

The Book

Rajendra Prasad was a President in a predicament, caught between the natural urges for true power and the constitutional checks brandished by a stern Prime Minister, the love of a good life and the ideals of the Mahatma, his own essential rural innocence and the sophisticated quicksands of high life that he trod, the many prejudices that scarred his thinking and the onslaught of the changing times which took him by surprise.

A pious and simple man who washed the feet of pundits, ate magical pills, tried to communicate with the dead, and believed elephants would bring him luck, Dr. Prasad was also a man of great gentleness, mercy, loyalty and trust - all of which were ruthlessly exploited by many of his entourage. His prejudices were the products of deep commitments and his ambitions of power, based on genuine democratic concerns. This childlike man would one day mutter to someone about Jawaharlal's "power hunger" and another day send him a magical ring to keep him from harm.

Bimanesh Chatterjee, who was Military Secretary to Rajaji during the latter's tenures as the Governor of West Bengal and as the last Governor-General of India, held the same office for five years under President Prasad. He paints an absorbing and controversial portrait of Rajendra Prasad in his unique predicament of power, set against an imposing backdrop peopled by India's famous and powerful. He brings you an insider's eye-view of New Delhi's Grand Palace of illusory power - the Rashtrapati Bhavan - culled from the days when the spirits of the Raj still haunted it, and its occupant still dreamt dreams of power.

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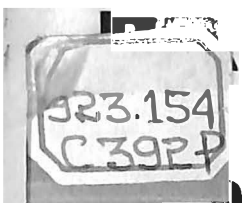
BIMANESH CHATTERJEE



**THE
PRESIDENTIAL
EDICAMENT**

Indira Prasad Remembered

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THE PRESIDENTIAL PREDICAMENT

Rajendra Prasad Remembered

BIMANESH CHATTERJEE



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Bimanesh Chatterjee (1907)

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PREFACE

I have briefly narrated here some episodes and anecdotes from the life of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, gathered from the first five years of his presidency—the period during which I was his Military Secretary.

No prefatory words are required on Dr. Prasad's well-known and pre-eminent role in the fight for freedom as a trusted lieutenant of the Mahatma, remaining steadfast till the struggle was fought to the finish. Despite his inconspicuous domestic background and frail health, he had pursued his scholastic and professional careers with as much self-confidence and devotion as he had brought to the cause of freedom. Dr. Prasad, as President of the Constituent Assembly, headed the three years of marathon labours that went into the making of the Constitution.

With the birth of the Republic and the emergence of the new Constitution, the two newly created high offices, of President and of Prime Minister, unlike in the case of their lesser counterparts in the states where the working relationship between Governor and Chief Minister had already been fairly well established, naturally demanded the norms for a harmonious and functional mutual adaptation, consistent with the Prime Minister's executive responsibilities, the constitutional provisions, and the need for the growth of rationalised traditions. But the first President, perhaps due to the absence of clear precedents or to personal predilections, had his own reservations about the interpretations of the powers of his office. The gradual impairment of his health and a growing dependence on the occult and the supernatural seemed to make him more and more unreconciled to the limitations of his onerous, though advisory role.

Perhaps it was an anachronism in itself that the spiritual heir of the Mahatma should opt for the grand office of the President. Having taken it up, inclinations towards the materialistic further showed up the idealistic issue; meanwhile, other forces, from within himself and from outside, prompted him to remain engaged in a futile tussle for power. A number of things were happening that would make for astounding revelation. But what surprised me most was the fact that certain wishes of the President tacitly or expressly implied the irrelevance, in his supreme office, of the applicability of ordinary moral and ethical standards in toto. Dr. Prasad did not seem to believe that a running adjustment was necessary with the changing values and the flow of time, and in consonance with what is adaptable in man.

He had, despite his chronic ill-health, winsome qualities which would have made him a highly successful organisational leader, provided he was inclined to take up a power-shorn office. But apparently, at the political level the factor of the correlation between pegs and holes is of no great importance....

In conclusion, I would like to express here my appreciation of the publishers for their helpful advice and cooperation.

Calcutta
March, 1974

Bimanesh Chatterjee

The gun-salute boomed, the freshly hoisted presidential standard fluttered in the wind, and the clear notes of the new born national anthem rose melodiously; the ceremony that precluded the birth of our new republic had reached a grand *finale*. Dr. Rajendra Prasad had become the first President of India.

For me, the auspicious day had begun on a banal note. I had reached the President-elect's residence early, and was immediately surrounded by a motley crowd who all appeared to be Dr. Prasad's admirers and well-wishers. At the far end of the large room stood some self-conscious gentlemen. Another group, contained also two apparently holy men with vermilion marks on their foreheads, and chains of beads round their necks. All of a sudden, a lanky old man asked me in Hindi, "Are you Babuji's bodyguard?" As I fumbled for a reply, another short and corpulent person, wrapped up in a tattered rug enquired if I had brought the coach-and-six for Babuji. In my imperfect Hindi, I told him that Dr. Prasad would be entitled to ride in the coach only after his occupation of the new office. Hardly had I finished, when one of the holy-looking men came close to me and, tickling my ear with his grizzly beard, whispered, "From which part of Bharat do you come?" and, before I could answer, he continued, "To which caste do you belong?" This surprising inquisitiveness amused me and I could hardly suppress my merriment. I told the priest that I was born a Brahmin, had taken up the Vaid's profession, and was now pursuing a Kshatriya's career. He jumped a step backwards with a flourish, took a dramatic stand, and staring at me, burst into a long, sardonic laugh. His loud guffaw immediately attracted the attention of the others, and all joined him in a merry chorus..

I could't, for a moment, believe I was in the residence of the President-elect of my country. Suddenly, a hushed silence descended on the room, and turning around, I saw Dr. Prasad standing in a corner, talking to a group of people. I walked up, greeted him, and told him briefly what the morning's programme was. He asked me smilingly if it was time to leave for the Government House. As I was telling him there were still five minutes to go, from behind him came a man sheepishly over to me and whispered in my ears that it was just the auspicious moment to begin the journey.

As we proceeded towards the waiting car, the assembled people began to cheer Dr. Prasad, and the slogans, *Deshratna Amar Raho*, and *Swatantra Bharat Ki Jai*, rent the air. An emotional Dr. Prasad turned in every direction with folded hands acknowledging their good wishes. The two holy men, chanting hymns and *mantras*, rushed forward to offer their blessings to the President-elect.

While we were entering the car, an attendant, carrying a medicinal spray pump, jumped in and sat next to the chauffeur. Dr. Prasad remained silent throughout the short drive to the Government House. On arrival, I conducted the President-elect to the Governor-General's study where Mr. C. Rajagopalāchari—'Rajaji'—the outgoing Governor-General, immaculately dressed, was waiting to receive him. Rajaji, holding Dr. Prasad's arm, guided him to a settee, and both sat down. Presently, the aide-de-camp (ADC) announced that it was time to proceed to the Durbar Hall. Dr. Prasad and Rajaji were then driven to the foot of the grand staircase climbing to the Hall, where the Prime Minister was waiting for them. Panditji received them, and after clarifying from me certain details regarding the ceremonies to follow, he ran up the staircase, carefully avoiding the red carpet.

A fanfare of bugles heralded the entry of the President-elect and the Governor-General into the Hall. The packed assembly of distinguished guests rose to give them an ovation. All eyes were upon the two principal figures whose sartorial

contrast could not escape anyone's notice. The 72-year old outgoing Governor-General was clad in his usual white *dhoti*, *kurta* and scarf, white woollen socks, and of course, the *chappals*. The President-elect, six years younger, was dressed in black *achkan* and shoes, a white cap, and pyjamas. The two proceeded solemnly and with measured steps, to the dais and occupied their ornate seats. Under a richly embroidered canopy in the background, an ancient, life-size stone figure of the Buddha in a benedictory posture, lent an enchanting serenity to the ceremony of oath-taking that followed.

The President had a strenuous programme during the first few days in office. Besides meeting several distinguished callers, there were the swearing-in of the Cabinet Ministers and of the Chief Justice, formal luncheons, receptions, banquets for the heads of the diplomatic missions, meetings with his staff, and finally the seeing-off of the ex-Governor-General. At the end of it all, the President had remained in good spirits, although he looked weary. He walked slower, spoke sparingly, and rested whenever he found the opportunity.

On the day of his investiture itself, I had a fair whiff of the President's candour and sense of humour. I had approached him for his approval of the cutlery to be used for the banquet that evening. He told me jovially: "It might be confusing to me if there are too many 'instruments'. I would not need any 'knife or scissors'. A large spoon should serve my purpose, but a spare spoon may as well be kept nearby. The attendant who served my lunch today has seen my technique, and he himself enlightened me with the information that Rajaji also followed the same style. I gathered that it has been the custom from the olden days that a personal *Khitmatgar* always waits behind the seat of the host. That is a very good arrangement, for he can be helpful in serving my special dishes, arranging the 'instruments and accessories' on the table, and generally be of assistance to the uninitiated, short of partaking of the food from my plate."

One day, probably aware of my medical background, he

related to me the whole story of his troublesome illness and of the treatment he was undergoing. Over the days, I gathered that he was greatly perturbed and concerned over the uncertainties imposed by his illness, and the possibility that he might not acquire the physical competence which the duties and responsibilities of his office demanded. With some anxiety he once asked me, whether I could prognosticate his health. When I told him that there was a general belief that with his kind of trouble, the sufferer usually enjoyed a long life, the President remarked, "Yes, that is what they say." His chief worry seemed to be centered round his fear of his health coming in the way of being an active President. And, in fact, this was the principal reason why, despite his personal inconveniences, he kept himself ambulatory, and whenever possible engaged himself in tours and outdoor engagements. Besides, the President did not like his recurring indisposition to gain any publicity. Because, at the time of his nomination to the Presidential office, the condition of his health had created some apprehension in the minds of an influential *coterie*.

Meanwhile, I had relinquished my sinecure post of surgeon to the Governor-General and had taken up another ex-officio, but burdensome post: that of Director-General of the Government of India Hospitality Organisation. Though there were two other doctors in the establishment, the President seemed to prefer the services of certain physicians, allopathic as well as homeopathic and ayurvedic, whom he knew personally and who had attended on him earlier. They were all, under orders of the President, given the coveted honorary appointment to the President's personal staff. Later, an Unani *hakim* also received this distinction.

As days went by, and the President grew more relaxed, I began to feel, that there was a weakening of the orderliness I was accustomed to in the House. There was an evident setback in the sense of duty and discipline, especially among the lower staff, some of whom had, so quickly, started addressing the President as 'Babuji'. The President's indifference to

the rigidities of staff discipline made me feel I had suddenly come out of a 'caisson'. There was no hurry, no pressure, no tension; everything was light and easy, and all around there cropped up instances of a gay, free, carelessness. These developments were certainly unwelcome, but I hoped to arrest such inroads of indiscipline, gradually with the President's understanding and support.

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Long before the investiture, Dr. Prasad had asked the outgoing Governor-General for certain financial clarifications relating to the management of the Government House. Rajaji, who was reluctant to get involved in a lengthy discussion, had instead suggested to Dr. Prasad my going over to his residence to brief him on these matters. The President-elect had, with a gentle nod, implied his acceptance of the suggestion.

Before the meeting that evening I had gathered some information about the President-elect. A distinguished alumnus of the Calcutta University, he had received his Master's degree in law there, and practised at the Calcutta High Court for about five years before moving to the then newly established Patna High Court. Responding to the Mahatma's call, he had given up his profession and plunged into the freedom struggle. His social and humanitarian services, particularly for the distressed indigo planters of Champaran and the earthquake victims of north Bihar, had earned him all-India reknown. I learnt too that he had an inflexible faith in Hindu traditions and religious practices and was a staunch believer in astrology, mysticism and the occult sciences. After the long years of struggle and imprisonment, he had developed a deep attachment to his family, and he loved the company of old friends and acquaintances. He was very popular among the masses, and his hospitality attracted a large number of

callers, mostly from the common strata of society. Studious by nature, he had a well-stocked library, and himself had written several books, mostly in Hindi. He had a good command of English, but was against its use in the country; he was a veteran champion of Hindi.

I left for the President-elect's house, carrying a number of voluminous files. As soon as my car drew up in front of the house, a person with a slouch and *pan*-stained mouth asked me to enter and make myself comfortable. Soon, another person came to me beaming, and said: "Wait a little, Babuji is coming!" Then, after hovering around me for a while, both left, and I was free to survey that dimly-lit room, the gloom accentuated by the dull-coloured upholstery. The patchy discolouration of the rug on the floor was the evidence of a heavy influx of careless visitors. My reverie was suddenly broken by the entrance of a tall figure, wrapped up in a grey blanket. Springing up from my seat, I was about to click my heels and salute, when, to my amazement I saw him hurriedly making an exit, through the front door. A little rattled, I resumed my seat only to see the President-elect, bareheaded, and wrapped up in a shawl, entering the room, followed by the two persons I had met earlier. As I greeted him, he beckoned me to go near and occupy a seat next to him.

This was my first close view of the President-elect. He was a sallow-complexioned person of big build, with short, clipped hair and a bristly grey moustache. He had a kindly countenance and an occasional look of anxiety in the eyes. Unconcerned about appearance and tidiness, and apathetic to a surrounding of calm and order, the President-elect seemed to be a person of phlegmatic constitution, and a sedate nature. There seemed to be a natural gentleness about him. He certainly was a lively listener, but spoke very sparingly. He walked with languid and staggering steps, and his laboured breathing at the slightest exertion suggested a substandard state of health in an otherwise impressive physique.

He remained silent and his looks wandered. Sensing his

discomfiture, I suggested a postponement of the meeting until the next day. He paid no heed to what I said and restlessly turned back and spoke in whispers to his attendants. Both hurried inside and returned in no time, one with a medicinal spray pump and the other with a spittoon. After taking a few whiffs of the medicine, Dr. Prasad said faintly, "I do not wish to go through any papers or records today. But since you have come, you may as well give me a verbal account of the management practices relating to the Governor-General's Estate." He spoke in Hindi, while I gave him all the information in English.

Punctuated by bouts of cough, the President-elect then told me softly that he had a large, deeply religious, and orthodox family. His own outlook he described as very conservative. His large circle of friends, relatives, and fellow villagers might, he told me, occasionally come to stay with him, and he wanted one or two large staff quarters to be earmarked for them. For himself and the members of his family, the lodging arrangements could, of course, be made in the main house more or less on lines similar to those in the times of the Viceroys. But, he emphasized, the boarding arrangements would have to be radically changed.

He continued after a long pause, "There are a few old hands living with me and looking after my family's conveniences. They will necessarily have to be provided with some berths, of course remunerative, after I move to that big house. I shall tell you again about all these matters. Meanwhile, I have received a number of suggestions from my friends and well-wishers on the investiture ceremony. It being an unprecedented event in the long and chequered annals of the country, they have suggested, and quite reasonably, that the general public should be provided unrestricted opportunity of witnessing the historic event from close quarters. For that, perhaps some improvised arrangements may have to be made in open air, preferably on one side of the Kingsway [now Rajpath], where the oath-taking can take place under a well-

decorated *shamiana*. The formalities should be more or less on the lines on the ancient enthronement ceremony, in which the *yagna*, prayerful rituals and benedictory messages were integral parts of the programme. Of course, the clergy and holy men of different faiths can also offer their good wishes."

The two persons who stood behind him interrupted Dr. Prasad to say that *Mataji* (the President-elect's wife) by virtue of her position must be provided a seat next to him on the dais. Nodding his head in approval the President-elect continued, "In the new scheme of things, the President will be receiving only practically half of what the Governor-Generals were drawing as salary, but it must be remembered that the prestige and dignity of the office of the President will be infinitely much more than that of a Governor-General. This and the total implications of the impending changeover should be properly understood by all the staff of the Government House. Then, of course, there will be the question of redesignating the House. I have decided it should hereafter be known as Rashtrapati Bhavan. The Simla House [the Viceregal Lodge] will also have to be renamed. Quite a few other changes will have to be made, a number of practices abolished, and a good many innovations introduced."

