

The life and times of another Asoka (A brief biography of Asoka Mehta)

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A leaf in the storm

The Indian socialist movement that began with the formation of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in 1934 has thrown up many a great leader. Asoka Mehta was one of them. If there is a democratic socialist movement in India today, it is largely due to him. He was a democratic socialist *ab initio* and *par excellence*. He was an intellectual, an able organiser, an ideologue, an able parliamentarian and a trade unionist all rolled into one. *A politician among intellectuals and an intellectual among politicians, equally at home in academic and professional groups* is how Prof. Verinder Grover describes him. One who reads his writings would be tempted to say that he was also a poet who wrote in prose.

Born on 24th October 1911 in Bhavnagar of Sourashtra, Asoka inherited an educated home. His grand father was the Chief Engineer of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and his father, Ranjitram was an educationist. During his student days he came under the influence of Yusuf Meherally, who was then the leader of the socialists in Bombay. Asoka graduated from Wilson College, Mumbai, in 1931 and briefly taught in the University School of Economics. It was a good fortune of the socialist movement that Asoka Mehta, responding to the call of Mahatma Gandhi, left his job and plunged into the Civil Disobedience movement of 1932, was arrested and lodged in the Nasik Jail for two and a half years.

Those were the days of the ferment of freedom struggle. About his involvement in the freedom movement Jayaprakash Narayan says "Gandhiji's .. movement swept over the land as a strangely uplifting hurricane. I too, was one of the thousands of young men of those days, who, like the leaves in the storm, were swept away and momentarily lifted up the skies. That brief experience of soaring up with the winds of a great idea left imprints on the inner being that time and much familiarity with ugliness of reality have not removed. It was then that freedom became one of the beacon lights of my life, and it has remained so ever since." Asoka was another leaf like JP.

It was in this Nasik jail that Asoka met JP, Minoo Masani, Nanasaheb Goray, M.L.Dantwala and others and planned the launching of a socialist party within the Indian National Congress. After the release of these leaders from jail, when the Congress Socialist Party was formed in 1934, Asoka naturally became one of the founder members.

Perhaps Asoka had read Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Robert Owen, Saint Simon and many other socialist writers and thinkers when he was a student. His very first booklet entitled *Gandhism and Socialism* written in 1934, when Asoka was hardly 24 years old, bears the stamp of his erudition. That may be one of the reasons why Asoka, inspite of the company of Marxist stalwarts like JP in the Nasik Jail, remained a democratic socialist.

The mouthpiece of the party '*Congress Socialist*' started publication from 30th December 1934 under Lohia's editorship. Asoka's first article "The two reactions: Fight or Grasp" appeared in it on 13th Jan 1935, "The inevitable Moscow Road" on 27th Jan 1935 and 'The victory of Socialism over romanticism' on 3rd Feb 1935. He was already quoting from G.D.H.Cole, Lewis Mumford, Lipson, Hoover Committee report on the Recent economic changes in USA. Bertrand Russel and Shaw.

The weekly ceased publication from 10th March 1935. It was revived from 21st December 1935 from Bombay under Asoka's editorship. Under Asoka's editorship the weekly started getting

advertisements and became financially quite sound. It also started publishing articles by socialists from abroad like the Italian socialist Pietro Nenni, Burmese socialist Than Tun, the French intellectual Romain Rolland, the British socialist Maurice Dobb and George Orwell and many others. In addition the weekly started publishing the poems by Harindranarh Chattopadhyaya and others.

Asoka was a liberal editor. In the 10 September 1938 issue of the Congress Socialist, about his editorship Lohia wrote "Congress Socialist is among the few journals in the world whose editor has published articles, over and over again, with which he was in sharp disagreement. A number of articles in defense of the trials (Stalinist trials in Russia) have appeared in the journal though this fact is not at all necessary to prove the bona fides".

Asoka was inducted in the National Executive of the CSP in the Lahore conference held on 12th and 13th of April 1938. Asoka was inducted in the National Executive of the CSP in the Lahore conference held on 12th and 13th of April 1938. He edited the weekly till 1939.

Being a democratic socialist, Asoka naturally was opposed to the Communists. The Communist International had branded the social democratic parties of Europe as parties of the Social Fascists. Toeing the said line the Indian communists branded the Indian National Congress as the movement of the national bourgeoisie and condemned the CSP as a party of the social fascists. That is the reason why the CSP had decided not to admit the communists in the party. However, in 1934, the British Government banned the Communist Party of India whereupon the communists started infiltrating in the CSP. Around the same time, the Communist International changed its tactics and called for forming united fronts with the social democrats. JP who was a Marxist, wanting to have unity of the progressive forces, advocated admission of the communists in the CSP. Another Marxist leader of the party, Acharya Narendra Deva opposed the move. However, the move was endorsed by the National Executive of the party. As a result many communists like E.M.S.Nambudiripad, A.K.Gopalan, Sajjad Zahir, P.Sundarayya, P.Jivananda etc., were admitted in the CSP and were given important positions also.

However communists believed in what Lenin had said that they should support the united fronts like the rope supports a man hanged. They hence tried to take over the CSP. A confidential circular issued by the CPI to the communists in the CSP to take over the party was exposed by Minoo Masani. Hence, Minoo Masani, Asoka Mehta, Rammanohar Lohia and Achyut Patwardhan resigned from the national executive of the party protesting the continuation of the communists in the party. It took two more years for the CSP to realise its mistake and the Party in its Ramgad conference held in 1940 decided to expel the communists from the party.

