

Chandra Shekhar (01-7-1927 to 08-072008)

Chandra Shekhar (Singh) son of Shri Sadanand Singh was born on 1st July 1927 (Official, 17th April is real) in a very poor family of agriculturist in Ibrahimpatti, a village in the Ballia district of Uttar Pradesh.

Education and start of career in politics

Chandra Shekhar received his early education near his native village in Ballia and for graduation and Master's degree in political science, he went to Allahabad University. He was awarded a Master of Arts degree at Allahabad University. He was known as a firebrand student leader. During his early days he came under the influence of Acharya Narendra Deva, a great Socialist leader of that time. After finishing his education in 1951, he had developed an interest in politics. He joined the socialist movement. After graduation, he became active in socialist movement. He joined the socialist Party and was elected secretary of the district Socialist Party (SP), Ballia, 1951-52. Within a year, he was elected joint secretary of the Praja Socialist Party's (PSP) State unit in Uttar Pradesh, 1952-55. In 1955-56, he took over as General Secretary of the PSP's State unit. During 1959-62, he was Member of the National Executive of the P.S.P.

His career as a parliamentarian began with his election to the Rajya Sabha from Uttar Pradesh in 1962, as a PSP candidate. From 1962 to 1977, Chandra Shekhar was in Rajya Sabha, the Upper house of the Parliament of India. In 1964, he joined Congress Party along with some PSP leaders under the leadership of Asoka Mehta.

Joining Indian National Congress

Chandra Shekhar joined the India National Congress in January 1965. He was soon elected general secretary of the Congress Party in Parliament. As an MP, he made a mark by his dedication and determination in championing causes aimed at the upliftment of downtrodden communities, and his commitment to rapid socio-economic change in India. He came in direct confrontation with the centers of economic power when he mounted a determined attack on the disproportionate growth of monopoly houses under State patronage.

Politics of ideology

In 1967, he was General Secretary of the Congress Parliamentary Party (C.P.P.) and also elected to the Central election Committee against the wishes of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. During his Congress party days, he gave the jitters to Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister and was called "Young Turk".

He vehemently criticized Indira Gandhi for her policies. This led to his arrest during the emergency days and Chandra Shekhar was interned Rohtak and Patiala jails. He was arrested under Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) in 1975 even being a member of the Central Election Committee and Working Committee of All India Congress Committee (A.I.C.C.).

Chandra Shekhar preferred the politics of ideology as the best instrument for socio-economic change. His advocacy of the politics of ideology and his persistent campaign for rapid social changes brought him in confrontation with Smt. Indira Gandhi who believed in the politics of personalities and power. Therefore, when Chandra Shekhar proposed that Indira Gandhi should hold a dialogue with Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) and seek conciliation instead of confrontation, she saw in him the main focal point of dissent within the party. When Emergency was proclaimed in June 1975, Chandra Shekhar was arrested and detained in solitary confinement for the entire period of the Emergency till January 1977.

Courageous and a great campaigner

He came to be known as "Young Turk" within the Congress because of the courage of his convictions and his campaign against vested interests. To carry forward his aims and ideals, he founded and edited the weekly "Young Indian" in 1969 from New Delhi. His editorials in the Young Indian were widely and frequent quoted, but the weekly had to be closed down after the imposition of the Emergency and pre-censorship in June 1975.

Just as he had rejected offers of ministerial berths in Indira Gandhi's Cabinet, he also declined to join the Congress after his release from detention. He wrote his prison diary during his solitary confinement in the Central Jail at Rohtak and Patiala, which was later published as "Meri Jail Diary" in Hindi. Another book of his is a compilation of his editorials and articles under the title "Dynamics of social Change."

In January 1977, he was released from prison and then he joined newly formed Janata Party and elected to 6th Lok Sabha from his home district Ballia. In the parliamentary elections, Janata Party did very well and formed the coalition government headed by late Morarji Desai. Chandra Shekhar was elected President of the Janata Party, on 1st May 1977. He was President of Janata Party during 1977-88. On April 30, 1988, he stepped down voluntarily from this post. Being president of Janata Party, he was popularly known as “Adhyaksh-ji”.

Bharat Yatra

Chandra Shekhar undertook a journey on foot (Pada Yatra, which came to be known as Bharat Yatra) from Kanyakumari in South India to Raj Ghat in New Delhi, covering a distance of 4260 kilometers between January 6, 1983 to June 25, 1983. The Bharat Yatra was aimed at getting closer to the people for understanding their problems and for rekindling hopes in them of the elimination of social inequalities and disparities. The exercise testified to his innate commitment to the politics of commitment and ideology and his aversion to positions of power. He established 15 Bharat Yatra Centers in various States to train social and political workers for mass education and grassroots work. Chandra Shekhar always remained engaged in intense political work by training social and political workers for mass education and for undertaking grass root work in the backward pockets of the country.

