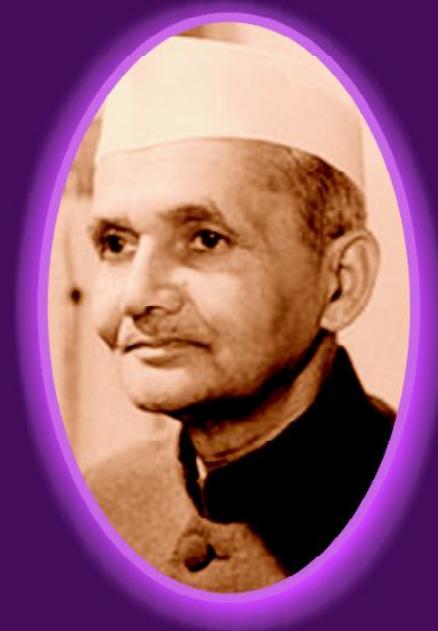


# Lal Bahadur Shastri



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# An Illustrious Life

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## **Birth and Early Days**

India's second Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri popularly known as Shastriji was born on October 2, 1904 in Uttar Pradesh at a place known as Mughal Sarai, a very well known city. Lal Bahadur's father, Shri Sharda Prasad Shrivastva was a school teacher. His mother Ram Dulari Devi was the proud daughter of this country, who gave birth to this great son who rose to the highest position and led the country on the principles cherished by Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru. Interestingly, Lal Bahadur's birthday falls on the same day as that of his mentor Mahatma Gandhi. Unfortunately, Lal Bahadur could not have the love and affection of his father since he died prematurely when Lal Bahadur was only one and a half years old.

## **Fatherless Child**

His parents Sharda Prasad and Ram Dulari Devi were agriculturists. Shrivastava was part of Lal Bahadur's name. He dropped that part indicating his caste, when he grew up. He did not like such indications of caste. Lal Bahadur's father, a poor teacher at first, became a clerk in the Revenue Office at Allahabad. Here, too, he earned very little. But, even though he was poor,

he never accepted bribes. He lived a life of honesty and integrity. Sharda Prasad died when Lal Bahadur was only a year old. Ram Dulari Devi felt as though the skies had come down on her. Her father gave shelter to her and her three children, a boy and two girls.

### **Loving Grandfather**

Lal Bahadur's grandfather Hazari Lal's family was very large. His brothers, their wives and children, besides his own children and grand children, lived under the same roof. It was a small world in itself and Hazari Lal was the fountain of love and affection to all of them. He looked after every one in the family with love. He was especially fond of little Lal Bahadur. He always affectionately called him 'Nanhe' which means 'tiny'.

An interesting incident took place when Lal Bahadur was only three months old. The mother went to bathe in the holy Ganga with her child. In the milling crowd at the bathing ghat she lost her child. The child had slipped from his mother's arms into a cowherd's basket. The cowherd had no children, So he took the child as a gift from God and celebrated the event with great joy.

The mother was lost in grief. A complaint was lodged with the police. They traced the child. The foster parents wept bitterly to give back the child. Lal Bahadur, who was destined to govern the country, narrowly missed the 'good fortune' of becoming a cowherd.

Lal Bahadur stayed at his grandfather's house till he was ten. By that time he had passed the sixth standard examination. There was no high school in that place. They sent him to Kashi for further education.

### **Early Childhood**

Lal Bahadur's surname "Shastri" did not indicate his caste or community. It was an honorific surname referring to the Shastri course he pursued at the Kashi Vidyapeeth (Varanasi) where he studied. He was born in a Shrivastava (Kayastha) family of minor government officials on 2 October, 1904 at Mughal Sarai, a railway colony about 10 kilometres from Varanasi. His father was a school teacher who died when Lal Bahadur was about two years old so

that he and his two sisters were brought up by his maternal grandfather. At Varanasi, he joined the Harish Chandra High School in 1914 which he left in 1920 to join the non-cooperation movement started by Gandhi, Krishna, Hutheesingh records an incident of 1920:

At that time he looked about twelve years old with his small frame and round innocent face, but he was full of spirit. Once, when the municipal authorities of Allahabad refused to let us fly our national flag from the pole atop the court house. Shastri dressed himself up in the tent-like robes and hood of a Muslim woman and got through the guards. Then throwing off his disguise, he bounded up the stairs like a chamois and hoisted the flag before any one knew what he was doing.

Shortly after, he joined the Kashi Vidyapeeth in 1922 and passed the Shastri Examination. At Varanasi he came in contact with one Pandit Niskameshwar Mishra who taught him mathematics and roused his interest in philosophy, religion and teachings of Ram Krishna Paramhansa, Vivekananda, and Ram Tirth. He also read some literature on Bertrand Russell, Hegel, Kant and Huxley.

The principal of the Kashi Vidyapeeth, Bhagwan Das imparted to him the principles of humanism. But his personal contacts remained confined to persons such as Kripalani, Sri Prakash and Sampurnanand. Nehru and Gandhi were rather remote, at the time. In 1925, he met Lala Lajpat Rai and joined the Servants of India Society. On his death in 1928 AD. Tandon took over the Society and he shifted to Allahabad, where he got in touch with Nehru and became a Congress worker.

In 1927, he married Lalita Devi of Mirzapur, then 18 years old. They had four sons and two daughters, which he admitted was "not a good example of family planning". His wife rarely appeared in public and never attended official functions. On her husband's tragic death at Tashkent in January 1966, she insisted on visiting the spot where he died seeking Soviet hospitality, to the embarrassment of Mrs. Gandhi. Three years later she issued the fantastic, attention-catching statement that her husband had been poisoned'. By whom and for what reason she never specified but

she went to repeating purposefully that there were discrepancies in the accounts of several of those present when he died of massive heart attack. These statements sounded eccentric. Nevertheless “a curious if minute coterie has formed which believes that Shastri was murdered, not by the Russians, who had no reasons to kill him nor by the Pakistanis, who had come to terms with him but at the instigation of his Indian political opponents” which is a reminder of a racial memory in India today of a time when the stealthy annihilation by poison of political enemy was more or less commonplace.”

