the working class in the first decades of his public life and taximen and railwaymen loved him. He opposed the 1975-77 Emergency which had abridged fundamental freedoms, by first going underground and we would hear stories of how he had managed to evade being caught. I was with *Himmat Weekly* at the time.

After he was captured in 1976, there was an iconic photograph of him when produced in court, chained, but with his fist raised high. He contested for the Parliament elections (Muzaffarpur, Bihar) in 1977 from the jail and won. All his life, George Fernandes strove to create a political alternative to the Congress Party, which was then the dominant political force in the country.

The first time I met George Fernandes was with a group of youngsters and we were visiting Bombay. We had heard of him as the "giant killer" who had just defeated the Congress heavyweight SK Patil in the 1967 elections. He showed us his office, where he said he would often sleep on the bench.

Mr. Michael Fernandes spoke about the democratic outlook of George Fernandes at the Trade Union level. In the early 1990s there was a National Executive Committee meeting of the Hind Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat in Bombay. " We eight office bearers including George and me were sitting together at the head of the table and all of us were from eight different political

parties debating and discussing various issues democratically under his leadership. In the family we helped and supported each other”. According to Michael, their father wanted George to go to college and become a lawyer. But he didn’t want to follow his father’s desire and a way out he chose to join the theological seminary and become a priest in the church. That after two and half years he left the seminary is another matter.

In order to carry forward the legacy of George the Institute of Social Sciences has taken the right step to establish the George Fernandes Chair on “Labouring and Marginalised Peoples”. According to Michael, the Labour Unions must come forward to support it and he would be taking it up with the Hind Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat.

Dr. Farooq Abdullah, former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir joined the programme. Acknowledging his debt to both Dr George Mathew and George Fernandes, Dr Abdullah said the former had been the mastermind behind the Panchayati Raj of Jammu and Kashmir which made the local government bodies into statutory institutions of local governance in the state’s constitution, much before the Indian Parliament did this. The purpose had been to empower the ordinary people of the state, a move that upset the members of the J&K legislature across political lines simply because they did not want to share their powers.

He saw George Fernandes as ‘an absolutely simple, people’s man’ who never forgot the people even when he held high office. As Defence Minister he had wanted to find out for himself what was fuelling the youth revolt in the Kashmir Valley. He had told Dr. Abdullah to help him set up links with the ‘separatists’ and once, in the dead of night, he visited the Valley to meet them, leaving Delhi airport at 10pm and returning by 2am on the following morning after assuring those he met that “We will look into your problems”. When a loved Colonel was



A Section of Audience

shot by militants in a remote area, the Army burnt the entire village. Farooq Saheb had accompanied George, who had come with the head of the Northern Command to that place by helicopter. As Defense Minister he had personally apologized to the people, acknowledged that “We made a mistake”, and assured them that within 24 hours the work of rebuilding their homes would start.

Farooq Saheb made an impassioned plea to remember both Gandhi's fight for independence against the tyranny of colonial rule and George Fernandes' efforts to solve the problem of Kashmiris.

Ms. Jaya Jaitly, in her address, stated that when George Fernandes came to know that she was working in the handicrafts field, he showed great interest and discussed the details. Then Jaya discovered that as Industries Minister he had reserved more than 400 items for the small scale and cottage sector. Despite being a trade unionist, fighting the emergency and involved in such high level activities, his mind easily could focus beautifully on rural livelihoods, rural producers and his concern was how to protect them – the handloom weavers, the potters, the iron smith, the black smith and many others who deserved protection.

As Industries Minister, George also protected the small scale industries. It was nearly eight years after that we had a new textile policy, which overturned all these positive developments. But during his time with George in the government, he was well aware that these sectors needed special attention. According to Jaya, this was the first time that she had heard a politician talking about the areas she was working in, in rural India.

Then Jaya highlighted the Gujarat drought crisis. Hundreds of women were trained by her team to earn a living. These women and many more were still continuing to produce and market their handicrafts. This was a very interesting revolution that took place; women became the earning members in the family and got respect from the menfolk. These rural activities helped a silent social change in the villages.

When markets were changing and industrialization and globalisation arrived, there were very few markets left for weavers and potters. George went to trade unions and told them to reach out to the rural brothers and sisters to make them aware of these developments. He wanted that taxi drivers, auto rickshaw drivers, nurses in the municipal hospitals and teachers in municipal schools to wear uniforms of the cloth that could be accessed from the weavers' homes. This helped the weavers, keeping them in their homes, employed.



Suresh Prabhu

Mr. Suresh Prabhu, Hon'ble Union Minister for Commerce, Industry and Civil Aviation, said that no one who ever met George Fernandes or heard him speak could ever forget him. He recalled how he and hundreds of college students in Bombay in the 1960s would go to listen to his fiery speeches to municipal workers, taxi drivers and other unions to persuade them to demand fair wages and better terms and conditions from the authorities. Each meeting spanned 1-2 days and George would speak for 2-3 hour periods non-stop. Not a single person left the venue, he said, remaining there fully engaged throughout the day. Later, when he entered Parliament, it was a treat to listen to his speeches, delivered in Hindi, whether he was in government or in the opposition.