Operation Bluestar

Chandra Shekhar vehemently criticized Mrs. Indira Gandhi for her policies towards Sikh and Punjab and Military action at Amritsar’s Golden Temple known as “Operation Bluestar”. He paid heavy political price for this stand and lost first time from Ballia Parliamentary constituency. He was termed as “Bhindrawale of Ballia” during 1984 general elections.

Difference of Opinion

Chandra Shekhar frequently differed with other political leaders in the opposition in respect of the methodology of agitation and social change. He felt that unity without an understanding on basic and minimum programmes would prove a mirage. Others, obsessed with immediate gains, were anxious to take short cuts to power. Chandra Shekhar kept advocating adherence to due political processes despite his motives being misunderstood. In 1988 his Janata Party merged with other political parties and formed the Janata Dal. After the defeat of the Congress, in 1989, Janata Dal formed a coalition government under the leadership of V.P. Singh,

interestingly this coalition (National Front) was supported with both the Communist parties and the BJP. Chandra Shekhar refused to join this government and publicly expressed reservations against the leadership of V P Singh. The country was soon pushed into a communal conflagration and eruption of casteist violence. Chandra Shekhar's view that power without commitment to principles and a minimum agreed programme would be ephemeral. Shortly Chandra Shekhar's relationship with the coalition deteriorated and he formed his own party, Samajwadi Janata Party (Rashtriya).

Prime Minister of India

At a period of great political turmoil and uncertainty following the collapse of the National Front government in November 1990, Chandra Shekhar decided to accept the challenge of normalising the troubled polity and putting democracy back on the rails. After his predecessor V.P. Singh resigned as Prime Minister, he led a breakaway faction of the Janata Dal, known as the Samajwadi Janata Party (Rashtriya) and formed his Government. The Indian National Congress headed by former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi decided to extend outside support to his government.

He assumed power (he was sworn in as Prime Minister on November 10, 1990) even though aware that his political adversaries and critics would question his motives. But he soon won the hearts of the people of India who saw in him a leader with a clear vision, commitment to social welfare and progress, and sincerity of purpose. Chandra Shekhar held a bare majority in a coalition. The relationship crumbled quickly, as the Congress party accused him of spying on Rajiv Gandhi, their leader at that time. The Congress Party then boycotted Parliament and as Shekhar's faction only had about 60 MPs. When an attempt was made to intimidate him and subject him to manipulative pressures, he preferred to step down rather than compromise his principles and self-respect. He resigned in March 1991 and was asked by the President to function as a care-taker government till the tenth Lok Sabha elections. He demitted office on June 20, 1991. He was then re-elected to the Lok Sabha from the Ballia constituency.

As A Parliamentarian

Chandra Shekhar was known for abiding by the parliamentary conventions and was honoured with the Outstanding Parliamentarian Award in 1995. He was elected member of the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament for eight times and for the upper house Rajya Sabha three times. The only election that he lost was in 1984 against Jagannath Chaudhary of Congress party. Altogether he was Member of Parliament for more than 40 years.

Death

Chandra Shekhar suffered from multiple myeloma, a form of cancer of the plasma cell. He had been hospitalised for over three months. He passed away in New Delhi on 8 July 2007 aged 80. He was survived by two sons. One of them, Neeraj Shekhar contested and won the Ballia Lok Sabha by-election which was vacated through his father's death.

Chandra Shekhar was 8th Prime Minister of India. He was in office from 10 November 1990-21 June 1991.

Book Published

Founder-Editor and Chairman, Editorial Advisory Board of “Young Indian”.

Prison diary “Meri Jail Diary”(in Hindi). Atamkatha-(Autobiography in Hindi)

Dynamics of social change by Chandra Shekhar.Popular Prakashan, 1978 -182 pages.

Chandra Shekhar: selected speeches, 1990-91Chandra Shekhar, India.Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1993-147 pages.

Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar: challenges and expectations, by K. L. Chanchreek.H.K. Publishers and Distributors, 1991-296pages. (Also includes selected speeches and writings).

Chandra Shekhar, the man of destiny.Hira Lal Chaubey.Vindhyachal Prakashan, 1991-151 pages.

Chandra Shekhar, a political biography.Yogendra Bali.Vikas Pub. House, 1991- 240 pages.

P. K. Ravindranath.Newsindia Publications, 1984 - Biography -187 pages.

Chandra Shekhar, the survivor, by Kotamraju Narayana Rao. Manak Publications, 1991 - Biography & Autobiography - 138 pages.

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