In 1941, Mahatma Gandhi announced that instead of mass satyagraha campaign he would launch satyagraha by select individuals. He nominated Vinoba as the first Satyagrahi. Asoka was one such satyagrahi and offered individual Satyagraha and was sentenced to undergo imprisonment for one and a half years. It is during this incarceration that Asoka wrote his book '*The Communal Triangle*' along with his co-prisoner Achyut Patwardhan, another senior leader of the Indian socialist movement.

It is interesting that while JP, who was later converted to Gandhi's Sarvodaya, had opposed this individual satyagraha, and Asoka Mehta, who was not attracted to Gandhism, offered individual satyagraha called by Gandhi. Asoka also participated in the 1942 Quit India movement and was again incarcerated for three years.

In 1947 the Indian National Congress adopted a rule that its members cannot be members of any other political party. Socialists, who had formed the CSP within the Congress, were presented with the choice of either dissolving the CSP and remaining in the Congress or leaving the Congress and retaining the CSP. While Acharya Narendra Deva and Lohia and some others were in favour of remaining in the Congress, Asoka favoured leaving the Congress and forming a separate Socialist Party (SP). The Party met in conference from 28th February to 1st March 1947 at Kanpur and took two historical decisions. The Party decided to drop the word 'Congress' from its name thereby leaving the Congress and becoming an independent party and it declared that socialism was not possible without democracy thereby jettisoning Marxism and accepting democratic socialism as its creed. Asoka had won on both counts.

Ascendant Asoka

Asoka was an intellectual and an incisive writer. One of his early pamphlets was '*Who Owns India*', which he started writing before independence and completed in 1950. In the pamphlet he demonstrated that it is not the ownership that mattered but the control. He said that "Indian capitalism without having materially expanded production or improved the standard of life of the people, has reached the same degree of concentration as is seen in say, Canada. ..India on a lower level of economic development has reached the same high degree of concentration. ..The crux of an economy, it is now realised, resides in control rather than ownership. Whatever be the situation as regards ownership of industrial enterprise, control is securely gathered in a few hands". The pamphlet made such an impression that within an year of its publication, The New Internationalist, a journal published in the United States, reprinted it with a commendation.

About the book he later wrote "I have tried there to describe the details of concentration of capital and concentration of control. These are two different things, because with the development of Joint Stock Company, it is possible to have control without ownership. Capitalism has discovered a method whereby control has been divorced from ownership. You may own a share, but you don't control the factory. You may control a mill but you need not own all the shares. The divorce between control and ownership is, you might say, one of the magical achievements of capitalism. And, as a matter of fact, it was the development of the joint stock companies that led Bernstein and others to indulge in their revisionist dreams..... Such a divorce is the essence of modern capitalism and it also becomes the *raison d' etre* of socialism."

When the Socialist Party accepted democratic socialism as its creed, many of the party cadre, who were used to Marxism, started asking what democratic socialism is. It was once again for Asoka Mehta, the democratic socialist of the party, to explain the ideology. He gave a series of lectures on democratic socialism which were later published as a book entitled **Democratic Socialism**, the first in the trilogy on socialism that he wrote. In this book of about 180 pages which is a standing proof of Asoka's erudition, Asoka refers to the ideas of 112 thinkers and refers to 70 books. About the book, JP wrote "...the democratic socialist movement not only in India, but also abroad, would be indebted to Asoka Mehta for these lectures into which he has packed so much fundamental thinking seasoned with such conspicuous scholarship. As I read through these lectures I wondered how Asoka Mehta, so busy as a leader and organiser, could find the time for such wide reading and quiet thinking." True to JPs words, the book did evoke much interest in the socialist circles all over the world. Asoka himself acknowledged it when he wrote in the preface to the third edition "The book ... has evoked wide interest in many countries of the world. Not only in the Socialist circles but among nationalist leaders in various countries, e.g., Egypt, Iraq, the book has received considerable attention".

Asoka then felt that *“For countries of Asia there is both need and opportunity to think afresh and articulate our socialist future in terms of a comprehensive understanding of socialism and the specific conditions of our countries. While socialism has to be a universal philosophy, its reinterpretation in the light of Asian conditions entitles us to speak in a general way of Asian Socialism”*. And hence he rounded off his study of socialism by writing a sequel to the book Democratic Socialism, entitled ***Studies in Asian Socialism***, the second of the socialist trilogy that he wrote, wherein he examined the contours of Socialism as applicable to Asian conditions. The two books together give a comprehensive picture of Democratic Socialism.

Socialists had, along with other Congressmen, nurtured the All India Trade Union Congress. After leaving the Congress, Asoka felt the need to establish a trade union centre that was committed to the ideology of democratic socialism but was not controlled by any political party including the SP. He along with stalwarts like Basawan Sinha, R.S.Ruikar, Maniben Kara, Shibnath Banerjee, V.S.Mathur etc., founded the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) at Howrah, Calcutta, on 24th December 1948. R.S.Ruikar was elected the President and Asoka, the General Secretary of HMS. Later Asoka led the strike of 2,20,000 Textile Workers in Mumbai for two months.

