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Flawed but Still Worthy

By: V. Krishna Ananth

The first biography of George Fernandes sparkles in places where the author's access to the socialist leader's private papers pays off. But it falls short, with gaps in understanding and inadequate exploration of crucial events and decisions.

George Fernandes provoked intense feelings. One could hate him or adore him, but no one could ignore him. He occupied key ministerial berths under three prime ministers of different political hues over a quarter century. Yet George (as he was known to his associates, friends, and acquaintances; or as George sa'ab in his constituency) did not fit the stereotype of the Indian politician. He had no use for wealth or the trappings of power and detested the paraphernalia that political minions scrounged after. Even though he strode the political scene like a colossus for three decades, he remained an outsider to the world of Lutyens Delhi.

He belonged to a generation that came to age after Independence but whose lives were influenced by the values foregrounded by the struggle for freedom. There was hardly any cause that George stayed aloof from. He was equally passionate whether he was involved in the causes of trade unions or human rights; against environmental degradation or capitalist greed. None else from George's generation of Indian political leaders could boast of having been beaten up by the police or dragged around in handcuffs as many times. In 1974, from inside jail, he steered railway workers into India's largest industrial action ever. He was at the fore of building an underground resistance to the Emergency. Instead of ending up on the gallows for his activities, the end of Indira Gandhi's regime elevated George to the Janata government's cabinet.

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Even when he held ministerial positions, he did not shy away from speaking up for the oppressed. He was ever ready to take up the cause of the downtrodden. His official premises were a home for agitators, whether for Tibet's liberation or democracy in Burma.

A biography of such a personality is certainly warranted. Rahul Ramagundam's book, the first-ever such work, offers information on George's life, his political journey, and his personal life. Ramagundam, having gained access to George's private papers and having interviewed a host of persons who lived and worked with him, has brought out many stories. These private papers "give the spine to this book." *The Life and Times of George Fernandes* is a rich description that seeks to capture the person and his political journey from Mangalore to Bombay and to Delhi via Bihar. It also brings aspects from the lives of colleagues, friends, and mentors, such as Madhu Limaye, whom George had considered a friend and in many ways more than a fellow socialist, and Placid D'Mello, a labour leader in Bombay, who was a significant influence on George. Access to George's notes written while in jail, his letters to others, and the letters he received make the biography an interesting read.

Carving a niche

Moving to Bombay in 1949 in search of a living as a mere 19-year-old lad, George did not settle down with a job. He began organising workers in factories and hotels in militant trade unions. (An image reproduced in the book shows him in tattered clothes, dragged away in handcuffs by the police – almost like a dangerous animal – from a rail-roko strike in 1960 at Dadar railway station, in solidarity with a national strike by central government employees). Despite formally being educated only till matriculation, George could engage with academic debates as proficiently as many in academia. He spoke a host of languages with ease. His public speaking skills were par excellence, and his interventions in Parliamentary debates were marked by style as much as content. The Socialist Party he headed between 1973 and 1977 (when it was dissolved into the Janata Party) was not an electoral force; yet George could carve a niche for himself within the space of non-Congress parties.

When the Emergency was imposed, Jayaprakash Narayan and almost all others in the opposition were picked up and detained late on the night of 25 June 1975. George evaded arrest purely by chance. Moving fast, he gathered as many as 24 others to emulate what Narayan and other freedom fighters had done during the Quit India Movement: set off low-intensity bombs across the country to 'shock' the regime – the Baroda Dynamite Conspiracy, as it came to be known. In the months before his arrest in 1976, he was involved in procuring low-power radio transmitters to interfere with transmissions of All India Radio, which Indira Gandhi used to

propagate herself as the nation's saviour and paint as enemies of the nation all those who opposed her.

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After the defeat of Indira Gandhi's government, George became minister for industry under Morarji Desai in the Janata Party government (1977–79). He left on the issue of 'dual membership': the demand that Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, fellow ministers, should cease to retain their membership with the RSS or quit the cabinet. In V.P. Singh's National Front government (1989–90), George was in charge of railways and doubled up as minister-in-charge of Jammu and Kashmir. In the latter role, he maintained a steadfast opposition to Singh's compromise with the BJP on Kashmir. (The BJP, on whose outside support the government survived, persuaded Singh to send Jagmohan as the state's governor over objections from Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah.) Under Vajpayee's BJP-led coalition government (1998–2004), he headed the ministry of defence for a considerable period. During that tenure, George, who had once tried to enlist as a rating in the Indian Navy, would dismiss the navy chief, Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat.