At this point, one of the persons who stood behind Dr. Prasad bent over his shoulder and whispered into his ear. With a displeased gesture, the master of the house cut him short. After a while he said, "I was just telling you about a few old and trustworthy hands who have been rendering me useful service since the stormy days of my life. I would like them to stay with me. Of course, you will also remain with me. About the other members of the Governor-General's personal staff, I shall decide after taking over my new office. Now, I would like you to come tomorrow morning again to clear up a few other points. I think, by that time you will be able to tell me all about the arrangements regarding the ceremonial installation."

While I was walking to my car, one of the assistants

hurried after me and said, "Babuji was speaking in *Rashtra Bhasha*, but you were talking in a foreign language. I am sure you know some Hindi. I am going to tell Babuji that when you come tomorrow, you will speak in Hindi only."

His ingratiating manner, and gratuitous advice surprised me greatly. I did not utter a word, but a passing thought worried me: does a President-elect consciously allow a retainer such latitude to abuse his patronage in this manner?

Back at the Government House, I found the Governor-General getting ready to leave for lunch. He was rearranging the things on his table. I briefed him about my talks with Dr. Prasad, expressing at the same time my curiosity about the two persons who had 'shadowed' the President-elect. Rajaji said casually, "Those people must be some old retainers who probably have been serving Rajen Babu from the days of the freedom struggle. Most of us had such assistants. With these people it may not be easy to enforce proper disciplinary standards. However, when you go there tomorrow, make sure that every aspect of the Estate administration is explained to Rajen Babu in detail so that at a future date I do not get embroiled in any outstanding issue. Meanwhile, you should immediately find out Jawaharlalji's reactions to Rajen Babu's suggestions on the installation ceremony."

The following morning I went to apprise the Prime Minister about the President-elect's proposals. He listened to me with a puckered face and then told me, scratching his bare head, "You know very well that all the arrangements have been completed and, therefore, you have to tell Rajen Babu that no change can be effected at this stage." Then he remarked with a smile, "We are not going to have a kingdom. It is going to be only a democratic republic."

The next day, I reached the President-elect's residence again and was greeted at the door by the same two attendants. One of them said facetiously, "We have told Babuji that you will be speaking in Hindi today."

I was ushered in and was surprised to see the President-elect waiting for me. Greeting him in English, I took a seat as he wished, near his sofa. He was breathing heavily, his head bowed down and eyes shut, and he did not appear to be in a communicative mood. As the silence grew heavy, and with the installation programme oppressively torturing my mind, I ventured to initiate the talk by enquiring about his health. In the attempt to answer me he was caught in the paroxysm of a distressing cough which left him completely exhausted. His livid face speckled with sweat, and cheeks twitching, he remained motionless.

Unhappily watching his pain, I waited patiently for him to revive. After a while he stretched out his hand to me and said, "The budget papers?" He looked through the file for a long time, and finally said, "We would need more money for tours." He then asked me about the existing arrangements for Presidential tours. I informed him that till now there had been no special aircraft for the Governor-General and that the Air Force had provided the aircraft whenever necessary. He then queried me about the availability of a special train for his tour. I told him that at the time of the partition the broad gauge Viceregal Special had been berthed in the Lahore shed and been not returned. But the metre gauge Special, docked at the Ajmere shed, I told him, was still with us. I explained to him how the special train requirement of the Governor-General had been met by improvised arrangements. Dr. Prasad appeared to be rather unhappy and asked me to get a saloon built exclusively for himself.

At this point, the Defence Minister, Sardar Baldev Singh suddenly walked in, and after paying his respects to Dr. Prasad, took a seat next to me. Turning to me, he said in a pontifical tone, "You see, on the 26th Babuji is going to assume the office of Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the defence forces. That is why, with his permission, I have asked a photographer of our defence establishment to come here some time today and take some official photographs of Babuji. We would need

those for the many defence units and establishments including the ordnance factories, ships of the navy, etc." Then, smiling with an air of evident satisfaction, he looked at me.

With Dr. Prasad's permission, I told him that it would not be correct to take any 'official' photograph of the President-elect before the installation ceremony was over. I also told him that the office of Supreme Commander-in-Chief was only an adjunct of the principal office of President and that I had already fixed a time on inauguration day to photograph the President officially. The President's photograph, I informed him, would be sent not only to the defence units, but to the thousands of Central and State establishments in India and abroad. Regaining his composure, Dr. Prasad said animatedly, "Yes, it should be done in the way the Colonel [that is, myself] is saying." While the Defence Minister became mute, one of the everpresent assistants remarked, "There should be no harm in getting another set of photographs as proposed by Sardarji [the Defence Minister]. It will not cost us anything, and at the same time, we shall be able to distribute the extra photos liberally, especially as the official photographs will never reach the hands of common people." With a gesture of his hand, the President-elect asked the assistant to leave the place.

Seeing that the President-elect was looking more tired, I quickly proceeded, with his permission, to give him a running account of the finishing touches to the coming ceremony. In the end, I enquired of Dr. Prasad how he wished to be titled, and whether he would like to use the prefix 'Babu' or 'Shri'. The reply came from one of the assistants who suggested that as Babuji was known as *Deshratna* among the masses, that epithet should be used in all official correspondence. Dr. Prasad quickly intervened to say that he had once prepared for a doctoral degree from the Calcutta University, but could not, for certain reasons, complete his studies. He continued, "However, I possess an honorary doctorate from a University. I know that Jawaharlalji and Rajaji, and a few others also have

received similar *honoris causa* degrees from some Universities. It should be all right if my name is written as 'Dr. Rajendra Prasad'."

As I rose to take leave, he asked me, whether I could interpret the designs on the presidential standard, which I did briefly. Then came an anxious query about the site and the programme of the installation ceremony. I told him that since all arrangements had been finalised there was hardly any time for changes. Disappointed, and in a tone of despair, the President-elect muttered, "The central figure of the ceremony is not being consulted in such important matters."

Before taking my leave, I told him that on the inauguration day I would come to accompany him to the Government House, from where along with Rajaji, he would proceed to the venue of the ceremony.

Thus, it was that, on the morning of January 26, 1950, I had found myself in the crowded drawing room of the President-elect's residence, waiting to lead him to the Government House, for his investiture....

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One evening, the President asked me to brief him afresh on the Estate administration. When I had finished, he pointed out that several of the practices and procedures that prevailed in the Rashtrapati Bhavan were outmoded, and not in tune with the spirit of the times and the wishes of the people. He said they would have to be changed or remodelled, and innovations would have to be introduced. The President continued, "Many visitors from the common strata of the society will henceforward come to this House. They are not familiar with the modern, sophisticated ways and the military discipline. Therefore, it has to be seen to, that those humble and

simple folks do not feel uneasy, or are not harassed or humiliated within the precincts of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. They will of course be talking in Hindi and naturally will expect replies in the same language."

He, then continued in English and told me that he had regard for all religions, but was himself a staunch Hindu, born in an orthodox Hindu family, and brought up in a strict Hindu environment, and that he hoped to breathe his last as a devout Hindu. Suddenly, looking, pointedly at me, he asked, "Have you a firm faith in the Hindu religion? I mean, do you believe in the *pujas* and the rituals?" I was momentarily nonplussed, but braced myself sufficiently quickly to tell the President that *pujas* of sorts, big and small, were continuing even that day in my ancestral home, but as for my own faith and belief in *dharma*, he would surely find it out from my work. This question from the President at that early stage of our acquaintance was not to my relish, and I felt that it carried an implied hint of doubt about my religiousness, which to me had always meant an abiding sense of rectitude. It brought to my memory an incident a few months ago, when a distinguished guest, pointing to me, had asked the Governor-General whether he had tested my religious bent of mind. Rajaji had told him that at my age, strict observance of *dharma* meant honest performance of *karma*. Dr. Prasad, however, did not pursue the matter further, and instead, said, "Although the Governor-General's salary was double that of my office, still, the President's office is far more distinctive and dignified. That position will be more clearly understood by the people after the general election is over, and true democracy ushered in by the elected representatives of the people."

He continued, "You will have to appreciate the total importance of the office of the President, and you must ensure that there is no interference in the affairs of Rashtrapati Bhavan. From what little I have seen during this brief period, I feel that you will have to give your immediate attention to three matters. The first refers to the drapery and upholstery

of the House. The present foreign materials will have to be replaced by *Khadi*. The uniforms of the servants could also be made of *Khadi*. The other matter relates to the crockery and cutlery used for the guests. The china and glassware articles should be replaced by silverware. Silver dishes, bowls, trays, tumblers, and so on should, as a matter of routine, be used for all formal functions, especially when foreign guests are invited. It is needless to say that there should not be any trace of foreign articles in my family wing, particularly in my sitting and bed rooms, where many of my old friends and associates may drop in frequently. These changes should be made as early as possible. The third question is related to the boarding arrangements for me and my family. I should like to discontinue the old system of preparing meals in the main kitchen and serving it from there. We are accustomed to orthodox Indian traditions. Some of my family members carry some old religious viewpoints. Completely separate arrangements, preferably in my own residential wing, will have to be made for cooking and catering. And as for purchase and procurement of commodities, the old family arrangements will continue. To that extent your Comptroller's section will be relieved of some work."

This led me to ask him whether the ADC attached to the President's family, who might not always be a Hindu, as ADCs come in rotation, would have free access to the family wing of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Dr. Prasad replied that ordinarily there should be no difficulty. I then asked him about the procedure for maintaining his funds and accounts. He pondered for a while, and said, "Those are really private matters, and therefore, will be looked after privately by my family in the same old way as was being done before I came here." I wished to further clarify my position in this delicate responsibility, and therefore, asked him again, "What procedure would you like me to follow regarding the maintenance of accounts relating to your sumptuary [entertainment] allowance?" Again, he thought for a while, and said, "There is already a Hospitality Organisation for meeting the expenses

connected with entertainment of the State guests. My allowance is expected to be spent on my private guests. Naturally, that account also should be kept privately."

I was much relieved at having gained a fair idea of the President's plan for the management of his domestic affairs. I immensely liked the clear and unambiguous manner in which the President talked. But what perplexed me was the question of replacing the drapery and upholstery which were very expensive and would certainly last many more years. I wondered how and wherefrom I should get the required funds, and also, how to dispose of those prematurely condemned lengths of silk, lace, velvet, brocade and so on.

I learnt soon that the refurnishing of the Rashtrapati Bhavan according to the President's taste would entail a very heavy cost. The Finance Ministry, whom I consulted advised me to get the approval of the Prime Minister. One evening, finding the President sitting all alone in the Moghul Garden, I broached the subject and requested him to speak to the Prime Minister about it. The President promptly said that if his wishes were communicated to the Finance Ministry, that should be enough. I told him then that it was the Ministry's advice that the matter should be placed before the Prime Minister. With a ruffled look, Dr. Prasad said, "That is surprising."

A few days later, I ran into the Prime Minister going to a cabinet meeting (then held in a room in the Rashtrapati Bhavan). He beckoned me and said, "Whatever changes the President wishes to be made in his study and his living apartments may perhaps be covered within the grant allotted to your office. But make sure, that no changes are made in the state rooms and in the guest wing." Later, I came to know that the President had had a talk with the Prime Minister on the subject that very morning.

I was happy to see the President enjoying a spell of sound health. He was obviously getting accustomed to his routine. I asked him if he would like to add a short walk in his daily programme, which would help tone up his system. With a bemused look the President said, "Make any suggestion, but physical exercise. Even a light walk does not agree with me."

I had noticed that for outdoor engagements, the President invariably carried a walking stick. And, except on formal occasions, he did not like to stand up to deliver a speech. However, with his time-bound daily routine, the President had put on a little weight. He slept fairly well during the first part of the night, but would wake up in the early hours of the morning, around 3.30 A.M., or even earlier.

At sunrise, an attendant would massage him for a fairly long time, and the President sometimes utilised this period by employing a dictaphone to reply to his private correspondence or issue a few orders. Other correspondence, and his literary works the President dictated to one of his assistants. And once he told me, "These books would live even when I am not alive." The more I saw of him the more I was enamoured of his simplicity and informality.

About this time, the Rashtrapati Bhavan staff wanted to felicitate the President on his assumption of office. I conveyed the matter to the President and he seemed extremely pleased. When he arrived at the staff recreation club the President was presented with a copy of the evening's programme. He went through it with a surprised look and immediately asked me, "I find the address is going to be read in two languages, Hindi and English. Why English?" When the President rose to speak he greatly surprised his audience with expressions of annoyance at using English on such an occasion. He concluded

with the admonition, "Hereafter, except Hindi, no other language will be used in any organised function in this House and Estate.

It was not so much the spirit of his remark as the manner of his expression which created some apprehension in my mind. As I watched the President, a doubt cropped up for the first time in my mind, whether the anxiety caused by his illness was leading the President to recurring anxieties of another nature.

Some of the President's old assistants and associates had been provided with jobs in Rashtrapati Bhavan. At the time of appointing them, he had told me how they were totally ignorant of office practices and procedures, and rules of conduct. They did not know English, but were well-versed in Hindi. Over the years, the President had developed an attachment for them, and their assistance in domestic matters as well as in political liason had made them virtually indispensable to the President. He, of course, was fully aware of their inadequacies, but even then, whenever there was talk about these persons, he would invariably ask me to keep a kindly eye on them and train them up as far as possible.

As I got to know these people better, I gathered that their demands, although not many, were quite extraordinary. They wanted substantial salaries, good accommodation, free access to the President, and unrestricted use of the Rashtrapati Bhavan cars. When I brought their behaviour to the President's notice, he gently nodded his head, and after a long time, told me with a sad look, "They are new in their present environment. Explain to them the position."

One evening, I received a call from the President whom I found sitting in a corner of the central lawn of the Moghul Garden. The two assistants were standing nearby. In a feeble voice Dr. Prasad said, "Probably you may not have a correct idea of genuine *Khadi*. Now-a-days, various imitations are coming out in the market." Pointing to his assistants, he said, "They know a particular shop in old Delhi where a variety of

printed *Khadi* linen is available at reasonable prices. If you give them some cash on an ad hoc basis, then, knowing our requirements as they do, they can get that material." I told the President that the Comptroller had already been asked to bring a wide range of samples from which a selection would be made with the President's personal approval. The advance cash payment, I told him, would set up a very unhealthy precedent for the many purchasing departments of my office, who always secured quotations and paid only after the receipt of regular bills. "Moreover," I said, "in such matters the proper department should be entrusted with the task, otherwise there may be fragmentation of responsibility which might create difficulty in spotting the guilty person in case there are lapses." The President, with a distant look in his eyes, suddenly became silent. As the two assistants were leaving the place in a dramatic hurry, one of them said, "As we were apprehending, Babuji's hands and feet will now be tied up in official red tape."

Though he knew all about *Khadi*, the President himself was confused one day when a distinguished visitor from abroad came to pay him a courtesy call. After the gentlemen left, the President commented with a beaming look, "Probably aware of my love for *Khadi*, the visitor was considerate enough to dress himself in *Khadi*." I then told him that the visitor's dress was made of Irish linen, a purely foreign material which resembled good quality *Khadi*.

My all too brief acquaintance with the President did not embolden me to ask him why he was not favourably disposed towards mill-made materials, especially when the mills were mostly Indian-owned, and a very large number of Indian workers were employed in them. Quite a few of those mills had actually come into existence during the lifetime of the Mahatma, and some very durable and attractive materials were being produced there.

In one of his relaxed moods, one day the President enquired if the uniforms of all the employees of Rashtrapati Bhavan

could be made of *Khadi*. He then revealed that he had already had a talk with the Defence Minister, and the Minister had told him that—for a number of reasons, *Khadi* would not be suitable as dress material for the defence personnel. The Railway Minister had, however, on the suggestion of the President, agreed to introduce *Khadi* for use in the bedding of upper class passengers, and in the retiring rooms of large stations. The President said at the end, “You should think about the matter from all possible angles, but in any case, the persons connected with my personal service and those employed in the family wing should all be equipped with *Khadi* dresses.”

Once, in a thoughtful mood, he said, “The ruling power in this country will remain in those hands that have implicit faith in the Gandhian creed. Therefore, it should be everybody’s concern to see that the demand for *Khadi* grows every-day.”