SP held its eighth conference at Madras from 8th to 12th July 1950 and Asoka presided over the same and delivered the Presidential address. Even while criticizing the content of the address, Acharya J.B.Kripalani, a Congress leader then, said, *“...the style superbly ornate is almost Tagorean in its conceits. Nothing of this nature has been heard for many years from the political platform in India or elsewhere”*. Till now the Party had only a General Secretary and no Chairman. The Madras convention elected Acharya Narendra Deva as the Chairman and Asoka was elected the General Secretary of the Party.

His concern for the farmers made him lead the farmers of Pardi in Gujarat in their agitation. The agitation was unique in the sense that while other agitations of farmers were for ameliorating their woes and even land grab movements were directed against the land owned by the Government, this agitation was aimed at structural changes in the pattern of land holdings by occupying the land owned by a Zamindar. On 1st September 1953 he led 1054 members of the Pardi Kisan Panchayat, of whom 97 were women in ploughing and digging in the 1000 acres of land owned by the local Zamindar of Piari village near Pardi and on a complaint by the Zamindar, Asoka, Amul Desai, and Bombay Municipal Corporator Vasanti Shroff and many other socialists were taken into custody by the police. Later Asoka was sentenced to undergo imprisonment for one year and lodged in Yerwada Jail, from where he wrote an acknowledgement for his book Democratic Socialism. He later wrote his book *Indian Peasants*.

When the General Elections were announced for the first time in independent India, Asoka was the General Secretary of the SP. He analysed the trends in public opinion as revealed by the bye-elections held before the General Elections, in an article which he called *“Straws in the Wind”*, which showed in which direction the wind of public opinion was blowing. Asoka very cautiously analysed the results and came to the conclusion that the SP was the second biggest and the principal opposition party in India, that it enjoyed more support than all other opposition parties put together, that it was the only organized nation-wide alternative to the Congress Party. He also concluded that the adult franchise favours the SP, but if only other opposition parties could leave 2000 seats to the SP and contest in the remaining constituencies, the Congress was likely to be defeated. While the SP heeded his advice, other opposition parties would not heed his analysis.

Asoka wrote to the party activists that if the Party worked as a team, it could emerge as an alternative to the Congress. He said that unless the party contested a large number of seats, it cannot impress the electorate that it wants to emerge as an alternative to the Congress. He also said that the single member constituencies buttressed the emergence of a two party system and recapitulated how in England in the 1945 elections some parties like the Commonwealth Party were defeated and later merged into the Labour Party and thereby strengthening the two party system. The Party also tried to have electoral alliance with the Scheduled Castes Federation led by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, but then it could not be done in time for the elections. Asoka Mehta put his heart and soul in the campaign. As a result of his efforts, the Party contested 254 out of 489 Lok Sabha seats i.e., 52 % of seats and 1799 out of 3283 seats in the legislative assemblies of various states i.e., 55 % of the seats.

Most of the leaders of the Party like Acharya Narendra Deva, JP. Lohia and others decided not to contest in the elections but help the party win more seats. But the essence of Democratic Socialism is to contest in the elections, win a majority, form a government and use the State power to bring in the socialist transformation of the society. Hence, Asoka, who already had a stint as a member of the Bombay Municipal Corporation, and who was a democratic socialist, contested from Bombay North and polled 1,39,741 votes, i.e., 16,165 votes more than Dr. B.R.Ambedkar of the Scheduled Castes Federation and 42,986 more votes than Shripad Amrit Dange of the Communist Party of India, but lost by a narrow margin of 9,397 votes i.e., only 1.33 % of votes.

While Asoka missed victory narrowly, the SP missed it widely. The party's performance was dismal. It could secure only 12 seats in the Lok Sabha though it got 10.59 % of the votes polled whereas the Congress contested 479 seats and secured 364 seats and polled 44.99 % of the votes. In the elections to the State Assemblies, the party could secure only 122 seats and polled only 9.7 % of the votes polled. Obviously the voters did not retain the pattern of voting which they had established in the bye-elections prior to the general elections.

This defeat of the Party and its failure to emerge as an alternative to the Congress set in motion the process of rethinking on the part of the party about its future. Talks were held with the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party of Acharya J.B.Kripalani with a view to merge the two parties and build a larger opposition party. While Acharya Narendra Deva was against the merger of the two parties, JP, Asoka Mehta and Lohia were in favour. Ultimately the two parties merged on 25-27 September 1952 at Bombay to form the Praja Socialist Party. (PSP). Later on the Forward Block of Subhash Chandra Bose also merged with the PSP. Acharya Kripalani was named the Chairman and Asoka Mehta, the General Secretary of the new party.

Thereafter, Asoka contested in a bye-election from Bhandara in Madhya Pradesh, a double member constituency, as a candidate of the PSP while Dr. B.R.Ambedkar contested as a candidate of the Schedule Castes Federation. While Asoka Mehta polled 1,49,636 votes and got elected and entered the first Lok Sabha, once again Dr. B.R.Ambedkar polled 1,32,483 votes and lost.

Though the Socialists had parted with the Congress, they had said in the Nasik conference held from 19th to 21st March 1948 that the SP hoped that because of the common political ideals, commitments and experiences, the Congress will partner with the SP and will remain a progressive organisation. So when Jawaharlal Nehru, who was the Prime Minister and had distinctly socialist views, became the President of the Congress also in 1951, Asoka thought that the Congress and the PSP could cooperate in building a socialist India. He wrote an article in

Janata, the weekly mouthpiece of the PSP, in which he spoke of the political compulsions of a backward economy and the need to search for areas of agreement with the ruling party.