The following account of his death is given by the oldest of India’s politicians then, Morarji Desai.

During the negotiations that took place at Tashkent, he agreed to return the areas that we had recovered from Pakistan during the war. This created a very bad impression in India and Lal Bahadurji, who had become very popular during the war, became very unpopular as a result. I was told that he talked over the telephone with the members of his family before he got the heart attack. He was informed about the opposition to the Tashkent decision. This information perhaps gave him a shock and he died within an hour and a half after this talk.

### **Contact with Nehru**

His stay at Allahabad deepened his contacts with Nehru. On December 31, 1929 he joined Nehru and his followers who demanded unconditional independence. In 1930, he joined the Civil Disobedience Movement and was arrested for the first time. He got two and half years’ sentence.

Thereafter, he went to jail in 1932, 1941, and 1942, altogether 6 terms in prison totalling seven years. At Allahabad, he was in the same prison with Nehru but they were kept in separate barracks. “We couldn’t meet”, Shastri said: “but Nehru was very kind about sending books to us.” In prison, he spent time in reading, and translated the biography of Madame Curie in Hindi.

In 1930, he became secretary of the Allahabad District Congress Committee and organised the No Rent Campaign in Allahabad district under the guidance of Nehru. In 1935, he was elevated to

the position of the general secretary to the U.P. Congress Committee, then dominated by the Congress heavyweight Pandit G.B. Pant in the 1937 elections, he got elected to the U.P. Assembly. In 1940, he participated in the individual satyagraha of Gandhi and got arrested.

In August 1942 came the Quit India movement. The U.P. leaders wanted him to avoid arrest so that he could supervise the agitation.

Mohammad Yunus says:

Someone suddenly got a brain wave that the best way would be to dress him up like a sweeper woman and station him in Anand Bhawan itself. So he wore a skirt, earned a broom and a dupatta to hide his face in the typical style in case the police came for a surprise check. The outfit was replete with a few bangles as well. The memory of that feminine disguise, its low-caste associations, allied above all with memories of the splendour of Anand Bhawan perhaps left a stigma of shame and humiliation on Lal Bahadur's mind. It could partly explain some of his later complexes.

After the war he was re-elected to the U.P. Assembly and was named secretary to the U.P. Parliamentary Board. Along with C.B. Gupta whom Galbraith described as "a politician of minute stature-some of five feet high." (same as Shastri), Shastri was appointed as Pant's Parliamentary secretary. It was, therefore, largely to Pant that Shastri owed his entry into the upper echelons of the Congress.

Pant had picked up Shastri because "he was likeable, hardworking, devoted and trustworthy. He was also non-controversial." Pant relied on him to assess the political impact of measures the state government proposed to take. In 1947, he was given charge of public security in U.P. and became the home minister in charge of police and transport. As the police minister, he asked them that instead of lathis, they should use water-hose to disperse a demonstrating mob.

Following the Tandon-Nehru controversy of 1950-51. Nehru became the Congress president and he called Shastri to Delhi, to organise the Congress campaign in India's first general elections.

He became the Congress general secretary. Throughout the elections, he stayed at Teen Murti House, Nehru's residence, and used the period for cultivating Nehru in order to realise his political ambitions. The landslide Congress victory produced his reward in the form of election to the Rajya Sabha and his appointment as the Union minister for transport and railways (1952). Following the railway accident at Ariyalur in 1956, killing 144 persons, injuring 115, in a show of righteousness, he resigned, a major politically motivated act calculated to earn him a halo.

Witness the observations made by Morarji Desai: At the end of 1956 before Shri Krishna Menon joined the Cabinet Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri had resigned his railway ministership as several accidents had taken place on the railways at that time. Such accidents had occurred before and have occurred again since, not only in India, but in all countries.

But Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri felt that the railway ministry must accept the blame for not preventing the accidents and that he must resign as the minister in charge Jawaharlalji accepted his resignation.

It did increase the reputation of Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri and I felt at that time that he took this step only to enhance his reputation and prestige. Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri was a *skilled political tactician*, and I, therefore, felt that he had taken this step to enhance his political prestige".

"After the second general elections, everything about the railway accidents was forgotten and Shastri was elected to the Lok Sabha from Allahabad and served as minister of transport and communications until March 1958. This was the reward for the fashion in which he did the selection of candidates, following Nehru's wishes. In 1958, following the Mundhra Deal scandal and the resignation of T.T. Krishnamachari (TTK) as finance minister. Shastri in a Cabinet reshuffle got into the important ministry of commerce and industry in which capacity he proved a flop. He demonstrated almost a total lack of initiative and in everything he did or did not do he followed Nehru."

**Home Minister**

By February 1961, Pant's health began to deteriorate and Shastri became acting home minister. On March 7, Pant died and bypassing Morarji Desai, Shastri became the home minister.

Desai has this to say about the event: Some people had felt, after the passing away of Panditji in 1961, that the home ministry should be entrusted to me but I did not think that Jawaharlalji would accept such an arrangement. I felt that he was afraid that if the home ministry was entrusted to me, it would increase my political importance a great deal. Ultimately it was entrusted to Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri who always carried out Jawaharlalji's wishes and did not do anything which he did not like.