He had instructed me to remove and replace all the imported articles from his study and bed rooms. I now pointed out to him that there were quite a few things of foreign origin such as the carpet, the airconditioner, the radio, various electrical gadgets, and even the table-lamp, the water-flask, and all the bathroom fittings and accessories. The President intervened to say that these might remain as they were, but that the towels, the screens, the table and the bedcovers must be changed. After a while, he said, “Try to get some handmade paper from Poona. This could be embossed with my crest in the House press. My people will arrange to get my shoes made by a cobbler in Wardha. He uses leather only of dead animals.”

Despite my growing understanding of the President, at times I found it difficult to follow his way of thinking. There were, in fact, exasperating moments when the President seemed to go back on his own words. On the subject of foreign articles, I had thought I understood his rigid views, but ap-

parently in certain situations, he relaxed his orders. On his birthday, for instance, the House staff presented him with a wrist watch and a couple of handknitted woollen pullovers. I came to learn later that the refugee girls who knitted the pullovers had used high quality imported wool for the purpose. My conscience pricking, I took the earliest opportunity to inform the President about the mistake. He said, graciously, "Those garments will admirably serve me for several winters; they are soft and warm and fit me well." He then mentioned the watch. "The watchmaking industry has not started in this country yet. But wearing a watch on the wrist is a strikingly western custom. I shall keep it on my bedside table."

The same element of indecision I noticed in his approach to western medicine, about the use of which his discouraging views had been since long categorically stated. One of his doctors once suggested to him the substitution of a particular western medicine with an equally effective indigenous product. The President told him, "When I have placed myself under the western system of treatment, what is the use of changing a particular brand of drug?"

Once, Dr. Prasad was greatly embarrassed when one of his near ones refused to accept the gift of a domestic appliance because he would have nothing else but the well-known foreign substitute. To help the President to overcome his indecision I reasoned that as long as India did not attain perfection in industrial production, there might, perhaps, be no harm in keeping an open mind on the use of certain useful imported products. Nodding his head, the President exclaimed, "Peace at all costs! Arrange to get a foreign piece!"

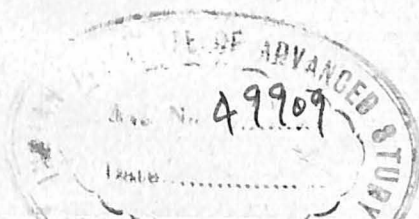
Dr. Prasad's dislike for things foreign was as strong as his views against coeducation, and the movie-going habits of young people. His firm belief in ancient Hindu traditions was substantially reinforced by Gandhiji's influence. In fact, Gandhiji's spirituality had cast a magnetic spell upon the President, and the Mahatma's belief in the hidden hand of divine power was unreservedly shared by Dr. Prasad. Nehru

had always disagreed with Gandhiji on the question of supernatural forces. And, according to the President, this fundamental difference between the two, which was never reconciled, was also reflected in the practical plane in various matters where their views could not converge.

5

It is an axiom that when physical health is impaired, the mind becomes restless. And, the President whose illness showed no improvement despite treatment from several systems of medicine, was a very disturbed man. His worries were aggravated by the thought that the public might gain the impression that his illness had come in the way of his living up to the stature of his office. For such a man, solicitude from others in any form has its value. And the President had an abundance of solicitude. But much of this unsolicited solicitude had an adverse effect on the President in that he became more conscious of his ill-health and of the general awareness of his incapacity. In this state of psychological turmoil, the President listened to anyone who offered advice—and there was no dearth of such people who came with suggestions on quick-acting and infallible remedies which sometimes stretched into the sphere of the occult.

One evening the President called me to say that the Defence Minister was sending a *pundit* to see him. The *pundit*, who claimed to possess extraordinary powers, was to perform a *yagna* in the House, and with the residual ashes and certain other ingredients, to prepare certain medicinal pills, which the President was told, would cure him permanently of his chronic malady. After the *puja*, the *pundit* would also read from a rare manuscript the future of the country and of its Head, the President. Though there was an anxious ring to the Presi-



dent's voice, there was also a discernible brightness lighting up his countenance. The President emphasised that the ceremony had to be conducted in direct contact with the earth, and the *pundit* fetched and driven back in a Rashtrapati Bhavan car.

Arrangements were made accordingly, and except for one thing all the other ingredients for the pill were procured locally. The rare component, and the most potent ingredient—the central part of a blue lotus seed—could not be found despite extensive search. The only place where this flower was in bloom at that time was Manasarowar, across the Himalayas. But the auspicious day was drawing near, and therefore, the *pundit* with a pontifical finality said, "In lieu of a blue lotus, two water lilies of blue colour would serve the purpose." This was easily procured.

The *pundit* came, the ritual was over, and the required number of pills was made on the spot. The President took the first dose from the *pundit*'s hand. Then started the reading of the sacred manuscript in the President's study, and it continued for seven days. The President wanted me to be present on the concluding day when the *pundit* would sum up the entire forecast. I sat and heard him ramble on about popular unrest in the country developing from economic distress, food-laden ships sinking near the country's coast, the President's increasing popularity, the gradual advent of peace, and finally, the establishment of *Ram Rajya*. As I took leave of the President, the *pundit* was advising him on what counter-measures to adopt to thwart evil planetary influence. The *pundit* finally received a substantial remuneration and went away, very satisfied with himself.

The President fell ill soon after. But there were still a few pills left to complete the 40-day course. The *pundit* visited the President again and assured him that once the course was completed the very roots of the malady would be rendered inactive. When the course was completed, however, the Presi-

dent was laid up with a violent attack of his illness. The President was very depressed, and I could make out that his faith in the medicine was completely shaken. The *pundit* was contacted again and he remarked, "Obviously the pills cannot acquire their potency without the blue lotus."

The President now pinned his faith on divine favours and supernatural influences. Ascetics and recluses with powers of divination, holy men with fatidic powers, astrologers, and sooth-sayers, began to be brought before the President by some of his old associates and acquaintances. Some by their forceful assurances, replete with recondite jargon, and some by their visible occult and abstruse practices did bring periodic relief to the anguished President. Once I saw a tall, bearded hermit, with nothing on his person except ashes, and looking fierce with a trident in his hand, blessing an emotionally upset President. He had been brought from a Himalayan cave. There emanated an exquisite fragrance from his body.

A Tibetan lama once came to me to seek an audience with the President, with the aim of requesting a donation for his monastic school. When I spoke of the lama to the President, he said excitedly, "Yes, some of the Tibetan lamas are powerful *tantriks*; I would like to meet him." The lama, as he came face to face with the President, blessed him with raised hands, and going closer, said, "You have brought a big bowlful of virtue from birth. You will be elected again as *Rashtrapati* not only in the coming election, but also in the next one after some years. But you are unlucky in another way. I shall of course be praying for you. You should also pray hard not so much for the enjoyment of your health as for its preservation." Tears rolled down the President's cheeks, and he requested the lama to pay annual visits to New Delhi.

Not long afterwards, the President informed me that a gentleman of unique spiritual powers, who also was perhaps versed in necromancy, would be arriving from Patna and would stay with him for a couple of days. The visiting gentleman, he said, would perform some rituals in the room adjacent

to his bedroom. Apparently, he was to call a spirit and get its answers to the President's questions. He would also acquire some divine gifts from the spirit in order to ease the President's ailment. I was greatly tickled by the news and wanted to see it all with my own eyes.

The first day's sitting ended in a fiasco; for, an elf—a *mala fide* spirit—had entered the room and after creating some noise, disorder and foul smells, left the place when the gentleman chanted some evil-repelling prayers.

The next day's session was very successful. Out of the sheaf of paper placed near a vase, a sheet suddenly flew up and rested against the vase; and the pencil that was kept nearby floated in the air and began scribbling rapidly on the paper. Several sheets were written upon in the same fashion, within a few minutes. All of a sudden two light taps were heard and the gentleman announced the conclusion of the seance. As the President collected the papers with the writings (his questions were kept by his side in a sealed envelope), the gentleman brought out two precious stones, one, a large pearl and the other a larger sapphire, which he presented to the President, who immediately ordered that they be got mounted on two gold rings for his personal use. When I asked the President whether the answers of the spirit did indeed meet his questions, he replied with a beaming smile, "Yes they do, to the minutest details."

Dr. Prasad had immense faith in astrology. One day when an astrologer had come from a distance to visit him, I asked the President whether his belief in astrology had developed from any particularly incident. Aroused by my curiosity the President told me the long story of how, during his college days in Calcutta, he and some friends had experienced the fantastically accurate prediction of a Bengali astrologer.

The then Central Minister, C. C. Biswas, a retired judge of the Calcutta High Court, had been one of his old friends in such consultations; and the common interest had not waned

with the passage of several decades. As the then Law Minister, Mr. Biswas visited the President often. One day he brought a *sadhu* to the Rashtrapati Bhavan, who prescribed for the President a course of mental exercise to strengthen his stamina and help overcome his illness. The President was required to sit before a painting of a crimson sun in a pale blue sky, with a deep blue foreground of an expanse of water with lotuses in bloom. Everyday, for half an hour the President was expected to meditate on the crimson sun. After a few months, however, the President gave up the exercise as it had proved futile.

Any visitor, familiar or unfamiliar, who showed some interest and belief in the supernatural found in the President an intent listener. Such visitors had a generous access to Dr. Prasad, as frequently as they wished. Some of them recommended Yogic practices to the President and one person paid regular visits to give him training in certain Yoga postures which were considered effective for bringing out phlegm. But these exercises proved too strenuous for him and were, therefore, after a few short trials, discontinued.

There were two persons whom the President held in high esteem in these matters, and one was the Tibetan lama, of whom mention has been made earlier. The President had asked me on that occasion to take down his name and address. Once, the President fell ill, and he wished to see the lama. The lama could not come but sent the reply that a soulful prayer was all that was needed for the President to overcome his indisposition. The other person close to the President was the spiritualist who at the seance had acquired the two precious stones for the President. He was so popular in the high circles that he was not easily available. One of the President's kinsmen, temporarily residing in Delhi, wanted to test this gentleman's powers. He received the shock of his life when a black cobra emerged hissing from under his carpet. As he jumped about in fear and excitement the spiritualist calmly advised him not to fool around with spirits. The President

was greatly annoyed with his relative when he heard about the happening, and expressed himself happy that the experimental seance had resulted in the loss for his relative, of a fountain pen and a copper vessel.

While it is true that prayers often do prove fruitful, to me they seem to gain value when said privately and in a secluded place. The President, however, had a leaning for rather ostentatious ways of offering prayers. In the practice of religious rites and rituals he seemed to like the exuberant glare of publicity, which, of course, paid dividends to him in a way; for, the simple public with their sketchy notions about *Sanatan Dharma* found in the President, a living embodiment of Hindu virtue and piety. And news of the President's spiritual practices spontaneously raised in the minds of the people a sense of awe, and reverence for a personage who, even in such a lofty office, continued to hold steadfast belief in the ancient traditions.

Whoever advised him on a pilgrimage would find him in enthusiastic agreement with the idea. Many such suggestions led the President to undertake extensive travel to various parts of India, at public expense. On one such tour to Rishikesh, he left an Ashram, named after him, in disgust, when the high priest started a *kirtan* in a mixture of Hindi and English!

One day I was called to the President, whom I found seated with two other gentlemen in the Moghul Garden. They had come to show the President a rare fruit which was grown in a garden in Hathras in UP. Showing me the fruit, the President said that it had been a favourite of Lord Krishna, and that according to the gentlemen, it had a taste like ambrosia, and also some medicinal values. One of the visitors remarked that it helped to increase virility. The President handed over the fruit to me and asked me to smell it. He was evidently greatly delighted with the gift — *Amrit phal* it was called — but wondered whether a single fruit would do him much good. He was, however, happy to hear that from its seeds it should be possible to raise it in the nursery. The few seeds, which

resembled those of a custard apple, were duly sown; but to his disappointment, none of them sprouted. When I asked the President whether the fruit had any effect on his vitality, he merely shrugged his shoulders and said regretfully, "A single fruit cannot show any appreciable effect."

Yet on another evening came two visitors to tell the President about a flower which possessed a bewitching fragrance. This flower, said one, grew very sparsely in the Himalayan valleys and its smell cast a magic spell on the human senses. The other remarked that the people of the mountains believed that when these flowers were in bloom, angels descended from the heavens beating their wings and hovered around the surrounding valleys. The flower, I learnt, was the fabulous *Gul-e-bakawle*. The President, of course, wished to acquire the plant for his nursery, and the gentlemen promptly promised to carry out this task. I could make out that this was a promise which would be carried out more in breach than in observance, judging by the drama of their story-telling. I ventured to mention that let alone the legendary flower, even ordinary Himalayan flora posed problems in transplantation due to altitudinal dissimilarities. But the President chose to be silent.

There was no end to the people who came to the President to offer him magical gifts ranging from flowers, leaves, ashes, and stones, to bits of paper and dry leaves on which *mantras* were written. The President accepted them all in humility and faith. Whether the gifts were presented informally or ceremoniously, I felt that these were aimed not so much at attracting divine grace on the President, as at invoking the President's grace on the donors themselves. Indeed, I was told by a distinguished friend of the President that the President was not unaware of the possible mesmeric influence of some of those gifts. But he did not dread them, saying, after, all what could these people extract from him, except some favours.

During his evening drives, when he invariably wanted me to accompany him, he usually spoke on three subjects: his

family commitments, the management of Rashtrapati Bhavan affairs, and the occult. Whenever I had, on such occasions, expressed my scepticism in placing unreserved faith in the unseen and the unknown, he was ready with an explanation: "Anything that is believed and practised by the majority cannot be generalised as superstition. When people offer me small gifts, these carry their prayers for me. My lone prayer 'may' invoke divine response, but the prayer of a multitude 'must' elicit it. And in this question of 'may' and 'must,' how can I disoblige these devout people?"

One evening at a garden party in Rashtrapati Bhavan the President was talking to a group of guests that included the Education Minister, about the unpredictability of meteorological forecasts, when the Prime Minister joined them. Turning to the Education Minister, Panditji said, "Meteorology is more dependable than the abstruse astrology." A discussion followed between him and the Education Minister, and Panditji continued to run down astrology in his impulsive fashion. An embarrassing situation was developing, and the Education Minister, in his quiet and humorous way, finally managed to put an end to the discussion. The Prime Minister moved away to another group of guests. As all the guests surrounding the President sat tight-tipped, I went to him, sensing his discomfiture, and asked him if he would like to retire. With a gentle nod he consented, and I immediately instructed the bandmaster to play the national anthem.

The President could not bear anyone talking disparagingly about astrology. In support of his faith he sometimes said that good astrologers might be dead but that astrology was very much alive. His unshakable faith was founded basically on the fact that it is considered by the learned as a part of the Vedas (*Vedanga*). As he sought the guidance of stars on all important matters, I occasionally found myself in awkward situations. The President had an unofficial astrological adviser in a distant town, who from time to time sent periodic forecasts to the President. He followed the astrologer's instruc-

tions religiously, especially the do's and don'ts prescribed. Thus, once, after having completed all the arrangements for the President's tour to Simla, I found him asking me to cancel the trip. When I explained that a large advance party had already left for Simla, and that the concerned authorities had all been informed, the President repeated, "You had better cancel it." Thinking of the expenses, and of the expectations of the people at the other end, I asked him again whether the tour was to be cancelled or postponed. With a faint smile he answered, "Yes, postpone the trip for some time."

In his enthusiasm to support and encourage astrology, the President once asked the Home Minister if a national award could be given to a particular astrologer. He was told that since the subject had not been recognised as a modern science, perhaps he should not press the proposal. However, some years later I learnt that the same astrologer, after having been categorised as an astronomer, had been given an award.