The Congress Controversy

In the meanwhile, when JP met Nehru during the first week of February 1953, Nehru suggested that the Congress and the PSP should cooperate with each other at the party and the government levels. After discussion with other party leaders JP suggested a 14 point programme to Nehru which would form the basis of co-operation. However, Nehru did not want to be bound by such definite programmes and was more particular about identity of views. Hence the talks of co-operation failed.

However, the Nehru-JP talks generated so much controversy in the Party that, a special convention of the Party had to be convened at Betul, in Madhya Pradesh, from 14th to 18th of June 1953. Asoka Mehta as the General Secretary of the Party presented a report to the convention, in which he again spoke of the political compulsions of the backward economy and the need for searching areas of agreement. Asoka wanted only what Alexander Hopkins McDonald calls "discriminating cooperation" with the Congress. But the Nehru-JP talks coupled with Asoka's theses created a lot of controversy in the conference between those who wanted to cooperate with the Congress and those who wanted to oppose the Congress.

In view of the controversy Asoka Mehta resigned as the General Secretary of the Party. Even while resigning he said that his resignation does not mean that he will not work for the party. Nanasahab Goray was appointed General Secretary in his place. In the Panchamadi Conference of the PSP, when Lohia became the General Secretary, Asoka's commitment to the party made him accept the position of a Joint Secretary.

However, when elections were held to the then Travancore-Cochin assembly in 1954, the PSP entered into electoral adjustments with the Communists with a view to defeat the Congress. However, when no party could secure a clear majority in the assembly, Madhu Limaye, who was one of the Joint Secretaries of the Party, wrote to the communists, that either the communists should form a minority government or the socialists and the other should support the government from outside. The communists did not respond. Then the Congress came forward to support a minority PSP government. Thus the first ever PSP government came into existence with Pattom Thanu Pillai as the Chief Minister.

This looked like a triumph of Asoka's views of co-operation with the Congress. Lohia, who had by then become very anti-Nehru and anti-Congress, perhaps felt that if the PSP government continues, it would widen the areas of agreement between the Congress and the PSP. So when the police opened fire on a restive crowd in Travancore-Cochin and four people died, Lohia sent a telegram to the Chief Minister asking him to resign. Asoka resented this unilateral act of Lohia. He said that only the National Executive Committee of the party could seek the Chief Minister's resignation. A party convention was called in Nagpur to decide the issue. Party rejected Lohia's stand by a majority and endorsed Asoka's stand.

Very soon another controversy arose in the Party. In its Avadi session, the Congress resolved to advance towards a socialistic pattern of society through planning aimed at social ownership of the basic means of production and equitable distribution of national wealth. Asoka wrote an article in the party mouthpiece Janata that the Avadi resolution had expanded the area of agreement between the Congress and the PSP. However Madhu Limaye issued a press note that the Avadi Resolution was a fraud on the people of the country. This led to a controversy which

ultimately led to the suspension of Madhu Limaye from the Party. When Lohia incited the party units to invite Madhu Limaye to speak in party functions despite his suspension, Party had to suspend Lohia also.

After Lohia launched his own Socialist Party at Hyderabad, the PSP met at Gaya from 26th to 30th of December 1955. Acharya Narendra Deva who was the Chairman could not attend the conference as he was not well. However he had written a draft of the policy statement of the Party which was read out in the conference. The statement admitted that armed insurrection is neither possible nor advisable and hence the socialists should use democratic and peaceful means to usher in socialism. In an obvious reference to Asoka's stand, the statement further said that the Party will not let itself to be deluded by the calls for national unity and will not waste its time in useless talks of need for cooperation. Though the reiteration of the rejection of Marxist methods and acceptance of democratic socialism was a triumph for Asoka's views, he and Purushottam Trikamdas opposed the draft for its rejection of Asoka's theses of search for areas of agreement.

The conference decided to bar electoral adjustments with the Congress, the Communist and the communalist parties. However, an amendment was moved to delete the reference to the communist and communalist parties restricting the bar only to the Congress. It was defeated by 189 votes in favour and 260 votes against it. Though the defeat of the amendment was a triumph for Asoka, the policy on adjustments itself was against his views. Democrat that Asoka was, he accepted the decision gracefully.

However, in 1956 JP issued a statement calling for the opposition parties to have electoral adjustments between themselves with a view to reduce the majority of the Congress. He opined that though he believed in party-less democracy he wanted parliamentary democracy to survive because in its absence one party rule will become inevitable. However he explained that he wanted only electoral adjustments and not alliances. Asoka reacted by writing an article which was published in The Hindu of 26th September 1956. He argued that though the recipe may help the opposition parties to increase their strength in the Parliament, it may not benefit the PSP.

In the second general elections held in 1957, Asoka contested once again from Bhandara, which was a double member constituency, but this time he lost. PSP polled 1,05,613 (Asoka) and 1,04,954 (Sakhare) votes as against the Congress's 2,27,373 and 1,98,202 votes. But he once again bounced back in a bye election held on 12th December 1957 from Muzaffarpur, in Bihar, defeating a communist rival and became a member of the second Lok Sabha. He polled 50,783 votes as against 36,341 votes polled by the communists.

He contested the third general elections held in 1962 from Deoria in Uttar Pradesh but lost. He polled 60,954 votes as against the successful Congress candidate's 80,195 votes.