Missing aspects

Ramagundam's biography is rich and insightful. In some parts, it reflects meticulous work. But there are gaps and failings, which place a question mark over the value of this work other than as a recounting of events in a fascinating life.

The treatment of the 1974 railway general strike – George's finest moment – is far too sketchy. The author could have interviewed leaders who were part of the strike, perhaps the most decisive trade union action George led, to put the strike in perspective. He is at fault for having not mined Stephen Sherlock's important study *The Indian Railways Strike of 1974: A Study of Power and Organised Labour* (2001). Although the book is mentioned in the bibliography, there is hardly any evidence of Ramagundam having used it. If he had, he could have avoided some factual errors, like there being a speech George gave in Madras which Ramagundam states was in Delhi. Moreover, the book would have led him to several accessible documents on the strike.

Another episode is one of George's earliest instances of showing inconsistent behaviour. After passionately defending Morarji Desai's government during a no-confidence motion on 12 July 1979, three days later, George walked over to the side of Charan Singh, who had led defectors away from the cabinet and the Janata Party. Even sympathetic observers explain the inconsistency as due to George succumbing to emotional persuasion by Limaye.

The truth, however, is somewhere else and George himself has placed this on record.

Ramagundam seems unaware that when George spoke passionately in support of Desai, the regime commanded a majority. It was only after the government was reduced to a minority that George resigned. This is how George used to explain it. But he also used to say that he would have lost Limaye's friendship if he had continued with Desai.

The new George, though, would not hesitate even for a moment against continuing with the BJP-led alliance, even after Hindutva was put into practice in Gujarat in 2002.

The other aspect not sufficiently discussed is George's decision in the early 1990s to team up with the BJP and even function as the National Democratic Alliance's convener. The biography does not go beyond recording the events of Samata Party/Janata Dal (United) joining with the BJP, despite this representing a U-turn for George from the positions he held earlier. In the 1960s, he opposed Ram Manohar Lohia's reaching out to the Bharatiya Jan Sangh to forge as broad a unity of forces against the Congress, and, in 1977, he broke up with Desai over the dual membership issue.

The new George, though, would not hesitate even for a moment about continuing with the BJP-led alliance, even after Hindutva was put into practice in Gujarat in 2002. In a debate in the Lok Sabha on the Gujarat killings, he dismissed the gory act as nothing new, and said that similar or worse atrocities were committed during the anti-Sikh riots in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984.

Ironically, one of the books George read was William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960) on fascism in Germany. However, his political choices seem to indicate that he had not cared to absorb the content and message of Shirer. (Ramagundam mentions George reading the book only in passing; he does not bring it into context when he narrates the intervention in the Lok

Sabha debate on Gujarat 2002).

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Even George's worst critics would desist from accusing him of being greedy for the loaves of ministerial positions or worried about self-preservation. Why then did he hold on to office in 2002? The author has not probed as to how anti-Congressism was so central to George that it blinded him to the implications of Gujarat 2002 for the democratic set-up.

While George did not make a virtue of consistency, a constant throughout his political life was animosity towards the Congress party. His opposition, and more particularly his near-pathological dislike of the Nehru-Gandhi family, even got him into a serious quarrel with Limaye, his soulmate in the political world. Yet George did not grudge this and pull his punches. In a conversation with me after his Samata Party allied with the BJP, George recalled the beatings he suffered at the Visapur jail in Maharashtra at the hands of convicts in 1960 during his detention after the Dadar rail roko. He then said, “I want to see the Congress party maimed, while alive, and will do anything for that.”

The more significant problem with *The Life and Times of George Fernandes* is that while Ramagundam has used private papers and interviewed many contemporaries, there is an absence of confirmatory evidence and cross-checking. The author, instead, resorts to assumptions and conjunctures, like when he tells the story of the Baroda Dynamite Conspiracy case. The charge sheet and the defence statement by George and the fellow accused are available for access, but Ramagundam does not seem to have consulted these crucial documents. This leaves gaps in the story about the underground resistance.