"Here also the contrast between Shastri and Pant whom he replaced was sharp." Shastri seemed furtive as he slipped unnoticed on to the government front bench. Pant's entrances always sent a stir through the huge hall. The Emperor Akbar could not have commanded more deference. The contrast was even more marked when Shastri rose to speak in a small monotone. The words were lost in the hubbub of heedless legislators. Pant, on the other hand, always held Parliament spell-bound. It seemed as if Oliver Wendell Holmes had been replaced by the Clerk of the Court."

As home minister, Shastri never rose to the challenge the job posed. His performance was lacklustre and he displayed lack of initiative in moments of crisis. In November 1962, he became panicky and is reported to have told a colleague that NEFA, Assam, and northern Bengal would all be occupied by the Chinese and that he was preparing to have the oil Wells in Assam blown up. He had to look after law and order, internal security, the central reserve police, the political department, the intelligence bureau, the language question, the centre-states relations, the All-India Services, major appointments in the high courts and the supreme court as also in the union public service commission, the minorities problem, and a hundred other vitally important issues.

Either he followed the orders or instructions given to him by Nehru whose mere wish was a command to him, or he was

overawed by the old ICS bureaucrats— V. Vishwanathan, L.P. Singh and Hari Sharma. Vishwanathan was “the *de facto* home minister except on the rare occasions when Shastri intervened to overrule his lieutenant.” L.P. Singh looked after the administrative services while Hari Sharma was charged with the government of the Union Territories This triumvirate ran the home ministry but it was Vishwanathan, the home secretary, who was “the uncrowned King of India.”

As for Shastri, he rarely visited the home ministry until 5 or even 5.30 p.m. and that only to sign on the dotted lines or to meet visitors upto 11 p.m. in the South Block labyrinth. Normally, he got up at 5.30 a.m. did some yoga exercises which he gave up after his first heart attack in October, 1959 and then met the visitors at his residence, at 1 Motilal Nehru Place which, long before he woke up resembled “a metropolitan railway station at rush hour.” As one observer put it Waiting there, you feel as if you were at the crossroads of India. Turbaned Sikhs, dhoti-wearing Congressmen, and half-naked sadhus are among the flood of audience-seekers who fill his sitting rooms and spill out into the garden.

When Shastri is ready, he receives each caller individually rather than having them come in delegation as Pant used to do. He rises to greet each visitor, he would not dream of lying on his couch, let alone allowing petitioners to kiss his feet. Despite the milling throng outside and the other pressures on him (he is) always calm, courteous, and seemingly unhurried.”

But despite the trying time he had with the visitors, he never lost his cool. He was always anxious to appear fair and very humane and tended to treat an individual as an individual rather than part of the mass By this technique, he rose from the position of nobody in the Congress to fourth rank in the hierarchy by 1960, immediately after Desai. Just because he entirely depended on the able and experienced ICS officers, he avoided all controversies which attend a decision taken by a minister independently and at his own.

Shastri preferred to be non-controversial and “to stand in the wings of the party leaving the centre of the stage to Nehru.” His

admirers and kinsmen built up the legend of his administrative ability, he himself remaining "a middle-of-the-roader ideologically" and building up "a growing following among the rank and file." Gradually, he gained the reputation of being "a man of the people" and "a pure man".

Before he became the home minister, on the question of Nagaland to be declared a state within the Indian Union, Shastri as also Pant had supported Nehru. In 1959-60, Phizo had come out with the demand of an independent Nagaland and the Nagas began to set up an independent rebel government. The Naga rebels were getting sympathy from other Nagas and the Indian army was not given full freedom to suppress the rebellion by means of force.

In 1960, Nehru called a conference of the representatives of the Assam Government in which the views of Assamese and Naga people were presented. Nehru suggested the separation of Nagaland from Assam and making it a separate state. Desai opposed it on the ground that giving separate statehood to such a small population would lead to demands for separate states from different parts of the country and the unity of India would be endangered. Both Pant and Shastri kept quiet.

Nehru told Desai that if there were demands from other parts for separate states, those could also be considered. Nehru had his way. Desai writes: This convinced me that Jawaharlalji had prior discussions with them and had taken their consent."

As home minister, Shastri's astuteness came into full display on the question of language dispute in the Cachar district of Assam. In late June and early July of 1960, language issue ignited the long-smouldering economic jealousies in Assam. The backward Assamese-speaking majority had always resented the fact that the Bengali-speaking minority held the best jobs and also dominated trade and commerce.

The Bengali resistance to the Assamese language being declared as the sole official language of the state was used as a pretext for a wholesale assault on the Bengali community. About 45,000 Bengalis became refugees of whom about 40,000 went to West Bengal. On July 4, the police opened fire on a crowd in

Gauhati killing one student and injuring six others. This made the anti-Bengali frenzy "a hurricane of violence". At least 500 Bengalis were killed in cold blood and many more hundreds injured. An ashen-faced Nehru walked among the hordes of the homeless during a tour of stricken villages. After the death of Pant eight months later, violence erupted again on 19 May, 1961 when the Bengalis agitating for the recognition of Bengali as an additional state language of Assam clashed with the police so that 15 persons were killed and 80 injured.

When the police opened fire on a crowd of 2000 Bengalis in Cachar district the result was hartals in the Bengali areas in Assam. On May 24, hartal was observed in Calcutta and other West Bengal cities. Shastri flew to Cachar. He "Went on probing and pursuing this thing until people started thinking in terms of human tolerance and their obligations to the country. It required tremendous patience: he to convince all groups of his own deep sincerity and firmness".

Shastri listened to different view points. As he put it "I have the capacity of understanding different view points. I kept an open mind. I talked to different sets of people." Shastri returned with a permanent solution acceptable to all. It was based on the use of English, Assamese, and Bengali languages for different purposes. Correspondence between Cachar district and Assam Government headquarters began to be conducted in English and both Assamese and Bengali were now used in Cachar government offices and schools with preference for Bengali as the language of the local majority. This 'Shastri formula' ensured communal harmony in Assam. Cachar district was now represented in the Assamese Cabinet.