Asoka chooses the Congress

Failure of the socialists to emerge as a viable alternative to the Congress, or at least as an effective opposition party, disheartened Asoka. He came to the conclusion that the PSP cannot become an effective opposition party. He expressed his views in a meeting of the leaders of the PSP held in Patna in April 1962. Asoka said that if the socialists had to play an effective role in Indian politics, they had only two alternatives: one, that they should join Congress and strengthen the socialist tendencies developing in that Party or two, they should form a united front of all opposition parties in order to defeat the Congress. It was quite natural for Asoka to choose the first alternative because he was a democratic socialist and the Congress Party was at

least speaking about socialism, but not the second alternative because according to him, communists did not believe in democracy and the communalists, who were becoming strong, did not believe in either democracy or socialism. While Asoka took the first alternative, Lohia and his party took the second alternative in their Calcutta conference held in 1963 and tried to bring together all opposition parties to defeat the Congress. But the PSP conference held at Bhopal between 8th and 10th of June 1963, over which Asoka himself presided, rejected his theses. The Party still elected him the Chairman of the Party.

At one time Nehru had asked Achyut Patwardhan to be a member of the Indian delegation to the General Assembly of the United Nations. However, Achyut had declined the offer. Thereafter, Nehru had chosen Purushottam Trikamdas as a member, and he had accepted the offer and had represented India in the United Nation's General Assembly. Nehru now chose Asoka Mehta as the Deputy Leader of the Indian delegation to the United Nation's General Assembly which held its session in September – December 1963. Asoka accepted the assignment. Asoka addressed the General Assembly on 14th October 1963 on 'The Challenge of the Development Decade' in which he spoke of the '*stubborn differences between the affluent North and the poverty-ridden South*'. In 1977, Willy Brandt, the former Chancellor of West Germany was appointed as the chairman of the Independent Commission for International Developmental Issues which produced a Report known as "North South Dialogue" which spoke of the need to reduce the differences between the rich north and poor south.

Planning was Asoka's passion. According to Asoka, the concept of centrally planned economy, of a planning commission taking over the functions of the market, is one of the concrete contributions made by socialist thinkers to economic science and that the planned economy, was the solution evolved by socialists for achieving rapid economic development. Asoka was invited to discuss the First Five Year Plan with the Planning Commission. About his discussions Asoka writes "*The First Plan was not a well thought out plan. We were new to the technique of planning, statistical material was limited. I remember that when I was called to discuss the draft plan with the Planning Commission, and I had the good fortune to do that for two whole days. I had drawn the attention of the Commission to the absence of employment aspect in the Plan. Hastily a chapter was put together and it was tagged on to the Plan at the end. What should have been integral was made an adjunct and no one felt the difference.*" In 1966, he was invited by the University of Puerto Rico to speak on *Fifty Years of Social Change*. In the same year he was invited by the University of Hawaii to speak on *Ideological and Political framework of India*. Both the Universities published his speeches.

On 3rd December 1963 Nehru appointed Asoka as the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission. Asoka accepted the position. This was viewed as his attempt to force the Party on the path of cooperation with the Congress. When the National Executive of the PSP debated whether Asoka's acceptance of the Deputy Chairmanship was against the policies of the party, Nath Pai, Farid Ansari, Ishwarlal Desai and Mulka Govinda Reddy supported Asoka's stand. When it was proposed at the National Executive to seek Asoka's resignation from the Party, Nath Pai, Farid Ansari, Ishwarlal Desai and Genda Singh opposed the move while Ganga Sharan Sinha, Nanasaheb Goray, Surendranath Dwivedi, H.V.Kamath, Niranjan Singh and Sanat Mehta chose to be neutral. In order to avoid the controversy, S.M.Joshi, requested Asoka not to renew his membership of the Party. Asoka did not oblige and the Party took the historical decision of suspending its Chairman from the membership of the Party.

Thereafter, Asoka joined the Congress Party with his followers including, Triloki Singh, Genda Singh, Narayan Dutt Tiwari, Vasant Sathe, Chandra Shekhar and M.S.Gurupadaswamy etc. He was appointed Union Minister of Planning in January, 1966, even though he was not a Member

of Parliament, and took over additional portfolio of the Department of Social Welfare in February, 1966. He was elected to the Rajya Sabha from Maharashtra as a Congress Candidate and was a member of the Rajya Sabha from 3rd April 1966 to 26th February 1967. In the general elections held in 1967 he again won from Bhandara in Maharashtra by polling 1,52,206 votes, i.e., 44.41 % of votes polled by defeating his nearest rival of the Republican Party of India and this was his last stint in the Parliament.

He was once again appointed as a Cabinet Minister in the Union Government by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. However, his stint as a Minister was also to end soon. On 21st August 1968 Soviet tanks rolled into Prague the capital of Czechoslovakia. USSR occupied the country. Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev enunciated his doctrine of limited sovereignty of Socialist States and said that intervention in Czechoslovakia was vital to the preservation of the Soviet Socialist system and that he would intervene in any state that sought to replace Communism with Capitalism.

Asoka had always been a staunch anti-communist. He had once earlier resigned from the National Executive of the CSP in protest against admission of Communists in the Party. During the Cold War years, when the USSR sponsored front organisations to promote its interests around the world, an international organisation called the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) was set up with its headquarters in Paris to counter the Communist propaganda. In India Asoka Mehta with JP, Minoo Masani and others established the Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom with the objective of defending intellectual liberty and to cultivate the spirit of free enquiry, and got it affiliated to the CCF. It was a non-political organisation consisting of scholars, writers and scientists etc.