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For reasons known best to him, Ramagundam has not reached out to many figures who played important roles in George's political life. Some of them include Anil Hegde, who looked after George's official residence since the early 1980s. Similarly, while Ramagundam has spoken to Ravi Nair, whose association with George was not merely political but personally intimate, the only instance the author cites him is on an innocuous point. And there is Nitish Kumar, Bihar's chief minister, with whom George ploughed the furrow for long; there is no evidence anywhere in the book of Ramagundam having discussed anything with (or even reached out to) him.

Some of these people might not have agreed to speak frankly or share all their reminiscences, but complete silence about their roles in George's politics creates an erasure. It seems as if the life of George is only what his private papers and a select group of associates who spoke to Ramagundam have said.

On the other hand, the author has heavily relied on those colleagues of George in the socialist movement who seem to have had an axe to grind. One such is a complaint by Limaye's son. Another instance is a set of accusations by Arun Yadav from Gorakhpur, who, at best, was a marginal player in the Socialist Party and for the most part, was one who only moved around in New Delhi in the fringes of the Janata Dal and its various faction leaders in the 1990s. This helps Ramagundam share his grief over the collapse of the socialist movement and George's contribution to the process, a lament that recurs throughout the book.

The fall of the socialists

The story of the unfulfilled promise of the Socialist Party could have been a useful thread while writing the biography of a political person, more so of someone like George, whose life and acts were integrally tied with the Socialist Party and the movement. One of the motivations for this biography was for Ramagundam to not just tell George's life story but also to write a history of the socialists in India, but this has not happened.

As Lohia described it in 1956, the Socialist Party's most impressive phase was its early years – a period before George had stepped into public life. (The party originated from the Congress Socialist Party, formed in 1934 to serve as a ginger group within the Indian National Congress.) After 1948, Lohia said, the party was mere sound and fury without action, or marked by splendid indecisiveness.

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The author could have picked up from this trenchant critique by Lohia himself rather than delving into George's life or what sometimes seems as excessive forays into his marital relationship. The socialists, including Lohia, Limaye, and George, were lone rangers with big egos, probably incapable of building organisations. Like the characters in U.R. Ananthamurthy's novel *Bharathipura* (1973), the socialists were drawn from sections that were wealthy, educated abroad, and talked big without making efforts to build an organisation and thus lived in their own world. The real-life equivalents of Ananthamurthy's protagonist in the novel were the ones whom Lohia in 1956 held as responsible for the inability of the socialists to emerge as a significant political force.

To conclude therefore, as Ramagundam does, that the Socialist Party's decision to merge into the Janata Party (when George was the former's chairman), brought an end to the socialist movement in India is misplaced. Ramagundam misses the important point that it was the Socialist Party's influence that got the Janata Party to appoint a Backward Classes Commission in 1979. B.P. Mandal, who headed the commission, had been a Socialist Party member, and his report firmly established reservations for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Ramagundam, despite having set out to weave the history of the Socialist Party into this biography, ignores this landmark legacy.

Conclusions

A biography cannot stay away from a political personality's private life. George had a tumultuous personal life and relationships with women – before his marriage, with his wife Leila Kabir, and during their separation. While there is no need for silence on such matters, there is no need either for salacious discussion and least of all, baseless speculation. Ramgundam deals sensitively with Kabir's feelings and fears (drawing on the private papers), but this is not the case in the description and discussion of other relationships. I am also constrained to observe the poor taste with which the author talks in detail about the symptoms of Alzheimer's/dementia in George, at the very start of the biography.

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Ramagundam will serve the cause of history – as much as the causes that George stood for, fought and left a legacy – if he would consider passing over George's papers to an institution like the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML). Along with the library's existing collections of the private papers of Ram Manohar Lohia and his partner Rama Mitra, Madhu and Champa Limaye, Jayaprakash Narayan, and a host of George's comrades in the socialist movement, the George Fernandes Papers will help make possible more studies on the socialist movement.

Ramagundam confesses at the outset that he decided to write this biography after meeting George for the first time in 2009. That was rather late in the socialist leader's life; by then, he had been diagnosed with dementia and the author could not have interviewed him meaningfully. But Ramagundam tells us that he was drawn to George after seeing his iconic image in chains, an image from more than a quarter-century earlier. In other words, his view of George Fernandes was based on impressions rather than any intimate knowledge. He could have dug deeper into the archives and gathered the context in which the subject matter of the study lived. Ramagundam, however, claims in the preface, "I have tried to present an insider's account though I have not had any fleeting proximity to those processes." The strength and the weakness of this biography both come from this process.

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