### **Strong and Self-respecting**

Courage and self-respect were two virtues, which took deep root in him from his childhood. While in Kashi, he went with his friends to see a fair on the other bank of the Ganga. On the way back he had no money for the boat fare. His self-respect did not allow him to ask his friends for money. He slipped from their company without their knowledge. His friends forgot him in their talk and boarded the boat. When the boat had moved away,

Lal Bahadur jumped into the river; as his friends watched breathlessly he swam to the other bank safely.

Though Lal Bahadur was, a man of small build, he was unusually strong. His moral strength was even greater. As in water so in life he swam quite successfully. Twice he was about to be drowned but was saved. It is said that when he was saved the second time, he had his teacher's three-year-old baby on his shoulders.

Lal Bahadur acquired virtues like boldness, love of adventure, patience, self-control, courtesy and selflessness in his childhood.

Even as a boy he loved to read books. He read whatever books he came across, whether he understood them or not. He was fond of Guru Nanak's verses.

He used to repeat the following lines often:

"O Nanak! Be tiny like grass, For other plants will  
whither away, but grass will remain ever green."

### **Education**

Lal Bahadur was only ten years old when he came to Banaras for his studies. The maternal uncle of Shastriji had been living at Banaras and that was what made him shift there for his schooling. He studied at Harin Chandra High School, Banaras and Kashi Vidyapeeth.

In the year 1926, Shastriji secured a first class degree of Shastri in Philosophy. Shastriji was very much impressed by the personality and spiritual greatness of the Principal of the Vidyapeeth. It had a lasting impact on the personality of Shastriji for all times to come.

In fact, if we may say so, Dr. Bhagwan Das, the great Principal moulded the personality of Shastriji through his own example of high class morality and spirituality. The giants like Acharya Narendra Dev, Acharya J.B. Kriplani, Sri Prakasa and Dr. Sampurnanand were the teachers in the Kashi Vidyapeeth. Shastriji was thus one of the luckiest persons to have his education, academic or otherwise, under the charge of these great personalities. Shastriji

was born and brought up in the holy cities of Banaras and Allahabad which shaped his mind and personality into an orthodox, moral purity and humility.

### **Marriage**

In the year 1927, Shastriji was married to a great lady by the name Lal Mony (Lalita Devi) of a famous town Mirzapur (U.P.). The only thing which Shastriji accepted as dowry in his marriage was a charkha and a little yam. It is a historical fact that Jawaharlal had been a very close associate of Lal Bahadur Shastri. Lal Bahadur had the good fortune of watching Jawaharlal Nehru unfurling the flag of independence on the banks of Ravi in the year 1929.

In the thirties, Shastriji joined service in *the* Municipal Board at Allahabad. Shastriji could remain there only for a short span. In the year 1930, at Gandhiji's call, Shastriji participated in the Salt Satyagraha and was arrested and sentenced for two and a half years. He utilised his period of detention in as best a manner as possible and had gone through the biographies of great leaders as also the political philosophies of Kant, Hegal, Laski, Marx, Lenin, etc. He also translated into Hindi the autobiography of Madam Curie.

### **The Lesson**

An incident, which took place when he was six years old, seems to have left a deep mark on his mind. Once he went to an orchard with his friends. He was standing below while his friends climbed the trees. He plucked a flower from a bush.

The gardener came in the meantime and saw Lal Bahadur. The boys on the trees climbed down and ran away. The gardener caught Lal Bahadur. He beat him severely.

Lal Bahadur wept and said, "I am orphan. Do not beat me."

The gardener smiled with pity and said, "Because you are an orphan, you must learn better behaviour, my boy."

The words of the gardener had a great effect on him. He swore to him, "I shall behave better in future. Because I am an orphan I must learn good behaviour."

Though short he was not timid at school. All boys were friendly with him. Like the grass he always looked fresh and smiling. Not only during his school days but also in his later life he did not hate anyone. It seems he used to act in plays at school. He played the role of Kripacharya in the play 'Mahabharatha'. Kripacharya was in the court of Duryodhana and yet was loved by the Pandavas. Lal Bahadur Shastri had acquired the same worth.

### **Death**

Lal Bahadur Shastri, who had earlier suffered two heart attacks, died of the third cardiac arrest on 11 January, 1966. He is the only Indian Prime Minister, to have died in office, overseas. Lal Bahadur Shastri was the first person to be posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, (India's highest civilian award).

### **Great Moral Character**

On his early life he need not dwell much, because it has already been touched upon by those who have written about him, specially the swimming of the Ganga incident. Having lost his father as an infant, his mother's influence was strong upon him and to the very end he faithfully followed the advice she had given him when he had announced his intention of joining the freedom struggle: "Think well and decide, but once having decided, never turn back."

From an early age he was involved in the National Movement, and to the end of his life he remained a member of the Servants of the People Society founded by Lala Lajpat Rai. This membership had a deep influence on him and instilled the spirit of service which was so characteristic of him.

Like others who took part in the freedom struggle, he had his share of suffering and sacrifice. But, as will be mentioned in his letter to me, the help and cooperation of his wife went a long way to make the burden bearable. Of his prison days Shastriji used to say that some of his fellow prisoners had begun to almost dread the days when their family members were permitted to visit them. Very often there used to be reproaches to the effect that you are

sitting comfortably in jail getting two square meals a day, while the family and children are almost starving, and having a bitter struggle for even bare necessities. But Shastriji said that on such occasions whenever he asked his wife whether she was facing any difficulty she used to smile broadly and say "None at all. There is now one person less to eat".