Hence in 1968, Asoka wanted the Government and the Congress Party to condemn the occupation of Czechoslovakia. Both did not oblige him. He was now a Minister in the Union cabinet. When he had accepted the Deputy Chairmanship of the Planning Commission he had been accused of being power hungry. Asoka, spoke in favour of a resolution tabled by PSP leader in the Lok Sabha, Sri. Surendranath Dwivedi, condemning the aggression and did not hesitate to resign from the Cabinet on the issue. His resignation proved that he had a strong commitment to the democratic socialist ideology and opposition to the Communists. It proved that he was certainly not power hungry.

Asoka had said in 1951 that *“Socialists, even when in a minority, might agree to participate in a non-socialist government, nay—they might do so in their individual capacity. In France, Millerand, who was one of the leaders of the French Socialist party, in 1899 joined in that fashion the Waldeck-Rousseau Cabinet. Such step can have no sanction of the socialist movement. Participation in a non-socialist government not at the instance of the party or the movement but on one’s own would be a betrayal of socialism.”*

Was Asoka an Indian version of Millerand? Did Asoka betray socialism by joining the Congress government? Having searched and found areas of agreement with the Congress, Asoka did not believe that the Congress was a non-socialist party and hence felt that his joining the Congress Government was not a betrayal of socialism. His fight against totalitarian attempt in India during the emergency once again proved his commitment to the ideal of democratic socialism.

In defence of democracy

In 1969 Indira Gandhi split the Congress Party. Her faction came to be called Congress (R) and the other faction Congress (O). Indira Gandhi was becoming authoritarian and democracy was so dear to Asoka. How could a democratic socialist like Asoka Mehta be with an authoritarian person like Indira Gandhi? It was an irony of fate that Asoka joined the Congress (O) whose top leaders were generally perceived as conservatives, if not capitalists, and opposed Indira Gandhi who initiated some progressive measures like the nationalisation of banks and abolition of privy purses etc. Asoka contested the 1971 elections again from Bhandara as a Congress (O) candidate but polled only 16.88 % of votes polled and lost to the Indira Gandhi's Congress candidate who polled 76.58 % of votes.

Soon Indira Gandhi's authoritarian storm overwhelmed the Indian polity. Indira Gandhi became more and more authoritarian. In an editorial of Janata weekly, of 22nd July 1973 Nanasaheb Goray wrote "*The difference between a dictator of admittedly totalitarian country and the head of a democratic federal union, whose federating units have ceased to function, can be only notional. In fact when major States like Andhra Pradesh and U.P. have come under President's rule and so many other States are rapidly qualifying for it, is not Smt. Indira Gandhi already functioning like a dictator? .. one fine morning the Indian people will wake up to learn that they are under a dictatorship*". Asoka said, Mrs. Gandhi was not well disposed to the process of decentralisation, her predilection was in favour of sucking up power to the apex, both in the government and the party.

Corruption became rampant. JP responded by launching his campaign for 'Total Revolution'. Asoka and his party, the Congress (O) and the Socialists joined forces with JP. True to Nanasaheb's prophesy, on the morning of 25th June 1974 people of India woke up to learn that they were under a dictatorship. Indira Gandhi imposed emergency and jailed thousands of leaders and imposed censorship on the media. Asoka was also arrested and jailed.

Asoka took his incarceration as a blessing in disguise. In the confines of the Rohtak Jail, Asoka penned his master piece in socialist literature, the third and final of his socialist trilogy, "*Reflections on Socialist Era*". In the *apologia* to the book he wrote: "*Writing it (the book) helped to fill the empty hours with purposeful activity. I must thank the Prime Minister for inadvertently providing me with an opportunity to make a modest contribution to the prison literature of our time*".

After his release from the prison Asoka, as the President of the Congress (O) party, got busy with JP in bringing the various opposition parties together to defeat the Congress which was now the torch bearer of totalitarianism. Asoka took the second alternative that he had suggested in the Patna meeting of the PSP held in April 1962 but under so different circumstances. He was not, like Lohia, trying to bring together all opposition parties to defeat the Congress Party, but was trying to bring together all political forces to defeat the totalitarian threat to the Indian polity and to restore democracy. When Mrs. Indira Gandhi announced elections to the Lok Sabha, Janata Party was formed and romped home with victory in the elections and the first ever non-Congress Government came into existence. However, it is a pity that Asoka, who had contested in all the general elections held till then, did not contest the elections in 1977.

However, it was most appropriate that in December 1977, the Janata Government appointed him as the Chairman of a committee to recommend rejuvenation of the Panchayat Raj institutions in the country. The Committee submitted its report in August 1978 and made 132 recommendations to revive and strengthen the Panchayat Raj System. It recommended among

other things, a two tier system with Mandal Panchayats at the bottom acting as *growth centres*, and all tiers with powers of taxation and participation of political parties. The West Bengal and the Karnataka Governments enacted new Panchayat Raj Acts implementing the recommendations. However, it is a pity that the subsequent Congress government once again opted for a three tier system.

Along with Jayaprakash Narayan, he led the Indian delegation to the first Asian Socialist Conference held at Rangoon between 6th and 15th of January 1953 and the second conference held in Mumbai in November 1956. He also addressed the Council Meeting of the Socialist International held at Haifa, Israel on 'The tasks of Social Democracy in Asia'.