The President's passionate concern for the ancient *Gurukul* system of education found expression in many of his speeches and he made no secret of his desire to see the revival of the many decaying arts and crafts, and studies in areas such as Sanskrit, ayurveda, astrology, mythology, and folklore. One day, talking with the Jam Sahib (the Maharaja of Nawanagar) about these things, the President ruefully remarked, "The Prime Minister believes that the moon has an influence on the tides of the ocean, and of course he believes that the sun has a profound effect on human beings. Now, if he does not believe in the influence of the other planets such as Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn, then that would be his personal view. I know of a number of my colleagues old and new, who do not stir out of their houses without consulting their horoscopes or astrologers; but sometimes, to show their modern and progressive outlook, they make a complete *volte-face*, totally denying their faith."

It was through the Maharaja that a water-diviner, popularly known as *Pani Maharaj* came to the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Watched by the President and many others, he tried various sites in the Estate for subterranean water; but nowhere did his divining stick stand erect. Though the experiment failed, the President was nevertheless quite delighted as quite a few modern young men of his own staff had witnessed the experiment which, without a scientific explanation, was an accepted practice in the West too.

One day, I received an extraordinary piece of news from a lady clerk who had her quarters in the President's Estate. According to her, many of her costly dresses, kept in a wardrobe, had been totally destroyed by white ants overnight. The engineering section was ordered to take necessary measures to destroy the pests. But soon after, she dashed into my office one morning in a frenzy, to tell me that whatever wet clothes she spread out to dry in the courtyard immediately caught fire. I went down to the place and was rewarded with the sight of a towel catching fire. Meanwhile, she had brought a person who knew how to deal with evil spirits, and he told her that the place would remain haunted as long as there remained a skeleton buried deep under the house.. I spoke of the matter to the President and he advised me to get the views of a certain priest whom he knew personally. The priest came, surveyed the house, and calmly suggested that the evil spirit could be permanently inactivated if a *yagna* was performed at the site. Meanwhile, the lady had left the place with all her belongings. The rites were performed, but for a long time no one came to occupy the place. Finally, a stout-hearted tenant came to occupy it and lived there peacefully.

6

The President's first tour after assuming office was to Banaras, where he re-enacted an ancient ceremony which had

been part of the enthronement rituals of the kings of yore. In a glare of publicity, he washed the feet of a number of *pundits* and priests, made them offerings and received their benedictions. The ritual surely boosted the President's religious image to a new high, and enhanced his stature in the eyes of some people. However, I was at a loss for an answer, when the Prime Minister asked me later, "How will such showy revivalism benefit the State, in the short or the long run?"

Later, I learnt from the President that the ceremony, which had the moral support of the state government, had been conducted to make up for its absence at the time of his installation. I ventured to say then that perhaps it would have been better if the rituals had been performed privately. The President reacted sharply with the remark that there was no secret chapter to his life and he could not think of a thing he would do privately which he would not do in public. Taking courage from his growing trust in me, I continued, "Many religious practices, including the acts of piety and charity, are traditionally kept, as far as possible, clothed in privacy." The President replied with an air of finality, "That may be a modern practice, but not traditional."

The next tour took the President to the district town of Arrah in Bihar. There, an organisation devoted to the spreading of Hindi presented the President with a volume of sketches on the President's life, contributed by several writers. The President said at the function, "Hindi has to be taught to the people of non-Hindi-speaking states. In the beginning a great part of the task will have to be carried by the Hindi-speaking people. Unless they acquire a working knowledge of the regional languages, they will find it difficult to teach Hindi. If, as laid down in our constitution, Hindi is to replace English within the stipulated period of 15 years, those who know Hindi have the responsibility of learning other languages and thus of helping to accomplish this task."

The President's tour programmes were random ones. Whenever he felt physically well, he was eager to take on speak-

ing engagements. Except in the southern states, the President always spoke in Hindi, and most of his speeches were delivered extempore. His speeches usually covered the same areas: language, education, food, agriculture, cattle wealth, Indian culture, social reforms. At times the speeches betrayed a heavy emotional content. But never were they humorous. Often, they had a strong political ring and sometimes were catchy enough for the gallery. I sometimes wondered whether it was necessary for him, even in the pre-election times, to be so weighted down with politics, but apparently he and his admirers held contrary views.

Before a huge gathering in Allahabad, the President once said that if the citizens wanted him to take up a broom and clean the streets, he should be only too pleased to do so. The words had no doubt an electrifying effect on many minds, especially the simple unlettered people who probably constituted the bulk of the audience. But at least some knew that even in the best of health, the President could not bear the slightest whiff of dust or smoke.

He made some interesting observations about the sexes, while inaugurating the All India Conference on Moral and Social Hygiene: "If I had the power, I would stop the exhibition of films which create sexual lust. I would also stop the free mixing between sexes, which is opposed to our customary restraint. It is, of course, prevalent in foreign countries where it has been in practice for centuries, but its introduction here, is bound to upset our social life. . . . Many years ago I felt that I should write a book dealing with the lives of a dozen typical women who have been induced to lead an immoral life. But I could not do so because I had no courage to come into contact with persons who could give me correct information of that kind. . . ."

Dr. Prasad's views on the present system of education, which has doubtlessly created a gulf between the city dwellers and the villagers, were stated in no uncertain manner at a convocation of the Delhi University. He said, "Another loss

which the village suffered owing to the present system of education was that all the capable and skilled people of the villages began to desert their homes and settle in the cities. Talented young men from villages, who acquired English education, got so steeped in the English way of life that they would no more think of living in their former surroundings. The result was that the Universities became a kind of blotting paper for soaking up village talent. Only such persons continued to live in the villages, who were deficient either in intelligence or in craftsmanship. . . . Whatever may have been the economic and political importance of this educational system during the British period, it does not, and should not, exist any more. . . . The people educated in these Universities came to develop a kind of indifference, if not contempt, for the Indians who had remained entirely unacquainted with English literature and culture. The result was that in every city of India, a kind of cultural wall began to arise, on one side of which lived the spiritual children of England, and on the other the people of India. . . .”

At a meeting in Ernakulam, Kerala, the President prefaced his speech by saying, “I have perforce to speak in English, which I personally do not like. Hindi has now been adopted by the constituent assembly, and it is enacted in the constitution itself that Hindi is the national language of India. We all hope that within the next 15 years, everyone in this country who has any all-India business will know enough of Hindi to carry on his work.” Here, he also talked of his concept of socialism: “There must be millions and millions of men and women who are in extreme poverty in this country. On the other hand, we have only a few persons who are in affluent and happy circumstances. What we need is not the suppression of those at the top, but the uplifting of those who are at the bottom, and I cannot understand the philosophy which aims at levelling down instead of levelling up.”

The question of enquiring into the ancient Indian techniques of construction, came up in his speech at the Indian

Academy of Sciences: "I do not know whether sufficient attention and research have been devoted to a study of the ancient methods and materials of building, with a view to improving them. I have a feeling that it would be easier, perhaps less expensive, to improve the old implements and methods than to introduce altogether new instruments and materials, particularly in agriculture.... I do not know if there were any engineering colleges or other institutions which trained the builders of our South Indian temples, or of the Taj and the forts of the Moghul emperors. Even lesser known structures than these, have also stood the inclemencies and extremes of the Indian climate for hundreds of years. What were the materials used in them?.... I wonder if the materials used in the old structures have been examined and scientifically tested; also whether these were found to be costlier or inferior, and hence rejected...."

During one of his informal drives, the President asked me, "Will you make the necessary arrangements for my visit to the various Central Government institutions and establishments in and around Delhi? It is necessary for me to know what exactly is happening there. I spoke about this to some Ministers, but till now no formal invitations have been communicated to me. You may draw up a programme for my visit and inform the Ministries concerned."

Arrangements were accordingly made for the President to visit the Agricultural Research Institute, the National Physical Laboratory, the Archaeological Museum, the National Archives, the Meteorological Office, the Malaria Institute, the Housing Factory, the Ordnance Factory at Muradnagar and a few other institutions. The President displayed keen interest in the working of these establishments, but he was disappointed that none of the Ministers concerned was present to receive him. He was conducted around by the institutional heads.

Now and then, incidents cropped up which upset the President and in turn affected his health. When the first *Vana Mahotsava* (Plant-a-Tree Celebration) was going to be held all over the country, the President had suggested that he would himself plant the first sapling. He also wanted that all the customary religious rituals should be observed during the ceremonial planting. Shortly before the day of celebration, I received a message from the Delhi Administration that the function would be presided over by the Prime Minister, who would also plant the first sapling. Evidently, there was no need, therefore, for the President to take the trouble of going there. When I informed the President about it, he was silent for some time; then he said, "We will celebrate the festival in our Garden here." He then asked me to get a number of saplings of the choicest mangoes so that some members of his family could also participate in the ceremony. He told me in a soft voice, "Tree-planting is an act of great virtue. If you like, you may also plant one. But don't forget to invite some religious-minded people to watch the ceremony. Some foreign diplomats may also be asked to come." In due course, some select mango saplings were brought down from Saharanpur and a place was selected for the ceremonial planting.

On the appointed day, the President, sitting under a huge velvet umbrella, and accompanied by the chanting of *mantras*, performed the *Bhumipuja* (worship of the earth), the *Vriksh-ropan* (planting of the sapling), the *Vrikshpuja* (worship of the plant), and *Vrikshsnan* (watering the plant). Most of the invitees could not attend the Rashtrapati Bhavan *Vana Mahotsava* as they had to be at the public ceremony presided by the Prime Minister. When the President was told later that in the intense heat some people had fainted at the public function, he asked laconically, "Were they Indians?" He

then inquired, "Was the tree planted by the Prime Minister an indigenous one, or one brought from abroad?"

Not long after, a disturbing incident occurred. I had been aware that the President was getting quite exercised over the question of the powers and privileges of his office, and I also knew from what he confided in me often, that soon after the general elections he would try to get the controversy sorted out finally. On several occasions he had told me that as his authority was being encroached upon in various ways, he would thenceforward resist all those attempts firmly; and he reminded me to be constantly conscious of my primary obligation—which was to him.

Sardar Patel had expired in Bombay. The Prime Minister had rushed to the Rashtrapati Bhavan to tell the President of it. Even as he was in the Presidential study, the staff officer on duty rang me up to say that the President wished to see me immediately. As I was entering the study, the Prime Minister came out of it with a grave face. My greeting to him went unacknowledged, and inside the room I saw the President in a state of great anguish, tears rolling down his cheeks. After a while, he raised his head and asked me, "Will you immediately arrange for my flight to Bombay to attend the Sardar's funeral?" Then he broke down completely. I took the telephone and asked my office to make the necessary arrangements through the Air Force. When he had regained a measure of equanimity, the President said in a tremulous voice, "Sardar! Sardar! who in fair and foul weather always stood by my side! I can't forget. It would be the crudest depth of ingratitude if I did not present myself at his funeral." He then told me with a flushed face, "Jawaharlalji informed me now that he and two of his colleagues would be leaving immediately for Bombay. He advised me that at this juncture when the law and order machinery of the state government would be put to extreme strain, my presence in the city would further aggravate the situation. He therefore suggested that

you, on my behalf, could accompany them in the aircraft and represent me at the state funeral. But I have told the Prime Minister, that in spite of my weak state of health and irrespective of the state government's inconvenience, I shall personally go there."

It was a moving sight as the dazed and speechless President led the long convoy of cars that followed the cortege. At the cremation ground, even from the beginning of his oration, the President broke down. An asphyxating gloom filled the hearts of the mourning multitude, as the flames danced on the funeral pyre.

Soon there arose another occasion when the President expressed his inability to accept the Prime Minister's advice. I was formulating the President's Hyderabad tour, when I was told by the States Minister, Mr. Iyengar that in Hyderabad the President should perhaps camp in the city itself and not in the Faluknama palace where the visiting Governor-Generals used to stay. That luxuriously furnished palace, situated on a hillock commanding a panoramic view of the countryside, had been specially built by the Nizam for the exclusive use of touring viceroys. When the President was informed about the Minister's proposal, he merely shrugged his shoulders and asserted that what was good during the previous regime could as well continue to be so during the present regime too. The same evening, the Prime Minister asked to see me. Panditji exclaimed, "Listen, we must be reasonable! The PWD Minister of Hyderabad was telling me that the stretch of road between the city and the Faluknama palace is in a state of disrepair. Moreover, if the President were to stay at the palace then it would put the civil administration under unnecessary pressure to make the necessary security, transport and other coordinating arrangements. Therefore, you should explain the position in detail to the President and keep the States Minister posted regarding the final outcome."

Next morning I related to the President all that the Prime Minister had wanted me to tell him and finally informed him

that a colossal sum would have to be spent for repairing the road for the President's fleeting visit. Raising his head from a file, the President said, "Whatever may be spent for the repair and reconstruction of the roads will provide relief to a number of poor labourers of the state. So where is the waste? You may go ahead with the proposed plan for my stay in the Faluknama palace."

A similar situation arose when the President went on a visit to Srinagar. But there, the state administration could not meet his wishes. The beautiful lakeside villa, Chasmeshahi palace, where the last Governor-General used to stay, and where the President wished to be put up, was already occupied by the visiting Minister, Maulana Azad.

On his birth day that year, he was not in good health, but insisted on personally receiving all the visitors who started pouring into the Rashtrapati Bhavan from early morning. The Moghul Garden was thrown open and soon the whole place took on the air of a *fete champetre*. People from all walks of life were there. A few Ministers and other VIPs came, but late. The majority were ordinary people.

The Rashtrapati Bhavan staff had a trying time controlling some elements of the visitors. With most, sentiment had got the better of reason. Everyone was in a merry mood, sauntering all over the place, plucking flowers, crowding around the immaculately attired lancers, or washing their feet in the water-courses of the Moghul Garden. People milled round the President uttering fawning platitudes. Some burst into tears while garlanding him with chains of *Khadi* thread. The President was soon sandwiched among some people who in wild ecstasy began shouting his *Jai*, and one of them, turning towards a House officer, cried, "All of you are seeing Babuji in the heyday of his glory; but we have served Babuji during his difficult times. We are not summer friends like you."

As they continued to pester the President, one of the staff officers asked them to stand aside. But the President, with a

smile, said, "Leave them alone; they have come from long distances." Derisive laughter rose from the group, and instead of standing aside they moved closer to the President and asked their cameraman to take some photographs. Seeing the staff officer in discomfiture, I myself went over to them and told them in a formal fashion, "Please do not forget that you are standing before the President of the country. You must know how to conduct yourselves in such a situation." Immediately, the President told them with a worried look, "Yes, you should observe the rules of the place wherever you go." The President's words had some effect, and a few people moved away. Almost simultaneously, I saw the Prime Minister approaching with a large bouquet of red roses. His very sight had a magical effect on the crowd that still clustered round the President. Some vanished behind the trees, and some hurried away and disappeared. After offering his tributes, Panditji turned back, frowned at a small noisy group, and then dashed off, trailed by his harried security officer.

The Viceroy's of India, in their heyday, had kept their touring commitments limited to the princely states where they were invariably accorded a fabulous hospitality. The strength of the Viceroy's usually large entourage had caused no problem to those hosts who drew no line between economy and extravagance in entertaining the King's representative.

But the order had changed. And there was a critical watchfulness on what went on. I was not, therefore, surprised when, one day, running into me in a corridor of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Prime Minister enquired, "What is happening? Is it really necessary for a battalion of people to accompany the President on his tour? By convention, the Members of Parliament do not raise the matter inside the House, but mind you, they are talking about it outside the House." Puffing at his cigarette, he continued, "There used to be a saying among British seamen, 'Join the Royal Navy and see the world'. Now you seem to be subscribing to a new slogan: 'Join the President's staff and see India.' Is your sense of

discipline and concern for economy thinning out?" He went on in a fit of laughter and cough: "I am sure you must be aware of the reaction the President's circus creates in the various states. There are frequent reports from Chief Ministers about their difficulties in meeting the heavy demands on the exchequer caused by the unwieldy side of the President's party. At times they are embarrassed, and even annoyed. I want you to explain to your staff that all such obtrusive and extravagant practices have no place in democratic management. I personally think that yourself, a couple of ADCs, a private secretary and half a dozen assistants should be enough to meet the President's touring requirements." The Prime Minister then continued on his way to the President's study.

