

## **SYED SHAHABUDDIN**



Former Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officer and parliamentarian Syed Shahabuddin who was suffering from a prolonged illness, passed away on 4th March, 2017, at NOIDA (near Delhi). Son of Shri Syed Nizamuddin, Syed Shahabuddin was born on 4th November, 1935, at Village Itki in Ranchi district of then Bihar now Jharkhand State. He was educated at Haridas Seminary, Gaya, St. Xavier's College, Ranchi, Science College, Patna and Law College, Patna. He stood first in Bihar State in Matriculation, first in the University in I.Sc and did M.Sc., B.L.

During his student days he was General Secretary, Bazme-Sukhan, Science College Patna, 1953-54, Vice-President Science College Debating Society, Patna, 1954-55. Convener, Patna University Students Action Committee, August 1955, General Secretary, Bihar State Students Council of Action, December, 1955. Member, Patna University Students Union Steering Committee, represented Patna University in English and Urdu Debates. He was Secretary, Patna University Students Relief Committee, Literary Society, United Nations Students Association, 1955-56, Secretary, World University, Service National Committee, 1955-56.

Long time ago when he was asked in an interview about his political ideology he said, 'I was known to be a Leftist in my views and still am a socialist by conviction'. On being asked about his selection in Indian Foreign Service and controversy aroused being a Left-winger Syed Shahabuddin explained how then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's intervention made him diplomat.

"It is true that there was a police report against me and that is why my letter of appointment to the IFS was delayed. Actually there were ten vacant spots in the Foreign Service in 1958, nine were filled. Muchkund Dubey, who was my contemporary in the University, was a year senior to me in the Service since he became eligible for taking the exam a year before me, wrote to me, while I was teaching at Patna University, to tell me that nine probationers of 1958 batch had joined the training school and that, according to his information, one spot was being kept vacant for me. He asked me to find out what had gone wrong. The top man in Bihar police intelligence at that time was Mr S.P. Verma whom I knew because of my involvement in the Patna student Firing Disturbance in 1955.

So I requested him for an urgent meeting. I asked him what he had written against me. He laughed and said he couldn't disclose that. But he assured me that the police report wouldn't finally go against me.

In India, there are many ways of finding out what a police report says and I managed to get hold of its text. What it said was that Shahabuddin had led the student agitation (in 1955), which was true but then added a blatant lie that I was a member of the Communist Party, which I was not. But then the intelligence report went on to say that for the past one year I had been teaching in the university and had not come to any adverse notice. I suppose that was the saving grace.

I had seen Jawaharlal Nehru during the disturbances, so I immediately wrote to him that I was a socialist by conviction but I had never been a member of any political party. I don't know what action Nehru took or if he took any action at all but within a week or so I happened to meet General Shahnawaz Khan who was very fond of me, as he used to visit the university very often to preside over debates and distribute prizes. He advised me to go and see Mr Humayun Kabir. Humayun Kabir asked me to state my case in black and white. I said that all I wanted was an opportunity to see Mr Nehru because he would recognize me.

I got a call a day later saying that the file had already reached Nehru's table and I should see Mr Chakravarty, then Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, later the Governor of Haryana. So the next day I went to see him. 'The Prime Minister has ordered your appointment,' he said, 'but he has asked me to give you a talk on the responsibilities of the Civil Service.' He then asked me a few questions about what had happened in 1955 and what I had told the Justice Das Commission of Inquiry. I told him that in protest against police firing on the students, I had organized a procession of 20,000 students from the university area to the airport to greet Jawaharlal Nehru with black flags. It was raining. So along with a few others, we saw Pandit Nehru at the Raj Bhawan. I still recall his words, '*Goli chalna buri bat hai par jab goli chalti hai to kisi na kisi ko lag jati hai.*' He was referring to the killing of Panday, a student. Later that evening, some banners in Gandhi Maidan, planted by a Congress leader, obstructed Nehru. He lost his temper and threatened the students with punishment if they were found to be in the wrong. A few days after, I saw Mr Chakravarty, and got my letter of appointment. I joined the IAS Training School at the Metcalf House in the Civil Lines, Delhi in May 1958, about a month later than my batch mates.

So while it is true that there was a police report against me, which delayed my appointment, it's also correct that Nehru overruled it. Nehru had written in his own hand on my file "I have known Shahabuddin during the Patna disturbances. His participation in the disturbances was not politically motivated. It was an expression of his youthful exuberance." So Nehru had given me a clean chit.

Subsequently, nine months later, when I was about to embark on my first posting abroad, as a probationer back in Delhi after my district training, I was deputed to serve as Liaison Officer for the UN Secretary General, Mr Dag Hammarskjöld, on his visit. I accompanied him everywhere including the official dinner at the PM's House at Teen Murti, which is now Nehru Museum and Library. After the dinner when the guests were sipping coffee on the open terrace, I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around to face Nehru who said affectionately, 'So you are that naughty boy from Bihar'. In my youth I had no formal connection with any political party, but I was certainly a Leftist and socialist in my views. This explains why in my 15 years in Parliament, almost never I took a line different from the Left parties on the floor of the House. The same is true of my entire public life."

Before joining Foreign Service Syed Shahabuddin was Lecturer in Physics, at Patna University, 1956-58 and while he was in Indian Foreign Service, 1958-78, he served in Indian Missions in New York, Rangoon and Jeddah, as Charge d' affaires in Caracas, Venezuela, 1969-72, and as Ambassador of India to Algeria and concurrently to Mauritania, 1973-75. He was Deputy Secretary, 1966-69 and Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs in-charge of S.E. Asia, 1975-78, but opted for pre-mature voluntary retirement from the Indian Foreign Service in November, 1978.

He was Member, Aligarh Muslim University Court, 1981, Vice-Chairman, Haj Committee, Bombay, 1981-84, Vice-President/Acting President, All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat, 1981-90, Convener Babri Masjid Movement Coordination Committee, 1986 onwards. Member, Working Committee; All India Personal Law Board, 1980 onwards and invited to deliver Inaugural Address by East-West University, Chicago in November, 1980 and invited to address University of Oxford on Power Politics, in July, 1982 and Islamic Medical Association of the USA.

Syed Shahabuddin was Member of Rajya Sabha, 25-7-1979 to 9-4-1984 and elected to eight and tenth Lok Sabha in 1985 to 1989 and 1991 to 1996 respectively from Kishanganj in Bihar. He was General Secretary, Janata Party 1980 to 1986. He contributed many articles in the National Press and was founder Editor, 'Muslim India' monthly since 1983. Syed Shahabuddin was a Teacher, Diplomat, Advocate, Political Worker and Journalist. He married on 30th January, 1958 to Smt. Shaher Bano and had one son and five daughters. RIP! Shabuddin Sahib.

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