But of suffering there was no dearth, which can be illustrated by just one instance, which Smt. Shastri once related. Shastriji was in jail when his little daughter fell seriously ill. The doctors said it was typhoid, and the child was unlikely to survive. Even so, Shastriji was unwilling to apply for parole; but at the intervention of some persons the jail authorities permitted him to visit his dying daughter.

Perhaps happiness at her father's presence made the child linger on and on and delayed the inevitable end. Came the last night, when the next morning Shastriji had to return to prison. Smt. Lalita Shastri was faced with the terrible prospect of having to arrange herself for the funeral rites of her child. As she said' "All that night I kept praying to my God. Other mothers pray for the long life of their children; I was praying for the death of mine. God heard my prayers, and the child passed away in the early hours of the morning, and Shastriji was able to perform the last rites before going back to prison".

However, to come to Shastriji himself, the lasting impression one has of him is his essential goodness. He was in every sense of the word one of God's good men, full of compassion and the milk of human kindness. Never did he wish ill to others, and he always recoiled from giving pain.

For one who was the Home Minister and Prime Minister of India he could not always avoid doing so, but never did he consciously desire it. And whenever he did come to know of any hurt caused to somebody by any action of his, he agonised over it, sometimes to the extent of making himself miserable. Always, and to all matters, he sought to bring the healing touch.

His goodness found its base in his gentleness and humility, his simplicity and shining integrity. The last few years of his life were those of constant rise, but the pleasures and privileges of

office sat lightly on him. One is reminded of the Roman farmer, Cincinnatus who, when the enemies of Rome were at its gates, answered the call of duty and led the armies of Rome to victory, and thereafter returned to the quiet and anonymity of his fields. Like Cincinnatus of old, Shastriji would have been glad to return to his role of a quiet, constructive worker.

In his own quiet, humorous way he put it very nicely when after laying the foundation of Mangalore Port as Minister without Portfolio in early 1964, he visited Bangalore. He was presented with a Civic Address by the Bangalore Corporation, on which occasion the Congress President, Shri Kamaraj Nadar, was seated by his side. In the Address, after the usual complimentary sentiments and phrases, there was a reference to Bangalore's problems—the need for more roads, housing, water, civic amenities, etc. and above all the need for more funds for which the Minister's help was solicited.

When it came to Shastriji's turn to reply, he thanked them for the honour done to him. Then he went on to say: "You have referred to some of your problems, with which I am in full sympathy. But why have you addressed them to me, because I am only a Minister without Portfolio? At one time I was the Home Minister of India, and I thought I was a big and powerful man. But, along came a man called Mr. Kamaraj, and he said, 'I have a Plan'. As a result of that Kamaraj Plan, I found office and power vanishing away from me.

However, constituted as I am, accepted this change without getting upset, and was settling down to my befitting role of a quiet, constructive worker. But suddenly Panditji fell gravely ill at Bhubaneshwar, and then along came this man, Mr. Kamaraj, once again and told me. "You have got to help Panditji". So he took me by the ear and brought me back into the Cabinet, though this time as a Minister without Portfolio. So you see (pointing to Shri Kamaraj), this is where the real power resides. So why not address your problems to him?"

More seriously however, he outlined his philosophy and approach to life in a letter dated 6th October 1963 sent to me in London. After four and half gruelling years with him I had

managed to get away to the UK on a Nuffield Foundation Fellowship in May 1963. Shortly thereafter came his resignation from the post of Home Minister under the Kamaraj Plan. Knowing full well his family circumstances and the difficulties he must have been facing. I had written a very feeling letter to him. In reply to that came this intensely moving letter of October 1963, which, so far as I know, is the only expression in writing he ever made of his general philosophy and approach to life.

Lal Bahadur Shastri

I, York Place

New Delhi October 6, 1963

My dear Rajeshwar Prasadji Namaskar,

I had received your letter of the 2nd September, and yesterday I also received your letter of the 28th September. I am sorry I could not write to you earlier. I have been extremely busy during the last one month. There was the election of the new Chief Ministers and the formation of their Cabinets, etc. and these took a great deal of time. We have not yet been able to resolve the disputes in Uttar Pradesh. The situation there is causing concern. Our colleagues in U.P. do not seem to realise how much harm they are causing to the State. They are so preoccupied with their individual rivalries.

Panditji wanted very much that I should continue on my post. He mentioned this several times, but I myself wished to leave office. I had always been feeling uncomfortable in my mind about giving advice to others and not acting upon it myself. The speed with which we in the Congress are going down is sometimes frightening. Government administration in the districts is rapidly reaching a low level. No strong opposition party has been able to emerge. In these circumstances if some of us in Government come out and do something, then this relinquishing of office should be welcomed.

So far the signs are not very favourable. But it is hardly surprising that such a big step should give rise to some doubts and hesitations in the beginning. For those of us who are regarded as experienced and elders, this is a testing time. I feel that the fault

is ours and not that of our Congress workers in the states or the districts. The next few months will show just how much utility we will have outside. I am not without hope.

Difficulties and hardships in the household will have to be put up with. A person learns to adjust himself. I have not yet shifted from my house but I shall be going to a smaller house. We have reduced one vegetable dish, as well as milk, and have started washing some of our clothes ourselves. I am using Ramji's car and shall put in the petrol myself. We shall have to be careful in respect of other things also. I have left office twice before also and this is the third time. This time there are a few more facilities than on the previous occasions. Hari is also now employed. There is also the Parliament allowance. It is, however, a fact that the burden of expenditure has greatly increased. The truth is that the help and cooperation of my wife is most sincere and without parallel, and I get great strength and support from her. So we shall manage somehow. It is natural for you to be concerned. It is perhaps better not to think too much about what may come. I believe that whatever he does, we should accept cheerfully.