It was during the Emergency that he emerged as the real hero of the day. No one else opposed it the way he did. Arrested over trumped up charges in the 'Baroda Dynamite case' and kept in jail for, he contested and won the famous election that followed at the end of the Emergency. He was 'the spirit of 1977' when democracy was restored to the people of India.

Besides his taking on the might of transnational giants like Coca-Cola and IBM, George had many other constructive projects to his credit, one being the Konkan Railway. As Minister of Railways he created a corporation and handpicked Sreedharan (of Delhi Metro corporation fame) to oversee it. Till then the four coastal states to be connected by this rail line could not agree with each other on either routes, stops or methodology involved in its construction. It traversed the hill areas of the Western Ghats with basalt rock and mountain passes creating obstacles along the way. Only George was able to get the four states to agree to the project and get it executed. He himself was the bridge, Prabhu said, the tunnel that bored through to a solution of seemingly insurmountable problems.

He knew so many languages that he bridged the language barrier between north and South India, and was thus the ideal convenor for the National Democratic Alliance set up under A. B. Vajpayee's leadership. He was its biggest asset and ran the Alliance so well that it never had any serious problems to contend with.

Prabhu recalled the simplicity of George Fernandes' life style even as Defence Minister of India. He had removed the gate to his house on 3 Krishna Menon Marg and anyone could enter to meet him without much fuss or frisking. It was always open to students and other groups who were in asylum in India, including the Tibetan refugees and Burmese dissidents.

Dr. Anand Kumar, formerly Professor of Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru University, gave a detailed analysis of the different phases of George Fernandes' career, placing it within the perspective of Socialist movements in India from Lohia to Jaiprakash Narayan, the rise of anti-INC (Congress) parties, coalition politics following the Emergency and the ascent of the National Democratic Alliance of the BJP under A.B. Vajpayee. Through all these phases, as charismatic trade unionist, and municipal corporator who became the 'giant-killer' defeating long-term Congress M.P. Sadoba Patil in South Bombay in 1967, an event which catapulted him into national politics, or as an expelled leader, a cabinet minister or a prisoner in jail, George was able to inspire intense loyalty among his followers. In his second phase as minister in three governments he never lost touch with the common citizenry. A polymath from Mangalore who mastered 8 languages, he was equally at ease negotiating alliances and addressing issues from Kashmir to Kerala, and from Gujarat to remote areas in the North-East. He represented constituencies as far apart as South Mumbai and Muzzaffarpur and Nalanda in Bihar. Prof. Kumar had campaigned for him in a backward part of Bihar, Banka, and witnessed the charismatic effect of his speeches there.



Anand Kumar

A picture emerged of an out-of-the-box Democratic Socialist strategist tempered by a natural humanism who could visit 'separatists' and Left Wing extremists or 'Naxalites' in jail, and talk to laid off textile workers, taximen, or municipal workers, always with a view to solve problems by understanding the viewpoints of these diverse groups.

He supported the Mandal movement for backward caste representation and then critiqued it, and he had remained unsure of the intent of the Jaiprakash movement for Total Revolution which swept North India in the mid 70s.

The dilemmas George faced mirrored those of other Socialist leaders in India such as Rabi Ray and Madhu Limaye – whether to remain outside government or contest parliamentary elections which are impossible to win without big money, where candidates may have to surrender everything they value to get a ticket and work within 'a coalition of rats and cats'. In the NDA, these compulsions forced George to live within the liberalization-globalization paradigm as well as the forces of right wing supremacist ideologies and to face corruption charges, a situation similar to those faced by Socialist leaders like Will Brandt and Bruno Kreisky in Europe.



Ravi Nair

Mr. Ravi Nair, who worked closely with George Fernandes, said that George Fernandes, like all humans, was a complex character. However, the one quality that stood out in him was his personal bravery. This is what "attracted me to him". One did not agree with him on all issues and he did not hold it against you as long as he felt that it was an honestly held belief.

He did a lot to nourish democracy. During 1978, as Minister of Industry, he was confronted with a piquant situation. Chaudhry Charan Singh, the then Home Minister, brought forward a proposal to reintroduce a Preventive Detention law to replace the notorious Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). In Parliament and in the public domain, Madhu Limaye led the charge against it. Within the Cabinet, George marshalled support. Helped by Madhu Dandavate, Rabi Ray and Purushottom Kaushik the Indian Deep state's proposal was given a burial. Mrs. Indira Gandhi promulgated the National Security Act (NSA) in 1980.

At the end, it was resolved to establish the "George Fernandes Chair on Labouring and Marginalized Peoples" at the Institute of Social Sciences by raising rupees 10 crore (US\$14,00,000) as corpus fund.

The meeting concluded by observing a minute's silence in memory of the departed leader, George Fernandes.



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