What Panditji said was nothing new to me. I had already heard from responsible sources in the states of their difficulties in hosting the President and his party. I had also spoken to the President about the matter. But he had merely remarked that the people who had always been accompanying him in his tours would not feel happy if they were now excluded, and therefore, they should be accommodated. Later, when I was planning a long tour of his, I omitted the names of two persons from the party, finding their inclusion unnecessary. The President sent for me. He said, "I believe two of my old assistants have not been included in the party that will accompany me on my forthcoming tour. Perhaps you might include them this time." After a while he continued, "No amount of drastic economising in this House will reverse or even arrest the spending sprees of some Government departments." Picking up a fancy brochure from a table the President named the Ministry that had issued it and commented on their reckless spending. He said finally, "Of the three types of Government departments—the earning, the self-sustaining and the spending—let the spending departments also have some returns, if not in cash. The people who accompany me can do some contacting of the masses, which is not a small return!" The President was evidently alluding to some political factor, which eluded me.

When the Prime Minister emerged from the President's chambers, I asked him whether the size of the tour party had been discussed. He merely waved his fist in the air and walked off. Inside the chambers, I found the President flushed in face and breathing heavily. I was in an awkward situation, unable to withdraw or initiate a talk on the subject in question. Suddenly the President spoke, in a hoarse voice: "The President of a country does not go on tours with just a valet and a stenographer." He stopped abruptly, and after a long pause added, "No changes need be made in my touring arrangements."

8

All my attempts at preserving an optimum standard of discipline among the lower staff of the House, especially those in the family wing, had successively failed. The President's simple and easy-going ways, rural habits, and air of childlike naivety were fast creating in the Rashtrapati Bhavan the impression that a new era had dawned. An atmosphere of relaxation gripped the whole place, and the pervasive laxity spread its contagion among the disciplined ones also. I was reminded of the saying that a drop of lime can sour a bucketful of milk. There were, of course, a number of trained old hands and young staff officers whose sense of duty and discipline had a corrective influence on many disorderly trends. But things came to such a pass that I could not but approach the President to tell him that the irresponsible conduct of some members of the staff was vitiating the atmosphere of the House. I told him how they were bringing their friends of doubtful *bona fides* to state functions and picking up quarrels with the sentries, and distributing in the name of the President, flowers and fruits of the Estate to their friends and acquaintances. Their

slovenly ways were an encouragement to general indiscipline. The President merely replied, "Perhaps these people are finding difficulty in adjusting to the new environment. You had better explain the position to them."

This emboldened me to say that though these persons had their own way before Dr. Prasad became President, they should, in the Rashtrapati Bhavan, adopt the prevailing standards of discipline and conduct. For, where was the need, I asked him, for the nearly 2000 employees (with another 6000 dependents) employed at enormous cost to the exchequer, but to run an efficient and dignified House for the President? I reminded the President that he had seen only a part of the budgeted grants, and that if he went into the total expenditure on all the civil and military personnel, he would be astounded at the staggering figure. Evidently all that expense was aimed at something genuine and the President, I suggested, might like to think it over. He stared at me for a long time and then repeated, "You could explain the position to them."

As the days went by, and the elections approached, the President seemed to be getting more and more exercised over them. He talked of the elections in several speeches, inviting comments upon himself as to the propriety of these references. Around this time, large number of visitors came for private audiences with the President. It became a common occurrence for some of these callers to argue with the sentries at the gate for halting them for identity checks. After one such 'gate-crashing', where the President's sympathy lay with the 'gate-crasher', I had told the President that it would be a desirable practice if such visitors reported themselves to the enquiry office—where due courtesy would be shown to them, and all advice and assistance given—instead of trying to sneak furtively in. If the existing discipline was flouted, I told him, awkward situations were bound to develop and the poor sentries would be finally blamed for faults that lay elsewhere. The President replied, "But why should people coming to see me be challenged at the gate? What more humiliation

can a person suffer?" Aware of the fact that the President rather disliked references to certain high dignitaries for their administrative acumen, I only ventured to relate to him what Rajaji had said in his farewell message to an army detachment leaving Government House at the end of their tour of duty: "You have given no cause for complaints, although you were charged with unpleasant duties. No one likes to be stopped or questioned by a sentry. We are an oversensitive people. We have not yet learnt to take routine discipline without attributing disrespect to ourselves...."

The President listened attentively and then said, "I have noticed that this House maintains close contact with the official world; but that is only a small part of our world. The big part is the unofficial world of the masses. I am an old social worker with a political affiliation. Many people, mostly from the average strata of society, know me and have a measure of regard for me. Whatever metamorphosis I may undergo, I cannot be inconsiderate enough to disown their friendship. Some of my colleagues in the political field do leave their friends in the lurch at their sweet pleasure. I do not follow that policy. I want the company of the masses all the more because I believe it is due to their prayers and good wishes that I am in my present office today. Of my old assistants, some are in close touch with these people. That is a valuable matter to me. I have told you before also that they may not be familiar with all the nuances of disciplined conduct; I would like you to explain these things to them."

A great majority of the common folk who called on the President informally, were undoubtedly simple and sincere; many of them had a record of suffering and sacrifice. They were mostly literate, but not much educated. And they had their own notions about what was going on in the country. Therefore, they were impelled to offer the President their suggestions on various matters of government action. Some of them appeared to be in conditions of extreme want. But curiously, the general tone and tenor of their talks were deeply

political. The President, of course, in his simple way believed in the leadership of the masses in a democracy. He was quite at ease in the company of these people whose desultory discussions on almost everything under the sun often provided amusing interludes. Long hours of the President were spent in their company; their numbers varied and their attendance was not regular. After his formal election to the office, their visits dwindled. And thereafter, his evenings became occupied mostly in entertaining Members of Parliament.

Some were there who in their self-imposed roles offered advice to the President on national affairs, and at times sought his intervention. But generally his common reply was, "I can do something about what you say, only if I have the power."

Meeting these people often made me wonder whether there weren't thousands of such sulky and disgruntled people all over the country who had given their best during the struggle for freedom, but whose services, for some reason or the other, had remained either unrewarded or unrecognised. These latent forces of discontent had evidently remained torpid and this could not be good for a country occupied with ambitious national plans. The remark of a wise person had remained with me: "Gandhiji's regiments were legion, but there was no practical scheme for the rehabilitation of the demobilised soldiers."

Then there were those who came only by invitation. Comparatively younger people who had been in the thick of the liberation movement, they were men of high morale and patriotic fervour who took socialism and Gandhian ideals seriously. Many had dissociated themselves from the Congress. A few of them had started new political parties, some had joined other parties and some had dedicated themselves to constructive social work. Some also had been offered high offices but had declined. The President was anxious to meet these dissident veterans informally. Their names, however, were not included in the issues of the House circular.

In those days when freedom still tasted fresh, the linger-

ing spell of the bygone era, coupled with the rush to make up for lost opportunities, frequently led to many inconsistencies of principle and purpose, and priority and proportion. Consequently, even after the democratic system was launched, many unhappy features of its antithesis still loomed large in several fields. Rightly and properly, the Government was called a National Government; but strangely, there was a clear apathy and unconcern for people and groups who did not see eye to eye with the ruling party. There was no imaginative approach to the solution of human problems; nor a democratic machinery for liaison with the opposition or to carry on a continuous salvage of the innumerable bright talents floating about unspotted and even ignored, often because they had happened to have incurred someone's wrath or pricked the bubble of another's vanity. The spirit of tolerance and accommodation was already fast ebbing out in the land of Gandhi, so soon after his martyrdom.

A golden opportunity was obviously lost when, during the transitional flux, nothing was done to bring about at least a minimal structural adaptation of the administration to the new conditions. There was, of course, much ado about bringing equality to the profoundly stratified society, but the insuperable compartmentalism and the inbuilt prejudices of the administrative motive power continued to impede the dynamism necessary for a determined progress.

9

I was often surprised and bewildered at the confused interpretations of Gandhian philosophy in which many of the visitors to the President vociferously indulged. Astounding was the depth of their self-satisfied conviction that Gandhian philosophy could be truly interpreted only by those who had

been personally close to the Mahatma. According to their own claims, they had learned Gandhian principles at the Mahatma's feet. But did they all live up to his ideals? The demised Mahatma's unseen presence had not still worn off from New Delhi's corridors of power, when I was witness to painful spectacles of aberrant behaviour and aggressiveness concomitant, of course, to the power-rivalries that had already begun. Past prejudices and old recriminations were being dug up to further individual or group interests. And a good deal of it was happening in circles where a steadfast faith in Gandhian principles was being loudly and piously proclaimed.

Once, unable to restrain myself, I asked one of a group of self-appointed close disciples of the Mahatma, in the presence of the President, whether they were aware that the philosophy of the Buddha was spread actively and extensively by a king nearly a couple of hundred years after the Lord's Mahanirvana. My question evidently created some consternation. In the absence of any response, and finding the President silent, I went on to add that all our prophets, saints and seers had found faithful followers in the succeeding generations than in contemporary devotees and worshippers. There was a sudden lull in the desultory and disjointed deliberations of that group, and I took the opportunity to make myself scarce.

Many people would not give clear and categorical answers to some of the President's questions, not because they did not have the right answer, but for the simple reason that they could not think up the right answer that would please the President. The President remained only a silent listener most of the time. Occasionally, he would nod his head to signify agreement. Even when the trend of some discussions were not to his liking he remained impassively quiet. It was amusing to watch the way people would express an opinion, only to hastily change it as soon as the President was found expressing a contrary view. All that these cringing men wished for was to fall in line with the President's views.

But, ironically, I found the President himself falling in line with his visitors' views all too often. Once, a caller suggested to the President that some black and white swans could be kept in the ponds and water-courses of the Moghul Garden. His friend amplified, "Those graceful birds will certainly beautify the President's garden." The President turned to me and said, "That is not a bad idea. We have sentries here, and jackals do not prowl at night; therefore we can keep half a dozen swans." But another gentleman said, "The swans do not stay all the time in water. They will come up and move about on the beautiful lawns, where they will surely leave droppings. If the human skin comes into contact with swans' excreta, fungal ulcer may develop, if not leprosy." The President promptly told me, "Then better abandon the idea."

A sycophant, once shocked the President with the remark that one of his friends who had recently attended a state function in Rashtrapati Bhavan, had told him that the cigarettes used in the House were embossed with the President's initials. The gentleman continued dramatically, "Finding the President's Military Secretary here, I have deliberately raised this topic." The President was aghast, and I asked an orderly to get a box of cigarettes immediately. I then clarified that the cigarettes served in the House during the old days had been embossed with the family crest of the Viceroy. During the Indian Governor-General's time they had been stamped with the letters 'G.H.', the abbreviation for 'Government House'. And now with the installation of the President, the cigarettes were stamped with the letters 'R.B.' standing for 'Rashtrapati Bhavan'. I showed the President a sample, but he still appeared unhappy. To add to his discomfort, another gentleman remarked, "Ordinary people might mistake 'R.B.' to stand for 'Rajen Babuji'." A dejected President asked me, "Can we not stop serving cigarettes in this House?" I reminded him that the Prime Minister, Maulana Sahib, Mr. Kidwai, and several other Ministers always asked for cigarettes when they visited Rashtrapati Bhavan. Hence, we would have to bear

in mind, I told him, the convenience of all the guests, especially the guests of state. The President was silent.

Soon, there arose another farcial crisis to agitate the President. An old friend of the President came to him with the news that there was a large picture of the President in the central lounge of a major club in Delhi, and that every evening an uproarious drinking session took place under the photograph of the respected President. The news upset the President so much that he was trembling in anger. His face red, he asked me, "Is this true?" I told him that a photograph had been presented to that well-known club; but I confessed my ignorance of the sort of session held below it. The President said excitedly, "If the news is correct, then you had better ask for the return of that photograph." The following day, I sent a letter to the president of the club informing him about the President's unhappiness over the information that had reached him, and requesting him to make necesssary inquiries regarding the matter. The president of the club promptly and politely replied that the President had been misinformed. I showed the letter to the President, and he said smilingly, "Then nothing needs be done."

Dr. Prasad's amenability to all kinds of idiosynceratic, and often mutually contradicting suggestions, was most bewildering. A fawning gentleman one day suggested to him the planting of a variety of perfumed flowering plants alongside the verandah leading to the President's bedroom. His apparent motive was that the President would enjoy the enchanting fragrance while resting. Nodding his head, the President indicated his approval and asked me to examine the proposal. Not many days passed before another gentleman said that all such strong-smelling flowers attracted lizards and other poisonous reptiles. The President immediately asked me to drop the idea of the flowering plants. Yet another gentleman who was present offered to get the views of a well-known horticulturist on this matter. With a tilt of his head, the President gave his assent to him. The same evening, I asked the Garden

superintendent to go ahead with the planting of the plants, but away from the main house and abutting the terraced wall of the Moghul Garden. When, next morning I told the President what I had ordered, I too received his assent! "That's all right."

I found a foursome with the President one day, one of whom was a gentleman who waxed eloquent about the richness of the Indian culture. He was the first to leave, and I was most tickled by his parting words. Taking in by a gesture of his hands, the President and the Rashtrapati Bhavan of Sir Lutyens, he cried, "This is really a heaven on earth; an abode of the gods. Blessed is he who lives in such surroundings!"

One of the remaining three then started talking about the unhelpful attitude of some Indian officers during the days of the freedom struggle, and proceeded to name some of them. The President, who was listening quietly, suddenly raised his hand and said, "Those old memories need not be raked up afresh. In the changed atmosphere of today, it would be better to bury those thoughts." Promptly enjoined a gentleman, "Bapu used to say that it would not be wise to wipe out completely the memories of the past, because some of the old recollections might provide interesting and helpful morals for the onward journey of a nation. He therefore, always advised occasional peeps into the buried past." Another said, "If we shut out the past then how shall we draw inspiration from the teachings of Sri Ramachandra and Sri Krishna?" And the third contributed his bit, "If we forget the past, then how could we have hoped to get this rare privilege of keeping Babuji's company this evening?" Nodding his head, the President said, "It is not possible to efface old memories."

I had heard many people talk about the President's noble qualities. All knew that he was extremely attached to his friends, associates and admirers. It was also well-known that with his profound sense of gratitude, he went all out to assist those persons who had, at some time or the other, lent their support and assistance to him. I could not figure out at the beginning why so many people came rushing to see the President at his slightest indisposition. My curiosity was satisfied by Sardar Sardul Singh Caveeshar who explained to me that returning every act of courtesy and consideration shown to him was an avowed principle of Rajen Babu's life. And therefore, people flocked in large numbers to visit their indisposed President merely to sow a seed of sympathy which they knew would bring them a rich harvest at some future date.

I knew of several instances where the President had suffered unnecessary vexation and harassment in trying to help someone. Of course, not all the people on whom he was pleased to bestow his grace were unworthy of such consideration. There was also a difference of opinion about the propriety of the Head of the State directly entertaining requests, and distributing favours or patronage on grounds of the acquaintance factor, or on personal grounds. Whether this sort of arbitrary charity was helpful in setting ideal standards during the formative stage of a developing democracy was a question on which there was a divergence of views. In any case, one thing that was particularly noticeable in all matters of direct Presidential support and patronage, was that no one went back disappointed if he approached the President personally. I had seen innumerable people, most of whom were his own friends and acquaintances, approach the President for help. And to help

the President quite often went out of his way, and in certain cases left no stone unturned to get what he sought. He even went to the extent of making claims for the sympathy and consideration of the Prime Minister and the other Ministers to get his wishes implemented. Such bestowal of Presidential favours, including recommendations for national honours, during the days of a vast democracy's debut, was being viewed in many quarters as blatant anomalies. More than once I brought this ticklish matter to the President's notice, and even commented that there were thousands of people of sterling character in search of justice, who, with their innate sense of propriety, did not dare to go to the President to get their personal desires fulfilled. The President always replied in the same old vein, "Shorn of all other powers, if the Head of the State does not have even a little discretionary power, then what is the use of retaining this expensive establishment and office at all?"