*Hariye na himmat, bisariye na Ram ko Jahi vidhi rakhen  
Ram, Tahi vidhi rahiye*

Do not lose heart and forsake Ram.

In whatever manner he chooses to keep you  
in that manner should you learn to live.

On the 2nd of October, all of us went to Rajghat. It was the same familiar scene except the new constructions which had come up around the Samadhi. The memory of Gandhiji brings one close to tears. All of us are consumed by the desire for comfort and office. The feeling of service and dedication is so much less evident in office. Gandhiji's renunciation was utter and complete. The story of his life is summed up in the beautiful verse of Kabir:

*Das Kabir jatan se odhi, Jyon ki tyon dhar deeni Chadariya*

Thy servant Kabir used this coverlet with care and  
left it just as he found it

At Rajghat Panditji recollected that it was my birthday also. The conversation which took place has been reported in *Navbharat*

as follows: Gandhi's birthday is everyone's birthday

New Delhi, 2nd October: This morning at Rajghat, Shri Nehru asked Shastriji "I hear that today is your birthday?" Shastriji, who does not ordinarily make any mention of this fact, replied, "Today is the birthday of Gandhiji, and hence it is not only mine but everyone's birthday."

I am glad to know that you and your wife are keeping good health and are happy. You will come back with new experience and new knowledge. You will be of even greater utility to Government and to the country. I am sure that you would have put every moment to the best possible use. I would like to convey, even at this stage, the congratulations and felicitations of all of us.

Ajay, Alok, Ravi and Anshu are all well. They came here and had their meals with us on two occasions. We also met them when we went to Maheshwar Prasadji's house for dinner. They are all living happily, although they must be missing you both and looking eagerly forward to your return. You and perhaps more than you, your wife, must also be longing to see them again. She must be wondering why the date for return does not come sooner.

I met your elder brother also. Maheshwar Prasadji is still in the Home Ministry.

All else is well.

Yours

(Sd.) Lal Bahadur

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## **Endearing Qualities**

### ***An Interesting Account***

One of Lal Bahadurji's most endearing characteristics was his utter simplicity—simplicity in thought, word and deed. This used to be exemplified in his dress itself. There is a humorous and endearing example of this. Once the closed collar black coat of 'pattu' that he used to wear on formal occasions had got so worn out that even the weave was becoming visible. To replace it the

family got a black pashmina coat made to the measure of the old coat. But when Shastriji was shown this, he reacted sharply and firmly refused to wear anything so bright and shining. Since he was going to Calcutta to attend an important dinner where the Prime Minister (Pt. Nehru) would be present, the old pattu coat, all mussed up at the tailor's, was hurriedly got dry-cleaned, and both the coats were put into his suitcase and sent off to Calcutta. When the time for the dinner came, Shastriji put on his old coat, but having just come from the dry cleaner's it had a very strong, almost unbearable odour.

Seeing his desperation we persuaded him to lay it aside, and put on the new black pashmina coat for just this once, which he reluctantly did. But all the way in the car he kept saying. "These people (the home people) act so thoughtlessly (*Nasamjhi se*) and get this son of coat prepared for me. What will people say when they see me wearing this *chamkili bharkili* (shining, exotic) dress. So I will go quietly to some corner of the hall and try to be as inconspicuous as possible." But the moment he entered the hall, the first person he ran into was none other than Pt. Jawaharlalji himself. Panditji took a good look at him, and then placing his hands on both shoulders brought Shastriji into the light, and then gave him a big whack on the back and said, "Lal Bahadur, you are wearing pashmina.

Now you are becoming fashionable." Shastriji, who looked as if he was praying that the earth would open up and swallow him, was just able to mumble: "Ji, I did not wear it. She (meaning Smt. Shastri) put it in my suitcase." Upon which Panditji gave him another whack on the back and said: "Well, one day she will put a pair of *pajamas* in your suitcase, and then you can start wearing *pajamas also*".

But Shastriji would never agree to wear *pajamas*, so wedded was he to his *dhoti*. The only occasion when he did wear them was at the Rashtrapati Bhavan dinner in honour of the Queen of England in 1961, when his daughters, who were keen on getting a first-hand account of the glamorous young Queen, virtually lifted and put him into a pair of *churidar pajamas* to attend the Rashtrapati Bhavan formal dinner.

**As per an Account:** Even when he was the Minister for Commerce and Industry, when there was not only the opportunity but also the necessity for the Minister to go abroad. Shastriji would avoid going, because he did not want to wear anything other than the dhoti. It was in vain that I kept trying to persuade him to make some foreign visits, because if he went then I could go too.

But Shastriji used to say that it would be difficult to manage abroad wearing a dhoti, and he would not wear anything else. When I pointed out that Gandhiji used to go abroad in a loin cloth, he said that Gandhiji's case was quite different, he was in a class by himself; but he himself would rather forego the foreign visits than give up his *dhoti*. And so in the giant Ministry of Commerce and Industry with unlimited opportunities for foreign travel, I used to gnash my teeth in impotent rage and keep putting up to the Minister almost daily files for clearance of officers going abroad to all the five continents and seven seas, while the head of the Ministry himself was unwilling to stir a foot outside India. It was only much later, after he became Prime Minister and could go anywhere in his *dhoti* that Shastriji began to experience the pleasures of travel abroad.