The ideology of Asoka

Asoka's first tryst with ideology was with Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian Freedom Movement. Freedom struggle filled the air then. An young man of 21, Asoka plunged in the Civil Disobedience Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. **Freedom** hence was the first beacon light that beckoned an young Asoka. And it remained a beacon light that guided him in his political life throughout.

Though Asoka participated in the movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi and courted arrest and was jailed, unlike all other socialists of the time, he was a sympathetic critic of Gandhi's ideas. His very first publication, which was as early as in 1934, was, *Gandhism and Socialism* in which he characterised Gandhism as a reactionary strain of romanticism. However, after a better understanding of Gandhi, Asoka had the intellectual honesty to admit that such characterisation was a mistake. He later characterised Gandhism as conservative classicism. He admits that it took twenty years for him to unlearn his mistake. He came to consider Gandhi as the greatest Indian utopian and said that in Gandhi, utopianism was epitomised at its highest and the best. In Gandhi and Vinoba, Asoka saw the utopian socialist thought in India reaching its highest watermark. But then Asoka counted Gandhi in the Proudhon-Kropotkin tradition of anarchism while he considered Nehru as having opted for social democracy.

Asoka's second tryst with ideology was in the Nasik Jail. There he met Marxists like JP, Nanaheeb Goray and others. All these men were fired with Marxism and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. It is interesting that inspite of spending two and a half years with them in the Nasik Jail, Asoka emerged from the prison a democratic socialist who was not enamoured of Marxism but of democracy and socialism which made him a thorough democratic socialist. Thus Equality became his second guiding beacon light. This conviction in, and commitment to, the ideology of democratic socialism also remained with him throughout his political life.

It was the love for freedom of staunch Marxists like JP and Acharya Narendra Deva and the democratic spirit of Asoka which made him work in harmony with them in the CSP inspite of ideological differences. His harmonious relations with Marxists in the CSP and his staunch opposition to the communists, was the realisation in him of the third normative ideal of democratic socialism, **Fraternity**. Soon, Minoo Masani who had connections with the Communist Party and was also in the Nasik jail, joined Asoka's ideology of democratic socialism. That the CSP, which called itself a Marxist party in 1934, abandoned Marxism and accepted democratic socialism as its creed in a span of about a decade is no less a tribute to Asoka Mehta.

Though he worked with Marxists inside the Congress Socialist Party, he was very critical of Marxism and the Communists. He blamed them for the split in the socialist movement. He said "*The fond belief that a group of men has a patent in revolution, that a group of men understands*

the march of history better than the people themselves, this belief in a totalitarian philosophy is responsible for the splitting up of the socialist movement. The little Marxes that strut about the world, in their megalomania, fritter away the strength of socialism”.

For Asoka, democracy was the very heart of socialism. He said *“We cannot conceive of socialism outside the framework of democracy. Democracy and Socialism together, and only as two together, make that ideal that we all seek to realise. The two cannot be divorced.”* Then he went on to say that *“economic equality is the necessary link that joins socialism with democracy”.* *“Socialism”,* he said, *“was the culmination of political equality that democracy prescribed.. .. Hence, till 1914, the socialists prided on calling themselves social democrats thereby viewing socialism as the crowning attribute of democracy.....It was only after the World War 1.. .. that adherents of social democracy hastened to rechristen their movement democratic socialism, thereby making democracy an attribute of socialism, rather than the other way about under social democracy”*

For Asoka, democracy was not merely a parliament elected once in five years. Here he borrowed a leaf from the anarchists. His vision of democracy was one of decentralisation. For him decentralisation was also a precondition of liberty. His concept of decentralisation was not limited to geographical decentralisation like some other socialist leaders sought to advocate. He said *“There may be the Parliament at the centre, but below it there must be State Assemblies, District Boards, Village Panchayats, Co-operatives, Ward Committees, and Community Centres. Their respective powers have to be allotted and satisfactorily dovetailed. Such is the pulsating fabric of a democratic state...”.* Thus Asoka’s concept of decentralisation had both vertical and horizontal dimensions. It was multi-dimensional.

He dovetailed this decentralised democracy with development. He conceived panchayats not only as decentralised units of governance but also as catalysts of growth and development. He conceived ‘mandal panachayats’ as the rural growth centres. According to him *“A nucleus of villages with the central village emerging as the focal point, to which surrounding villages respond and react and from which modern facilities would radiate, would provide a better model for development and growth”.*

Political compulsions of a backward economy

Soon after attaining independence, Asoka realized that the task of uplifting India was a stupendous one. He said that developing a backward economy requires mobilisation of resources through augmenting of savings at a high rate. Asoka gave the example of taxation to prove his point. He said *“Taxation in India absorbs between seven to eight per cent of the national income. For adequate expansion of development and welfare activities, it has been calculated that 35 per cent of the gross national income has to be in the hands of the government. Would any government dare to raise, in its tenure of power, taxation four to five fold?”*

The opposition parties, to strengthen themselves, tend to oppose the move. Afraid of the opposition and for want of commitment, the ruling party hesitates to take bold steps. The existence of communists and communalists in the form of parliamentary and political opposition compels the people to believe that the only choice is between conservatism and chaos which endangers the very concept of social change through democratic processes. Then people start believing that only a dictatorship can bring about social changes in a backward economy.