Even before becoming President, Dr. Prasad had, irrespective of the merit of the individuals, assisted people who approached him directly for such assistance. And all those who benefited through his influence were naturally loud in his praise. These apart, he was generally talked about appreciatively as a kind and accommodating person. But the short periods when he held certain offices had created the general impression that Dr. Prasad was not equipped with an administrative acumen or flair. This was succinctly put by Mr. Sudhir Ghose who had served as Administrator of the Faridabad Development Board when Dr. Prasad was its Chairman. Mr. Ghose told me that Rajen Babu was too nice a gentleman to be actively involved in administrative matters. He had the suavity of an administrator, but not the essential requirement: firmness. And that complicated matters.

His weakened physical constitution and the related mental makeup were perhaps the underlying factors of his haphazard ways. The President was once displeased, when in the midst of some invited guests I asked one of his assistants to leave. On several occasions in the past I had noticed that when all

eyes were focused on the President and the cameras were clicking all around, one of his valets or assistants would appear from nowhere and start tidying the president's dress—buttoning up the undone buttons of his *achkan*, rearranging the back-fold of his *dhoti* or putting his cap straight. I had warned them earlier in the presence of the President that such tasks should be done preferably in his room and not in public. And once the President himself had remarked, "They may try to make me appear smart, but people do not expect smartness at my age." And I had his own instructions that the affairs of the House should be conducted with all solemnity and dignity. But he himself had easily forgotten all these.

The same philosophy of slackness also accounted for his negative attitudes towards beauty, elegance, smartness, orderliness, silence, punctuality and all other finer traits of disciplined conduct. The President did not attach any importance at all to observing punctuality. Sometimes he would say, "How many people in this country possess watches?"

Once he made his appearance five minutes late at a state reception in the House itself. As I was receiving the guests, I saw the Prime Minister arrive right on time. He came into the Hall, talked to a few guests, and then turned to me and asked, "Have the guests come here to see the static display of the bodyguard lancers or the wonderful paintings on the ceiling?" Sensing what the Prime Minister was driving at, I walked down to find out the cause of the President's delay. I found to my surprise that the ADC had sent a 'second reminder' slip to the President, but had not so far received an answering ring. I did not hesitate to enter the President's study and inform him that he was already late and the guests were waiting for him. The visitor whom the President was entertaining must have understood the urgency of the situation, for he promptly left. The moment the President entered the Hall, Panditji walked up to him briskly and after a *namaskar*, looked at his watch and said, "I have kept a gentleman waiting in my office. I had told him before coming here

that I should be back in a quarter of an hour. I hope you will excuse me." Still looking at his watch, the Prime Minister hurriedly walked away.

After the reception, as I was accompanying the President to his bedroom, he lamented to me, "The shadows of the trees and the changing hues of the sky told the villagers of the progress of the day. Of course, such a method admits some inaccuracy. Still, unaccustomed to the demands of urban living, they do not feel the need for clocks and watches. And they live a contented and long life. Not one in a thousand in our country possesses a watch." I did not follow his precise intent, but for a moment, my mind wandered away from the luxurious Rashtrapati Bhavan to Gandhiji's temporary camp in Beliaghata where I had met him in the company of Rajaji and had watched him regulating his daily programme with the aid of an imported watch which always dangled from his waist. The President's words gave rise to a succession of thoughts in my mind that I could not reconcile easily with the facts as I knew them. It was Dr. Prasad's declared mission to walk in the footsteps of the Mahatma. He had also written a book entitled, 'Bapuji ke Kadam Mein'.

The joint session of the Parliament was due to be opened by Dr. Prasad. Every phase of the President's journey from his bedroom to the Parliament Hall, including a drive in the coach, and stops at two points to take the salute of the body-guard, had been timed to the last second, and even rehearsed. But on the opening day, as he was proceeding on foot to the coach, the President felt dizzy and had to slow down his pace. This naturally led to a dislocation of the timetable. When I brought this to his notice, he tersely remarked, "What would it matter if I arrived there a few minutes late?" He finally reached the Parliament Hall two minutes late. And I hastened to explain to the Speaker and the Prime Minister the reason for the delay. Back in Rashtrapati Bhavan, the President remarked, "A fraction of a minute might mean something in military practice; but in civil life such close calculation and minute observation is not really necessary."

Driving with him on the regular evening outing, I once ventured to ask him about his periodic phases of reticence. He told me, "The reason for my long periods of silence is simple. I have perforce to conserve my breath because of my respiratory trouble. The ancient spiritual schools of course believed that long periods of enforced silence is good for health. Some people do it for a fixed period every day. Bapu observed a day of silence every week. Silence is said to be a means of prolonging life. It leads to a trained diversion of thoughts which helps to elevate the spirit, and to dissociate oneself for a time from the turmoil of life. Besides, mental quiet means relief from nervous tension. And, the less one talks the fewer enemies he creates! But this principle can work the other way also, because it is mainly by communication that one enlarges one's circle of friends."

There was, I noticed, a multiangular conflict between the President's desires and others' wishes; between his physical abilities and the available opportunities. This variance created a psychological complex, which in turn, on the positive side, built up his determination to assert himself, and on the other, prompted him to give in. It was clearly an altogether unfortunate situation which weighed heavily on the President. And with the lack of a sense of humour, the President seemed to get more and more entangled in the cocoon of his own worries.

He had expressed a desire on more than one occasion to have two more official residences: one in south India, in Madras, Hyderabad or Bangalore, where he could spend a month or a fortnight every year, and the other in a place close to the Capital where he and his family could spend a quiet weekend. The President also thought that the residence in south would help to assuage the feelings of the people of the region, and also to understand the problems from close quarters. The proposal for the south Indian residence was pushed through enthusiastically by the then Chief Minister of Hyderabad and received the full support of the Prime Minister; but it did not materialise during my term in Rashtrapati Bhavan. However, the

proposal for a weekend resort at Walipur in Bulandshahr was rejected by the Prime Minister. Only recently then had the Prime Minister expressed his annoyance at the reservation of a spacious bungalow within the President's Estate for the use of the President's visiting kith and kin. The Prime Minister had earlier spoken to the President on the misuse of the property, especially when comfortable accommodation was available in the House itself. The bungalow was later rented out to a Minister.

The President was not very keen to stay at the hill residence in Simla and Mashobra. So, the Prime Minister asked me to find out whether the President still wished to retain the mansions. A continued disuse, he said, would cause damage and decay to the expensive furnishings there. When I spoke about this to the President, he snapped, "I do not wish to see any reduction in my establishment anywhere. Those houses will remain as they are. Natural wear and tear and normal depreciation cannot be called decay due to disuse. There is a permanent staff posted there to take necessary care." I was glad to hear the President giving his forthright views on the matter. For, on many other matters like tours, entertainment, discretionary charity, staff discipline, and disposal of orchard produce, he often vacillated and took a long time to give his final orders. His usual reply was, "*Sochna parega*. I shall have to think about it." Often I found that on these very matters he would consult people who at their best had only the foggiest notions about the entire issue.

The President's tour programme, barring those sponsored by the different States, continued to be patterned on the basis of his occasional desires which were usually related to some unofficial requests, and not infrequently to pressing suggestions of his private advisers, assistants and associates. I knew that the President had no personal interest in visiting at least some of the pilgrim spots, or in cruising round the Periyar Lake in Kerala to see the wild life, or in watching the wild animal fight in Udaipur—where, in a triangular fight between a panther,

a wild boar, and a buffalo, the panther was gored to death—or in looking at the Gir lions, from a treetop platform, feasting on the mangled bodies of the ‘kills’ or even in visiting the ancient temples at Konarak, Khajuraho and Ek-Lingh, famous for their erotic art. After a visit to these temples, I asked the President what he thought of the sculptures, and he replied with unusual gravity, “These are priceless archaeological exhibits.”

He once accepted an invitation to visit Gita Bhavan near Rishikesh. While there, he paid a fleeting visit also to Mira Behn’s dairy farm which was situated nearby in exquisite surroundings on the bank of the Ganga. Wondering whether the President had at all turned to look at the breath-taking view of the yawning valley where stately firs and pines waved in the wind, I walked up to him and mentioned the enchanting landscape. He just took a look at the treetops closest to him and said, “These places have attracted many saints, sages, ascetics, and recluses who found solace and salvation here.” So saying, he turned towards the enclosure where a herd of tethered cows stood staring at the distinguished visitor.

Mira Behn’s snug little cottage and the well-kept dairy aroused the President’s interest and he was delighted when a calf was brought to him carrying in the cleft of one of its hooves an epistle addressed to the President of India appealing on behalf of the bovine species for improved housing and grazing arrangements.

The planning for the President’s tour to Bihar where he was to inaugurate the National Fuel Research Institute, got me into a very delicate situation. He wanted to be the private guest of an industrialist in a nearby town. The Prime Minister who was attending the same function had also decided to stay in the guest house of a private company. When the Prime Minister found out about the President’s arrangements, he called me up in his office and asked me to explain to the President that as the Bihar government could make all the arrangements for his stay, he should not disoblige them. Moreover,

the industrialist concerned had acquired some notoriety because of malpractices in business. When I conveyed the Prime Minister's views to the President, he got extremely annoyed and said excitedly, "In the same country there cannot be one set of hospitality arrangements for the President and another for the Prime Minister. I shall change my decision only if the Prime Minister also stays as a state guest." What was unsavory was not so much the plight of being caught between the horns of someone else's dilemma, as the theatricality of serving as the earphone and the mouthpiece for two giants with diametrically opposite views. When I conveyed the President's remarks to the Prime Minister and suggested that he might also stay in the same circuit house as a guest of the state government he said with a faint smile, "Do whatever you like; but I don't sleep indoors. A bed may be kept on the lawn with a mosquito net, if available."

11

In the newly elected Parliament the opposition was a minuscule one. But these few men, with their intimate knowledge of the country's problems, acquaintance with parliamentary practices, and oratorical skill, made their presence immediately felt. The President asked me to include these members in the priority list of MPs who were to be regularly invited to tea parties at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

As the parliamentary sessions began, the President seemed more and more concerned over the question of the powers and privileges of his office. At the tea parties, while moving among the scattered groups of the Members of Parliament, the President often raised interesting constitutional questions. With certain groups, he made no secret of his unhappiness over the manner in which the provisions relating to his powers were

being interpreted. Whatever might be the sympathy and support the President received from some of the guests, it was obvious that most of them were positively distressed at the apparent wide divergence of outlook at the very top of the executive.

The Prime Minister, as I knew him, had a distaste for back-chats. But the President's loud thinking at the tea parties, where there were certainly some who could, without the least effort, run with the hare and hunt with the hound, had begun to trickle into the ears of the Prime Minister. I knew from sources very close to Panditji that his patience was wearing thin; and that he had been apparently hearing so much about his own 'power-craze,' and of his denying the President his entitled powers, that he was preparing for a showdown.

He had, it seemed, told his party colleagues about his disgust at the continued indulgence in unseemly talks on powers of office. And those remarks again had been duly carried to the President by those whose profession is the obeisance at the altar of power and whose joy is to bask in the reflected shine of their deities.

It came to me as a surprise, thus, to hear the President pay a fulsome tribute to the Prime Minister while unveiling a portrait of Panditji at the Rajaji Hall, Madras: "At the Lahore Congress session, Jawaharlal Nehru was to take over the Presidentship from Motilal Nehru, who had presided over the previous session. While handing over charge, Motilalji recited a persian couplet which said, 'What the father fails to accomplish, the son achieves.' The prophesy came true...."

Having settled down for the five-year term, the President once again impressed upon me the need to uphold the status and dignity of his high office, notwithstanding the fact that he himself was a simple man accustomed to simple ways of living. Although he was personally dedicated to the Gandhian principles, he wished that all the necessary ceremonial pomp and pageantry of the office be retained without any interference.

He would use, he said, his coach-and-six on ceremonial occasions, but a horse-drawn phaeton or landau for his informal outings. The bodyguard unit, of which I was the ex-officio chief commandant, was to remain unchanged, but the officers would have to wear heavily embroidered turbans instead of their peaked caps. The President continued, "The catering arrangements for formal luncheons and dinners should be strictly Indian in style. We should, therefore, have a large number of silver *thalis* (plates) and *katoras* (bowls) and, of course, silver tumblers and spoons. The menu should include an Indian sweet, and *paan* could also be offered after meals. At evening receptions, the practice of sprinkling rose water on the guests could be introduced, and the brass band must be instructed to play only Indian tunes." I asked him if there should be any indication of the dress style in the invitation cards and the President thought it over. "The question you have raised is not easily answered. What would you personally suggest?" I suggested that we could say, 'Dress: Formal' and then leave it to the guests to interpret this as they liked. The President smilingly nodded in approval.

Meanwhile, the Government had elevated my rank to that of a Major-General. The President was extremely pleased about it, and he was also happy to learn that I had decided to forego the enhanced salary as I did not appreciate the circumstances under which I was upgraded. I was, however, glad that the arrangement would benefit my successors.

Shortly afterwards, the President asked me to introduce an innovation in the House, apparently without consulting the Prime Minister. He wished to have the proceedings of both houses of the Parliament relayed live to his chambers. I, therefore, met the Speaker for his concurrence and found myself called up by the Prime Minister in his Parliament office. The installations were, in the meanwhile, completed. The Prime Minister looked at me from beneath a wrinkled forehead, and asked me, "Would it interest you to know that there is a box reserved for the honourable President in the Houses? He can

always go there at his pleasure and convenience. The honourable Members, I am sure, will be pleased to see him physically present. If he wishes, he could also use the coach-and-six for his journey there and back. There are no cricket matches being played in Parliament. Therefore, it would be wrong to listen in bed to the debate of these sacred chambers." So saying, he rang the bell for a waiting gentleman to be called in.

The evening teas were generally lively. In fact, I often felt these parties dissolved a bit too early for the President and a little late for the guests. But opposite was the case of the dinner parties which always ended too late for the President. The talks at the parties covered almost every subject on earth. One day, I heard a Minister running down the Prime Minister comparing him to a big banyan tree under whose shade nothing could grow. If such dwarfing and withering influence continued, he said, the country would will-nilly have to reconcile itself to authoritarianism. These loud and categorical statements attracted everyone's attention; but how much support he received could not be inferred from the impassive looks of the speechless listeners. The critic was of course known for his unreserved loyalty to the late Deputy Prime Minister.

During the struggle for freedom, many of the fighters including Dr. Prasad, had plunged headlong into that desperate battle, completely oblivious of everything, including their family obligations. A trusted friend one day commented on how the President had now grown attached to his family. Speaking of these matters, Dr. Prasad described how when the din and dust of the battle had subsided, and with the fighters beginning to pick up the broken threads of their disorganised lives, there emerged three broad modes in which they fashioned their lives. The affluent section easily adjusted themselves, having had the best of both worlds, and the acquaintance factor playing a great role in the dispensation of favours. In the middle class, some were determined to make up for lost opportunities and cashed in on their past laurels, and some kept themselves aloof, holding steadfastly to their principles, at the cost of domestic

well-being. And the poor, returned to their families in unmitigated despair.

It came to me as a surprise one evening when he asked me to discontinue the evening outings and the afternoon parties. The obvious cause, I felt, was his illness and so I enquired after his health. Rocking in his seat with his eyes closed, the President said, "I do not know how information about this House reaches the Prime Minister's ears in a distorted form. He seems to have received some completely incorrect information about my talks with the guests at the tea parties. I have never told any person that I want to set up a Parliamentary Review Committee to study the question of Presidential powers." He did not speak further.

A few days later I happened to be at the Prime Minister's house. I gathered from reliable sources that during his last visit to the President, the Prime Minister had not minced words in expressing his annoyance at the way in which several matters were being discussed with the invited guests. It seemed that the Prime Minister had also made it clear that if the President found any difficulty in working with him then he could make alternative arrangements.

Around this time, at a party meeting, the Prime Minister openly threatened to quit. He repeated the threat, not long after, on another occasion. The influential members of the party certainly knew that if Panditji stepped down as Prime Minister at that juncture, the party would head for unredeemable chaos. These threats were later interpreted as 'shock treatment' for a party which was growing already lethargic and unmindful about the colossal problems that lay ahead. The Prime Minister's threats not only helped to further magnify his stature, but also to silence those who talked of his power-hunger.