"This simplicity in dress used to communicate itself to us, who worked in close proximity to him. One felt very uncomfortable wearing a suit and tie before him. Not that he would ever say anything, unlike some others, for instance Pt. Govind Ballabh Pant. When Panditji was Chief Minister, U.P. after Independence he had been invited by the U.P. ICS-IAS Association to address their annual gathering. Panditji, his head and hand shaking owing to his ailment, looked around the room with all the officers in their best suits and colourful ties, and his first remark was: "*Desh ke sare bandhan khul gaye, kintu aap logon ke gale ka bandhan nahin khulpaya*". (The country has been freed of all its bonds, but the bond around your necks still remains.) Shastriji would never dream of making any such remark, but his love of utter simplicity spoke for itself. I still remember one particular occasion when I felt acutely embarrassed. My wife, Aruna, who until that time had not given up her hopes of making a colourful personality out of so colourless a person as myself, thought that what I lacked in

internal sparkle could be made up by external colouring. Amongst some clothes she had got prepared for me was a very bright blue dressing gown with some striking motif on it, which may have resembled flowers or even stars. So eye-catching was it that I was careful never to wear it in Shastriji's presence. But once when on tour with him, I was woken up around midnight by the Minister's PA who said that the Minister was working in the next room and wanted me in connection with a certain file. I was wearing a *pajama* suit, and it would have taken too much time to get dressed all over again; so rather reluctantly I put on my bright blue dressing gown, flowers and all, and went into his room. He was looking towards the door, and at the sight of the apparition which entered, he gave a start as if something had struck him between the eyes. Yet, thereafter, he said not a word: but whenever he looked at me, a faint smile kept playing on his lips, and I could hardly have felt more embarrassed had I gone there in the nude.

"Another of his lovable characteristics was his courtesy and consideration for others. This is something that knew no bounds, and the greatest as well as the humblest felt completely at home with him. One had only to meet him to succumb to his charm.

"I recall my own first meeting with him on the 11th January 1959, when he was the Minister in charge of the then giant Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and I had come to take over as his Private Secretary. I hardly knew him at all, because the only occasion I had come into contact with him was when I was District Magistrate, Etawah in U.P. in 1955-56, and he had come on a brief one-day unofficial visit as Railway Minister. I had just received him at the Railway Station in the morning and seen him off at night. And now, at the instance of the then Chief Secretary, U.P., Shri Govind Narain, I was coming to work in such close proximity to him. Shri Govind Narain as Home Secretary, U.P. had worked closely with Shastriji when he was the Police Minister, and at the latter's request to send him an officer in whom he could have the utmost confidence, he (Shri Govind Narain) overcame my reluctance and persuaded me to go. Shastriji was already one of the big names in the Congress and the Government and I could not help feeling a little nervous and wondering how I should

conduct myself, and how I should thank him for reposing so much confidence in me, and so on. But the moment I entered his spacious room in Udyog Bhavan, the Minister rose from his seat, walked round the table and came up to me, and shook hands warmly. Before I could get in a word to thank him, he thanked me for having agreed to work with him. I was left dumbfounded at the transparent modesty and innate courtesy of so big a man.

“That this was not a one-time show, but was something deeply inherent in his character and personality, I saw for myself times without number during the seven years that I worked with him. In all that period I can scarcely recall an abrupt or peremptory order from him like “Do this” or “Don’t do that”. It was generally in a question form, or a gentle hint upon which you had to act. For instance, when going on tour he used to say something like: “I am going next week to Calcutta, would you like to come along?” Now the relationship of the Minister and his Special Assistant is like the relationship of Mary and her little lamb: “Everywhere that Mary went the lamb was sure to go”. So there was never any question of liking or disliking; it was just the Minister’s gentle way of putting it. But lest there be any misunderstanding that this was an indication of softness on his part, I shall recount later how this gentle phrase was more in the nature of a commandment written on stone.

“Likewise, whenever he had to call me to his residence late at night or very early in the morning, the phraseology used to be something like this: if it is not too much trouble, could you come over at 6 a.m. or “If it is not inconvenient, could you stay on a little late and finish the draft”. Most of the time the remark was in question form, and the burden of proof was entirely on you, to say that it was no trouble at all, or that there was no question of any inconvenience. Once, when I had worked on an important draft speech at his residence till about 2 a.m., I completed it and laid it on his table, and coming home I told my wife that the meeting in Vigyan Bhavan is only at 10 a.m. So please do not wake me before 9 a.m. But the next morning she shook me awake at 6 a.m. and when I protested, she whispered: “What am I to do? The Minister is sitting just outside in the verandah”. This was one

of those small D-II Meena Bagh flats where the bedroom door opened out into the small front verandah. I jumped out of bed and rushed out—albeit this time without my blue-flowered dressing gown—to see the Minister sitting patiently in the verandah. On seeing me, he remarked: “I am sorry to disturb you again so early in the morning when you were sitting up till so late last night. But there are one or two important points that I wanted to clarify. Since it would have been too much trouble for you to come again so early, I have come over myself.” What could one say to a man like that?

“When he was Home Minister he used to sit at his semicircular table in South Block, where there was room at the table for only one chair—his own. I used to stand alongside and help him with the files. Generally, this used to be quite late at night, after 10 p.m. or so. After sometime he used to say: “You also sit down”. Where was I to squeeze in a chair for myself at that semicircular table? So I would say: I have been sitting all day and am tired of sitting. I would like to stand for a while”. He would resume his perusal of the files, and then suddenly he would push back his chair and say: “I am also tired of sitting. Let me also stand for a while”. And so with both of us standing at the Home Minister’s table, we would continue looking through the files.

“This same extraordinary courtesy and consideration was displayed when we went on tour. On reaching the Raj Bhavan concerned I would go to his room to see whether everything was as he would like it. And then to my amazement I would find that he had gone to my room to have a look at it. He would tell the Raj Bhavan staff. “Please do not mistake him for a PA. He is a senior IAS Officer of U.P. who has done me a favour by coming to work with me” (*Mere’ yahan aakar mujh par inayat ki hai*). The richness of the Urdu word can scarcely be matched in English. He used to keep telling his PAs: “I am a Minister and there are so many people to look after me. You should take care of the SA. “*Voh bahut sankochi jeev hain, muh se kuch bolle nahin par mahsoos bahut karte hain*” (he is a somewhat shy and reticent being who does not speak out but feels things deeply)—which is perhaps correct. Thus, even on these tours I would sometimes ask myself

in bewilderment whether I was supposed to look after him or he was supposed to look after me.