Asoka said that this presents us with two solutions. By pushing the opposition to the fringes the base of the government should be widened so that it could move forward and by strengthening the pluralist forces in the government. We should ensure that, even if not by law, at least by convention, a government lasts longer. Criticism should be confined to the normal democratic methods and opposition different from criticism would be confined to the few who are opposed to the very fundamental principles of the state.

Hence Asoka said that we cannot co-operate with the communists and communalists, only because they are also in the opposition like us. If so, the logic demands that we should co-operate with a party which is nearer to us in ideology, even if that party were to be in power and the socialists in the opposition. Hence his insistence on searching for areas of agreement with the Congress Party. These, he said, are the political compulsions of a backward economy.

However though this equation was based on ideology and not on power, a section of the socialists whose equation was based on power were very critical of Asoka's views. They argued that the *parties in opposition* ought to get together and defeat the *party in power* whatever the respective ideologies. This logic gave birth to the anti-Congressism of Lohia in which the Socialists were called upon to join forces with the communists, communalists and the capitalists who were in the opposition ranks with the socialists, to oust the Congress Party from power. Thus while Asoka's political beliefs led him to the Congress Party, the political beliefs of his opponents led them into the lap of the communalist forces and resulted in strengthening of such forces and their coming to power with the Lohia's followers as the dumb spectators on the fringe.

Development oriented democratic decentralisation

Asoka had said "because economics of socialism tend to be centralising, its politics must be democratic and decentralised and culture liberating, if the tensions between freedom and organisation are to achieve a vital equipoise." But then could not the economics of socialism also tend to be decentralised. Asoka set about the task of decentralising the economics of socialism.

If India lived in villages, then rural development assumed greater importance. But which was the agency to bring about rural development? Gram Panchayats with participation of the people in the developmental process were the obvious choice. But then they were weak administratively and financially.

The total receipts of Gram Panchayats in India even in 1976-77 were of the order of about Rs. 113 crores – on an average Rs. 5000 per panchayat. The average however is a deceptive figure hiding wide disparities. The average for Kerala was over Rs. 1,10,000 while that for Uttar Pradesh was Rs. 640. The income of all panchayats from all sources works out to 61 paise per capita per annum in Uttar Pradesh. The 5300 block centres were too few and far and the 2,40,000 panchayats were totally uneconomic and impractical. The appropriate level would be somewhere in between.

This thinking gave birth to the concept of Mandal Panchayats which would not only be viable institutions but will also act as rural growth centres. A nucleus of villages with the central village emerging as the focal point, to which surrounding villages respond and react and from which modern facilities would radiate would provide a better model for development and growth. And to strengthen these institutions Asoka wanted them to have powers of taxation to mobilise their own resources.

People's participation required that the Panchayat Raj Institutions should be democratic, that they should be elected by the people. Hence Asoka wanted elections to the Panchayat Raj Institutions. He said *"Elections constitute a process of social churning. They help to breakdown, in some measure, the hold of traditional decision makers. They progressively enable the poor to make use of their numbers to exert influence on developmental process. Some people are fond of fostering unanimous choices. It is fondly assumed that such unanimity would strengthen community spirit in the village and help developmental work. Unanimity circumscribes the power of the poor that resides in their number, unfettered elections are likely to enable the poor to come into their own"*.

He said *"More the number of persons that find themselves in positions of responsibility, less irresponsible will politics become. Political workers would find places where they can earn their spurs and make a mark in constructive as distinct from agitational politics. By democratising local government we would be strengthening the roots of democracy in the country also"*.

The Poet who wrote in prose

In addition to having the brain of a theoretician Asoka also had the heart of a poet - a rare combination. His prose writings had glimmers of poetry. Referring to Asoka's presidential address to the Socialist Party's annual conference held at Madras, Acharya Kripalani, wrote: "Sri. Asoka Mehta's presidential address makes delightful reading. The style, superbly ornate, is almost Tagorean in its conceits. It is full of unusual similes and metaphors. In the use of alliteration it is oriental. It has plenty of, to borrow its own language, 'mirrors in cadenced prose'... ..Here are some beautiful gems: 'I have labouredin the vineyard of Socialism and I would like to twine some of my significant impressions into a wreath', 'though long was the night of slavery, and arduous the twilight of the struggle', 'cultural discontinuity converted social rhythms into jerks and cut circles into segments', 'cut lanes of lucidity into the labyrinthine corridors of customs and habits', 'turn the single tomed beads of irritation into a rosary of despair', 'fluidity in the meaning of words creates a crisis in communication', 'the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow', 'life's lotus is many layered and every petal is precious', 'the connoisseurs of misery exploit cynically the hungers and frustrations in men and adorn reason with cap and bells'. This poetic prose lured Acharya himself to write poetically, "These are but a few fragrant flowers we have ventured to cull from a garden full of them". What more tribute could one expect that too from a person of the stature of Acharya Kripalani. Perhaps in Asoka, what the socialist movement gained, the literary field lost.

Asoka contested the general elections held in 1980 from Surat constituency only to be defeated. Calling it a day, Asoka retired from active politics. He was conferred the degrees of Doctor of Laws (LL.D.) and Doctor of Literature (D.Litt), (honoris causa) for his erudition and scholarship by many Universities.

Having remained unmarried and carrying a fragile body afflicted with Asthma, but a fecund mind, all his life, Asoka silently disappeared from the Indian socialist firmament on 17th January 1984.