One evening, in the course of a conversation on some internal matters of the House, the President stated casually and confidently that the Congress would forever remain the largest

single political party in the country, and therefore, the task of governing the country would rest in its hands. He continued, "Those who were in the vanguard of the liberation struggle, will of course get elected and occupy responsible representative seats at the Centre or in the states. Similarly, the other old soldiers will also occupy elected seats with varying responsibilities." About the front-rankers the President remarked, "In the absence of the Sardar there are only Jawaharlalji and Maulana Saheb who will probably remain in their respective offices for life. Rajaji has been given a pension; therefore, he cannot be appointed. As for myself, I have been overwhelmingly elected to this office. Although it is a tenure office, since it is not going to be abolished like that of the Governor-General, in all probability there will be no contender as long as I wish to stay in office."

He was quite frustrated by the tardy progress made by the Government in propagating the use of Hindi as official language. I frankly expressed to him my doubts on this issue, wondering whether as the Head of State, who has an impartial concern for every citizen's right, he should be involved in a question like this which might not be of uniform benefit to all sections of the people. He replied that as the custodian of the constitution his paramount duty was to ensure that the directives were properly executed, and in time. But I pointed out that there were several other directives of the constitution, which were perhaps more vital to the building of a welfare state, and asked whether he would like to be directly involved in their implementation or only to leave those matters to the relevant authorities of the State. The President did not reply.

Around this time happened the break between the Prime Minister and the Congress President, Babu Purushothamdas Tandon. The morning Tandonji resigned after sending a strongly-worded note to the Prime Minister, the President asked me to convey his compliments personally to Tandonji. I could not understand why, instead of an ADC, I was being sent on a minor errand. I delivered the President's message to Tandonji

at his residence. He said, "Only this morning the President spoke to me on the telephone. He is really a gracious soul. He always remembers persons when they are in need of sympathy." Then he went into a long discourse on the need for a single language to effect the integration of the vast multilingual peoples of the country.

I conveyed Tandonji's remarks to the President in the evening. He spoke of the linguistic question for a while, and then said, "I have heard that some staff members of this House are replying to Hindi correspondence in English, and I believe when people talk to them in Hindi they answer in English. This is a very serious matter which must not be allowed to continue. I want every office to have at least one clerk conversant with Hindi. I also want immediate arrangements to be made for all non-Hindi-speaking staff to learn Hindi. I myself might hold an examination for the senior officers to test their proficiency." I informed the President that non-Hindi-speaking staff had already been asked to prepare for the primary Hindi examination which was being conducted periodically by the Ministry of Education. Still the President insisted, "I myself might examine the senior staff."

I was absolutely certain that the President's desire to act as an examiner was the result of the whisperings of some self-appointed counsellors. I was determined to impress upon the President that while the examinees would be greatly delighted to be examined by the Head of State, it would nevertheless be imprudent for him to get involved in an embarrassing procedural inconsistency. He would be encouraging the growth of differential standards and needlessly drawing a distinction between a Government employee and a Government House employee. My argument failed to convince the President. He said forcefully that it would be incorrect to equate his establishment with a governmental one.

I told him with some emotion, "You, sir, are the Supreme Commander of the armed forces. But with all that power, would you expect a battalion standing-at-ease on the parade

ground or on the battlefield to respond if you call them to 'Attention'?"

Looking me squarely in the face, the President exclaimed, "Will they not?"

I said, "No, Sir! They are so trained in discipline that unless and until they get their orders from their own commander, who may be only a Major, they will not obey. In the mechanism of statecraft there should ordinarily be no confusing cause, or evasive effect. If there is a multiplication of voices in a single chain of responsibility then confusion will be inevitable. Furthermore, all the practices and procedures that are being observed in the conduct of the affairs of the State have the expressed or implied approval of your own office. Therefore, if an organisation has been charged with the task of conducting Hindi examinations under the auspices of a Ministry, then that arrangement obviously has your tacit support."

It was a visiting Chief Minister who suggested to the President that the handicrafts of each state should find display in the Rashtrapati Bhavan, for the benefit of the visiting dignitaries. This led the President to propose that each state government should undertake to furnish one guest-room in the Rashtrapati Bhavan exclusively with the cottage industry products of that state. There was an enthusiastic response from the states, to this proposal. After the guest-rooms had been furnished in the new style, the President's next move was to get portraits of eminent Indian personalities painted by a particular artist and have them hung in the lobbies, vestibules and corridors. The Prime Minister must have noticed these portraits in the corridors on his way to a party in the House; for when he saw me he said with a big laugh, "You seem to have lost all your sense of beauty and aesthetics." Several guests standing around were now all ears. "Did you purchase those horrid pictures from the footpath stalls or from a children's art exhibition? I did not expect you to lose your sense

of balance and proportion! Do you really think that those funny little portraits in those miserable frames should have any place in this House where there are already so many exquisite pieces of art in magnificent frames? Where did you get the idea from?" Without going into the genesis of the idea I merely said that the old portraits decorating the Rashtrapati Bhavan had cost, in those days, nearly Rs. 20,000 apiece and each frame nearly Rs. 2,000. Then I commented, "Perhaps it is time to have in this House the portraits of some great sons of the country whose names are of hallowed memory?" The Prime Minister softened and said, "But what was all the hurry for? All this could have been done after giving the matter more thought." Then he grew agitated again and said, "Why the mighty hurry to embarrass the state governments with needless expenses to furnish rooms in Rashtrapati Bhavan when they have so many other urgent things to do? We have a democratic, and not a monarchical system of government. The state authorities are now guided by the advice of the people, who are more concerned about changing the looks of their own states. In any case it would be desirable if those eyesores were immediately removed from their places." So saying, the Prime Minister walked away.

After transferring the portraits to less conspicuous places, I informed the President of the Prime Minister's views on them. He sat mutely for a while, looking at the ceiling, and then said, "The expensive picture that the Prime Minister purchased abroad still hangs in the Durbal Hall. I have not asked for the removal of that picture to a less conspicuous place. And no one has talked appreciatively about that picture to me!"

Once, at the President's invitation, Rajaji came for a brief stay at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. At tea one afternoon, in the course of a desultory conversation, a friend remarked that the President appeared to be in a serious mood. Rajaji promptly began describing the theory of the four cardinal humours of the body as enunciated by the ancients. The President was greatly interested in what Rajaji was saying and listened carefully to his exposition on the technique of coping with old age, a subject on which I had heard Rajaji often in the past. At the end the President asked Rajaji, "Can you briefly recommend a practice which should be helpful in improving physical health?" Rajaji laughed and said, "The unrevealed part of your revealed question carries the answer. The human being is a composite of the body and the mind. The mind is the ruler of the body. Mental health must be preserved in order to enjoy physical health, especially in old age. To this end, exercises of the mind are necessary." Then he briefly mentioned some of the exercises and commented, "You will have to decide on these exercises through trial and error, because your constitution is different from mine."

One evening the President was resting in his bedroom and I found two well-dressed gentlemen seated by his bed. They were engrossed in a criticism of the policies and procedures of the Government, a topic that was fast becoming a time-killing pastime for all. Reclined in his bed, the President listened to their talk with rapt attention. As I was leaving, one of the gentlemen asked me if we were doing anything about printing the President's photographs on rupee notes of higher denomination, and on postage stamps. Raising his hand, the President said, "That is a matter for the Cabinet to decide."

The President's simple and artless ways did not help to reinforce my efforts to preserve the solemnity and gravity which was expected of his exalted office, and which he himself desired. While driving down a road one day along a canal in the outskirts of Delhi, the President suddenly wanted to get down to look at a mangoe tree laden with fruits. Then I heard him asking one of the orderlies to pluck a couple of ripe mangoes from a drooping branch. I pleaded with him that the orchard-keeper, who must have been nearby, should be asked to get the fruits, if necessary on payment. The President said indifferently, "For a couple of mangoes, all this fuss and formality are totally unnecessary." Once in the Dehra Dun Circuit House, seeing a guava tree in the compound, the President ordered his valet to get a few fruits. When I suggested that we should first ask the caretaker for them, and later settle the cost with the district authorities, he appeared to be irked at my suggestion and remarked that the President of a country should not be equated with the other people who stayed in Circuit Houses.

I had often heard the President assert that the real power lay with the masses, theirs being the voice which finally determined the manner of democratic representation. He was, therefore, eager to meet and address the people wherever he went. His interest in anthropology attracted him also to tribal people wherever he went. The local authorities often strained themselves to transport the *adivasis*, like chattels, in suitable strength, to spots most convenient for the President. Most of them danced for the entertainment of the President; the only exceptions were the serious, blue-eyed Todas of the Nilgiris.

At Jagdalpur in Madhya Pradesh the President watched the Murias, with their women, dancing in gay abandon. One of the dances led to an embarrassing, yet amusing happening, causing great hilarity and wide-eyed attention among the crowd of 'civilized' spectators. From there, the President went to pay his obeisance at the forest temple of the goddess Danteswari, the presiding deity of the tribals. A plateful of human

teeth in the temple reminded the visitors of the grim ceremonies which were, not very long ago, a common practice there.

Once, while on a visit to a pilgrim spot in the Vindhya, the President heard of a tribe said to have been descended from the Kauravas. He wished to see them. At my suggestion, he decided to visit these people in their village, rather than have them transported to him. Amarkantak, the place of pilgrimage itself, was a delightful, little-known spot on a hump of the Vindhya hills, where a cool, crisp breeze blew all the year round. The great rivers, the Sone and the Narmada, sprang to life here. Starting as a trickle from a crevice, the Sone, flowed briefly as a stream, and then abruptly descending into a waterfall, wandered northwards along a vast sandy bed. Nearby, from inside a sacred temple sprang another thin stream, which after running a short course, descended the southern flank of the hill to emerge as the mighty Narmada, flowing west.

On his way back, the President stopped at the village of the 'Kauravas'. I was glad to see him openly appreciating the difference between seeing these natural people with their shy and hesitant attitudes in their true environment, and seeing them in an uprooted state, transported over long distances to his camp. The President walked around attentively observing their handlooms, querns, husking implements, brewing vats, culinary equipments, and the intriguing heirlooms of some families. He was deeply interested in the extraction of iron from ferruginous stones, the preparation of arrowheads from this iron, the extraction of colours from the bark and roots of trees, and in some pitfalls and snares for trapping wild animals. He was quite intrigued by an unmanned contrivance of a fixed bow and arrow that shot the arrow automatically at anything that stepped on a trap-string. I got hold of a fairly intelligent villager and asked him very discreetly if he really belonged to the Kaurava clan. With a grin he said coyly, "That is what the elders say."

Whenever the President felt fit, he prepared to go on tours. These sudden desires often created problems. It was not so much difficult to formulate a complex programme at short notice as to offer explanations to the state governments for the President's sudden decision. One day the President heard from a visiting Minister of Bihar that a Presidential tour of the flood-hit Kosi river belt would be a fine gesture. He immediately accepted the proposal, and asked me to arrange a special train, with the extraordinary suggestion of setting up a microphone in his saloon, and some loudspeakers on the roof of the train. Such an arrangement, he felt, would help him to address the crowd that might collect at his halts.

While these arrangements were being completed, the Prime Minister had received news of the President's programme. He sent for me. "Are you going to stage a drama," he asked, "in the flood-ravaged villages of Bihar? I hear that microphones and megaphones are part of the President's party. What does all this *tamasha* mean? People are undergoing incredible agony and suffering there. The local authorities have girded up their loins to meet the terrible situation and even then the means and measures are falling short of the mounting demands. And here you go with a train-load of people, the additional burden for whose catering and transportation will have to be borne by the authorities. And those poor people in the jaws of death must crowd round the train to listen to a totally unnecessary harangue." With a smile, he appealed, "For heaven's sake stop these things!"

In Bihar, I learnt that the Chief Minister, who was a confidant of the Prime Minister, was also opposed to the President's tour at that particular time.

On our return from that long tour I received the message that the Prime Minister wanted to see me after dinner. He was working in his office in a sleeping-suit when I reached. He greeted me with a smile, only to grow serious again. He asked, "What is all this ostentatious display about? Aren't there less expensive ways of winning cheap popularity! How much reflected virtue have you acquired from the blessings of the *pundits* of Banaras and from the holy dip at the Sangam?" Taking off his glasses, and leaning back in his chair, he said in a softer tone, "There are far more important things to do now. We have to think in a big way, act in a big way! You must ensure that the drain on public money for useless purposes is stopped! You must strive to build up healthy traditions so that the people's eyes are turned in new directions." He put on his glasses again and returned to the file. I wished him good night, and quietly left the room.

What was preying on the Prime Minister's mind was apparently the ceremony in Banaras in which the President had received benedictions from a number of *pundits*. As for the Kumbh Mela, the Prime Minister himself had come in for a fair share of public criticism. There had been an unfortunate turn of events at the Kumbh Mela. The Mela, as usual, had attracted millions from all over India, and few would miss the procession of the naked *sadhus* who had come down from their hidden resorts, on elephants, for a ceremonial dip at the confluence. While the President was having his dip, we heard a terrible uproar nearby. Panic reigned for a while. A rumour soon spread that a ghastly tragedy had overtaken a number of pilgrims who were watching the elephant-procession of the naked *sadhus*. At the President's wish, I went round to find out what had happened. But in the pandemonium all that I could gather were several versions of the news of an accident in which many people seemed to have been buried alive. Back at the President's camp, we learnt that a large number of fleeing pilgrims had got bogged down in a quagmire and lost their lives. And an equally large number had sustained in-

juries and were hospitalised. When the Prime Minister, who also had arrived to witness the Mela, and the Governor, came to see the President, the real cause of the tragedy was still not available. According to some, a naked *sadhu* had threatened to throw his trident at the pilgrims from elephantback, and that led to the terrified stampede. Another version attributed the cause to an anxious crowd running to catch a glimpse of the Prime Minister. And according to yet another version, the stampede was the result of people straining to have a *darshan* of the bathing President. Before leaving, Panditji told the Governor that as one who was aware of the slender resources of the state, the Governor could have avoided stretching it thin by extending his personal invitation to the President.

Once, on a visit to Simla and surroundings, the President was suddenly taken ill. From Narkanda, where a cold and biting wind was blowing, the President wished to be taken to Simla immediately. He had got into the car and his valet was making him comfortable with extra cushions and blankets when all of a sudden a security officer of the local administration came rushing to the car. He caught hold of the valet by the scruff of his neck and dragged him aside for interrogation. The ADC on attendance, of course, promptly interfered and had the valet released.

The following morning, when I visited the President who was still indisposed, I found the valet massaging him. The President was silent for a long time, and then he said in a quivering voice, "I want all members of my staff accompanying me on tour to wear the same kind of dress, so that there will not be any confusion about their identity. Of course, the defence service personnel will wear their usual uniform." I told the President that there should be no difficulty in complying with his wishes, but I expressed my fear that such a uniform dress style might at places create awkward situations. The President did not make any comment, and his wishes were given effect to.

Not long afterwards, the President was returning from Bombay and the train halted at a wayside station. I went to the President to inquire whether he wished to appear on the platform as a large crowd had gathered to have his *darshan*. He was lying in his bed, with all the shutters of the cabin drawn. He said sleepily, "I might sit in the lounge and acknowledge their greetings through the window." Hardly had he finished, when I heard a great tumult from the platform. Slogans rose wishing the President a long life. I ran past the adjoining lounge to the exit and beheld an amazing scene. A security guard of the President, tall, and wearing khadi *achkan*, pyjamas and Gandhi cap, who was standing at the foot of compartment door had been, to his great astonishment, completely mobbed by the crowd; despite his vehement protests, garlands of all kinds were being reverently placed around his neck. The more he tried to wriggle out of his predicament the more affectionately was he encircled, and lemons, cocoanuts, and various other offerings stuffed into his pockets.

I hurriedly returned to the President to inform him of what I had seen. He took a little time to put on his long coat and seat himself at the window of the saloon lounge. A few stragglers recognized him and began shouting slogans. But by the time the crowd realised its mistake and began rushing to the window, the train was on its way.