“Another instance of his extreme consideration is that which he extended to my wife Aruna. In 1960 she and I had gone on a pilgrimage to Gangotri, which included several days of trekking on foot, and I had also managed to cover the difficult and at that time dangerous route to Gomukh the real source of the Ganga, from where I had brought back a little of the sacred water. Shastriji had been camping at that time in Dehra Dun, which is my home, and had seen us off at the start of the trek. When we returned Aruna brought some of the holy Ganga water of Gangotri and Gomukh to Smt. Lalita Shastri. She also mentioned in Shastriji’s presence that now her dearest wish was to offer some of these sacred waters from the high Himalayas at the shrine of Rameshwaram washed by the southern seas. Shastriji remarked that when she had already covered the difficult part where no road or proper communication facilities existed, going to Rameshwaram, which was well connected by rail and road, should be a much simpler matter. But in view of the extreme distance involved. Aruna did not cherish much hope of being able to fulfil her ambition early. Imagine her surprise and joy, when a few months later Shastriji sent word to her that he was flying to Madurai to attend the Southern Zonal Council Meeting at Kanya Kumari and she should come along with him in the special plane to Madurai from where he would arrange for her onward journey to Rameshwaram. Hers had been a chance remark about offering the water of these Himalayan shrines in the great temple of the far South, but Shastriji had kept it in mind and at the first opportunity, he took the initiative in helping her to bring her dream to fruition.

“One of the qualities Shastriji will always be remembered for was his humility. He was in every sense of the word an Apostle of Humility, and he remained so till the end even as Prime Minister. There is a great sweetness as well as strength in humility, and Shastriji’s humility was one of the sources of his strength. He used to say that from childhood he was attracted by one of the verses of Guru Nanak Dev: *“Nanak, nanhe hi raho, jaise nanhi doob, Aur*

*rukh sookh jayenge, doob khoob ki khoob*" (Nanak, be small like the little blade of grass: When the other trees wither and die the grass will continue to remain green).

"I could cite innumerable instances of his humility, but perhaps just one or two will suffice. Once as Home Minister he was in Calcutta and had to catch the flight back to Delhi. It was the evening rush hour, and there was little hope of his completing the long drive to Dum Dum Airport in time to catch the plane to Delhi. The Commissioner of Police said that he would send a pilot car with a siren ahead, so that the Minister could have a clear road. But Shastriji immediately and firmly declined. When some one expostulated, Shastriji said that the Police car would go ahead making a loud noise with the siren, and everyone would think that some big man was driving down, and then they would feel let down to see what "thing" had come along—*Kya cheez chali aiyee hai*.

"On another occasion, as Prime Minister, he was to visit one of the States, but at the last minute he found it difficult to get away. So he rang up the Chief Minister and begged of him to excuse him (PM). But the Chief Minister was naturally cut up and he pleaded with Shastriji: "Please do not disappoint us. I have made really first class arrangements for your visit". To which Shastriji's instinctive response on the spur of the moment was: "Why do you make first class arrangements for a third class person"?

"Perhaps the most touching tribute of all to his humility was by the guard at the gate when his dead body lay in State at 10, Janpath on that cruel night of 11th January 1966. Thousands of people were filing past in silent and tearful tribute, and the guards at the gate had been instructed to see that everyone came in line in single file. But it was observed that people were breaking the line and coming out of turn, and that was causing commotion and confusion. So I went along with the PM's security-in-charge, Shri G.C. Dutt, a Joint Director of the Intelligence Bureau, to the gate, and the Security Chief pulled up the guard for allowing people to come out of turn and break the line. I still remember his reply: "Sir, what can I do? ! keep begging them with folded hands not to break the line, but they keep saying 'Who are you to stop me?"

Don't you know. I am so and so, and insist on going in then and there. The only thing I know is that he whom they have all come to see if he had come here I would have had no hesitation in stopping him and I know that he would have had no hesitation in listening to me." That tribute from the guard at the gate while Shastriji's dead body lay in State was perhaps the most touching tribute of all.

"Those of us who worked closely with him will always remember his forgiveness and magnanimity. There were times when we could not help playing truant. On tours with the Minister, one would accompany him in a car to a function. The moment he got out he would be garlanded and photographed, while we slunk out of the other door. On entering the hall there would be more clapping, more garlanding, more photographing, while the Minister was led to the seat of honour on the dais. But since the Minister was the last to arrive, by the time we entered with him every single scat would be occupied, and there was no place to seat ourselves. And while we were circling round and round, trying desperately to find some place to park ourselves, we would see businessmen jump up when they saw some local officer such as the Deputy Chief Controller, Imports and Exports, and rush to offer him their seals, at the same time shouting for paan and cigarettes and cold drinks for the Deputy Chief Sahib. After sometime, all this used to get on our nerves, and when we felt we had enough we would just take a car and vanish from the scene and proceed on some outing. Later at night we would tiptoe to his room. If he was in good humour he would smile and ask whether we had been able to see everything (*Aap log sab kuch dekh dakh aye*)—and then we knew we were forgiven, and we would launch into enthusiastic descriptions of the places we had visited, and urge him to find some time to go there himself (which seldom was the case). But at other times when he was not in so good a mood, he would lake a deep breach and say "*Accha aap log ghoom gham aye hain*" (so you have been roaming about). Not a word more would he utter in reproach or recrimination, but we used to slink away with our tails between our legs."