A similar incident occurred during a tour to the south. A temple elephant was to have garlanded the President. It approached carrying in its trunk a large garland meant for the President, and promptly garlanded a whiskered member of the President's party. The mahout obviously had given the pachyderm the right signal, but at the wrong time on incorrect identification. The episode was taken in the lighter vein by all, but not so by the President. He attached some auspicious significance to elephants. In fact, the President brooded over the incident for a long time, and wanted me to find out what had gone wrong. He was very proud of the elephant motif on his flag and even wanted to keep an elephant in the Rashtra-

pati Bhavan. Much later, his desire did materialise, when by the courtesy of the Assam government, he received the gift of an elephant for the Rashtrapati Bhavan. The President wanted the elephant, gorgeously caparisoned, to head the ceremonial pageant on Republic Day. All arrangements were made for the transportation of the elephant to the Capital and for its housing in the bodyguard lines. It was shortly before its arrival that I left the President's service for an overseas assignment. One day I learnt that the elephant of Rashtrapati Bhavan—the symbol of strength and stability, of luck and prosperity—had come to grief. It had run amuck destroying property, and had killed its keeper. It had to be destroyed.

14

In the Capital, the ennui and boredom of inactivity was telling on the President. Often he would say that in the midst of so much to do, he alone did nothing. He was also growing anxious about his health, and one day he told me that on his visit to Calcutta to receive an honorary degree, he would also like to be examined by a particular physician who was known equally well for his deep religiousness and spirituality, as for his professional competence. More than his prescription, I was impressed by the words of encouragement he gave to the President. Said the physician, "At our age, the debility consequent on senescence need not be dreaded; for, after all, we are like old, torn, patched-up sails. If there is a sudden strong gust of wind, most of it will escape through the many holes and tears; or at the worst, it may make another rent. So the chances of the 'boat' suddenly capsizing in the wind are small; whereas matters would be different in the case of those whose sails are fairly in tact. A sudden wind can easily overturn

these. So you and I with our multiple ailments are in the happy position of being able to withstand the occasional heavy blasts of rough weather."

The President had, earlier, accepted an expensive gift from a private company. The matter came to the Prime Minister's notice through press reports. The President considered the gift to have been given to him in his personal capacity, and could be, therefore, retained by him. He wanted my views on this question of 'private capacity'. I told him that though public servants were not expected to have private aspects to their life, except for their family commitments, in the office of President who is the Head of State, it was left entirely to the President's discretion to build up the conventions of his office. The President said firmly, "I am not a servant of the State. The gift that has been offered to me may be kept apart for my exclusive use. It is for me to dispose it of in when ever manner I choose."

Back in the Capital, I was told by the Prime Minister that whatever presents the President received were accepted by him in his official capacity, and that the gifts should, therefore, be treated as State property. The Prime Minister accordingly asked me to include the item in the inventory of the Government Hospitality Organisation. The President was very upset and angry when I told him of what had transpired.

The President showed much temperamental irritability and did fume and fret whenever he thought that his prestige had suffered in any way, or his rights and privileges had been encroached upon, or his orders and wishes had not been properly executed. He would speak of such instances to me. Though I enjoyed his full confidence and affection, occasionally I found myself in a quandary, in carrying out the President's orders. In such situations, I followed the age-old principle of 'complaint after compliance'. This principle had worked satisfactorily and the President would listen patiently to my dissenting views. But certain developments made me wonder whether this principle would work any longer. There was

no doubt about the exceptional powers and privileges inherent in the office of President; but at the same time, I knew that during the consolidating stages of a young republic, every thought, expression, and action should be carefully geared to the ultimate democratic goal. The President's deep involvement with current politics, and his circumscribed sympathies for a particular religion, province, and language were matters that appeared contrary to democratic notions. Whenever I expressed to him my misgivings on these points, the President would exclaim with a benign air, "The President is the fountainhead of democracy."

There was an awkward predicament one day, while driving on the long stretch of road from Bangalore to Mysore. Midway, the President wanted to alight from the car. I thought he wanted to view the cultivation on both sides of the road. Then I remembered that on long drives he felt the urge to ease himself. The accompanying group of ministers and officials who had enthusiastically followed him a little distance, made a sudden right-about-turn when they realised the real import of the President's pause.

When he was about to get back into the car, a minister pointed to a nearby tree and informed the President that it was the famous sandalwood of Mysore. The President immediately asked one of the orderlies to lop off a long branch to take back to Delhi and have a walking stick made. I noticed that a plaque was fixed near the tree announcing it as 'reserved,' and therefore, cautioned the President that obviously the state laws prohibited such an action. I suggested that the Mysore government could be asked to send readymade walking sticks, or, if the President so wished, some green branches, against payment. One of the accompanying ministers supported my argument, obviously because he was worried about an upset in the schedule. But another minister argued that the President was above the law, so there could be nothing wrong if some branches were cut under his orders. After some more argument, the President's wishes were finally carried out and the branch was duly carried to Delhi.

When the Prime Minister received an advance copy of the President's tour programme for the south at a reception in the Rashtrapati Bhavan, he had a hearty laugh. He asked me, "Are you taking out a 'Pilgrim Special' this time? I find it will be stopping at every centre of pilgrimage! How many goods wagons are you taking along? Because the bags of virtue that will be collected at the various stations will not be inconsiderable!"

Before moving away, he remarked testily, "If the whole country gets blessed because of the blessings a single person receives, then extraordinary provisions may have to be made for such pilgrimages, and, if necessary, a mint may have to be opened for meeting the tour budget."

Of course, there were but few important places of pilgrimage in India that the President had not been to. I once accompanied him to the seat of the Sankaracharya in the south, at Sringeri. We were told there that the saint was passing through one of his periodic, distraught phases of restlessness, interspersed with lightminded states of spiritual ecstasy. He had been throwing out of the temple window articles such as conchs and various utensils. The President was greatly worried about the prospect of the saint's *darshan*, as in that uncertain state of the Sankaracharya's mood no one could say whether the interview would take place. After a couple of hours' anxious waiting, we were relieved to hear that the saint was ready to receive the President. We were conducted to a hall adjoining the temple, where the President, some of the state ministers and others began to wait in a silent suspense. Suddenly, a short, fair, greyhaired and thin-built person, covered in silk, came out of the temple with quick steps, and sat on a low dais in front of us, gazing upwards. This was the Shankaracharya. Another hermit (who later became the saint's successor) came with heaps of gifts, which he placed by the side of the saint. With a gesture of his hand, the saint asked the President to approach. As the President, overwhelmed with emotion, went forward and offered his deep obeisance, the saint

handed over to him an exquisitely embroidered woollen shawl, a silk scarf, and some fruits. I handed over to the President the cash offering he had brought, and he quietly placed it at the feet of the saint.

I have wandered much and witnessed much. There have been occasions of gorgeous pageantry and pomp, and many meetings with the holy and the celebrated. But Sringeri was, and still remains, a unique experience for me. In a nook, at the edge of a forest skirting a desolate countryside, stood that ancient shrine in all its pristine glory, unpaled by the tide of time, the onslaught of the elements, and the inattention of men. And there presided this holyman, from whose kindly countenance beamed the radiance of spiritual exaltation and force.

After seeing what I had seen in my life—the group wars, the vengeance-seekings, the outwitting games, and the double-crossings—what a tremendous contrast the Sringeri air provided, where the highest and the lowest looked equally humble and small. After the President, I was waiting for the turn of the local ministers to approach the saint, when to my utter surprise the saint beckoned me to him. I was blessed with a rich woollen shawl and some *prasad*. Then the interview was over, and the saint hurried back to the temple. The President's desire for a private interview with the Sankaracharya could not be accommodated, for the saint had just then lapsed into an uneasy mood. Soon after returning to Delhi, the President was shocked to learn that the saint had met his watery grave in the placid waters of the nearby river, during his morning ablutions.

At Goalpara in Assam, the President was once presented with a small deer by an *adivasi* woman. Someone said that it was a musk deer. The President was thrilled, thinking of the fragrance it would bring to the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Another said then that the musk oozed from the navel of the animal only during the mating season. While some people got busy examining the navel, the forest officer said that the animal had

not come of age yet, and that it was not a musk deer; it was a barking deer. The President was disappointed, but still he wanted the animal to be air-lifted to Delhi. An enclosure was erected close to the Moghul Garden, where a rock garden, complete with caves, fountains, and miniature streams was laid on. The President's plan was to add a few more herbivorous, inoffensive animals, and create a children's park. Hearing about it, the Prime Minister one day came to see the place. He remarked after a brief glance, "You have already the Moghul Garden, the terrace garden, the circular garden, the nursery garden, the *zanana* garden and now this children's garden. Or is it going to be a deer park for meditation and salvation?" He then hurried to the President's study. Very soon, I got a call from the President. When I went to him, he was all by himself. With a vacant look he said, "You need not enlarge that deer enclosure. The Prime Minister was telling me that there is a plan to set up a Zoological Garden somewhere in the Capital."

The depth of the President's abiding attachment for ancient beliefs, traditions, and customs was indeed incredible. He often referred with pride to the resilience of the ancient practices which had withstood the test of millennia, not of just a few centuries. His exhortatory speeches, which often depicted the balmy days of the ancient eras, created in the minds of his simple, credulous listeners an impression that the President was the harbinger of a new and revolutionary age which would usher in a grand life for the common people. But many thought that the President's outlook suffered from a sentimental rigidity, and that such obscurantist views were inconsistent with the requirements of present-day life. In fact, listening to him during elevated moments in a public speech, or in private conversation, I had often wondered in what way the President would be able to push back the rising tide of modernism. Gandhiji had said, "Life should be lived forward but understood backwards."

My association with the President had brought about a change in my attitude towards astrology, although I remained

a sceptic about black magic and psychic phenomena. An astrologer I met while touring Mysore with the President, especially, was an eminently talented person. He had come to visit the President at the Lalitha Mahal palace, along with another astrologer, and volunteered to come and see me 'professionally' following the interview with the President. When he came to my room after about an hour, the first thing he asked me was, of course, whether the President was a Brahmin. He had apparently noticed the loop of sacred thread showing at the neck of the President's dress. I had to disappoint him with the news that the President was a Kshatriya.

He turned out to be more of a phrenologist, but he certainly knew his subject. After staring at me for an embarrassingly long time, he said certain things which later came true. What particularly surprised me was his remark that an astrologer had already done some mischief and I would part company with the President in the near future. Next day, when he came to see the President again, he made some further predictions which convinced me that he was no ordinary fortune-teller.

Soon after he left, I was summoned by the President. He told me with a worried look, "You should ensure that the visit of the two *pundits* does not get publicity in the newspapers." And then he remarked irritably, "Jawaharlalji thinks that I guide my steps with the help of the stars." There evidently was a conflict in the President's mind, between his public pronouncements and private inclinations. There was no doubt that for a number of reasons he was enamoured of the ways of the Prime Minister and tried to follow him in certain matters. But unfortunately, his physical disabilities and constitutional makeup did not permit him to display the *joie de vivre* of the Prime Minister, whose growing stature and immense popularity did weigh to an extent on the President's mind. This factor seems to have primarily accounted for the lack of the necessary concord between the office of the Head of State and that of the Head of Government.

The President often talked about his prison-life in Hazaribagh. He used to say that he had a comfortable time in Hazaribagh, what with the special arrangements that had been made for him in view of his poor health. The prison authorities were also very accommodating insofar as his personal requirements such as books and periodicals were concerned, which they got for him from the Imperial Library of Calcutta or Dr. Sachidananda Sinha's personal library. In addition, a few young political prisoners of his choice were allowed to visit him to keep him company. Almost all important political prisoners were permitted such young 'prisoner-assistants' who performed a variety of odd jobs such as nursing, massaging, washing, and cleaning. Their versatile services earned for them, in due course, the designation 'Civil Servants'. Whether this humorous label left any marks on their young minds is not known, but, apparently, once the struggle was over, most of them went to their old patrons for help in finding civil appointments!

Talking of such things, the President often narrated the true story of a war-widow who wanted a job for her son. The Governor of a province was meeting ex-servicemen at a rally, and the widow of a decorated commissioned officer asked to be allowed to submit her petition to the Governor. When she was brought before the Governor, the conducting officer gave a running account of the excellent service record of her deceased husband. The Governor then declared emotionally, "For the yeoman service rendered by your illustrious husband, we have decided to send your son for military training in England. I am sure you will appreciate this kind gesture on the part of the Government." Eyes brimming with tears, and with folded

hands, the widow told the Governor that she would have been happier if the benevolent *Sircar* had provided her son with the job of a *daroga* as that would enhance her family prestige, locally.

Away from the Capital, and in congenial company, I always found the President in remarkably buoyant moods. It was not, therefore, surprising that on all the three occasions I accompanied the President to his village home, I found him in exceedingly high spirits. On one of these visits, the President learnt that for my own needs I was getting my water bottle filled from a tube well some distance away. He, of course, knew that I was not using the water of both the wells nearby because of the presence of frogs, tadpoles and algae in them. At lunch in his house, the President turned to me smilingly and said, "Frogs and tadpoles are anti-larvae and help to purify the water. The well water is quite potable. After filtering away the various foreign matters, including the tadpoles, you must taste the water some time; I am sure you will like it." He added, "Tadpoles with their tails are very much like small fish; of course they have rudimentary legs."

The President enjoyed talking about agricultural practices of every imaginable variety. From agriculture, he would digress to dairy farming, animal husbandry, goat rearing, poultry farming, and related subjects. One day, I suggested to him a schème for a country-wide, intense cultivation in the public sector of the principal food crop of each state. The President listened to me, and said, "There are no arrangements at present for pooling these ideas. There are so many suggestions, but where will we stock them?"

During his stays in his village home, he would take a leisurely stroll in the mornings. It was, but natural on these walks that we should come across the dim shapes of the villagers answering the call of nature in the fields. Referring to them, the President mused one day, "After drawing upon the gifts of the soil, the rural folk repay the earth in this manner. This practice enriches the soil with organic manure. The in-

organic fertilisers now so popular are after all beyond the reach of these poor cultivators with small holdings." He continued, "Not many years ago the indigo planters and our own *shikar*-minded officers and *zamindars* would go hunting at dawn for deer, wild boar, hedgehog or hare. Sometimes these dim shapes were mistaken for animals; and some unfortunate villagers have lost their lives."

Walking among the fields and talking about increasing agricultural yields, the President often declared that unless there was a sufficiency of chemical fertilisers, it would be unwise to plough the land with mechanised equipment. He maintained that the furrows made by the ordinary plowshare did not go very deep; only the top soil was turned over and, therefore, small quantities of organic manure was sufficient nutriment for activating seasonal productivity. But the motorised tractors cut the earth so deeply that the demand for soil nourishment became most heavy. Excessive disturbance of the surface soil and large-scale adventitious nourishment was, in course of time, bound to cause a total change in the character of the soil. And the small farmer would never have the requisite funds and facilities to maintain the artificially activated fertility of the soil. The President had a firsthand knowledge of agriculture and I have seen experts and specialists subscribing to his views.

The President believed in the antidotal effects of certain stones, metals, roots and barks in countering adverse planetary influences. One day I asked him how the precious stones on his rings repelled evil influences. He replied, "In what way does an umbrella help in inclement weather? If you believe in the usefulness of an umbrella in rain, then you should also believe in the 'shielding' effects of the stones!" I was not therefore surprised when one morning the President produced from his pocket a gold ring studded with a large pearl and handed it over to me, saying, "Will you go and give it to Jawaharlalji and say that it is a present from me and that he should wear it regularly?" With some surprise I asked the

President if he had spoken about it to the Prime Minister. The President said gravely, "You must have read in the papers that Jawaharlalji slipped on the staircase of the Parliament House a few days ago and hurt his knee. It is a bad omen for a powerful man to fall. Some people have advised me to ask the Prime Minister to wear a pearl. I know he will not heed such advice, and therefore, I have decided to have this ring made for him. I have not spoken to him about it; but if you present it to him on my behalf and convey my concern about his well-being, then I think he might use it."

I handed over the ring to the Prime Minister and conveyed to him the President's message. He examined the ring with evident curiosity, and then with a cheerful laugh, asked me, "Have you ever seen me wearing ornaments?" Before I could reply, he continued, "Now, take this back and return it to the President and tell him that I appreciate his kind gesture, but I do not wear ornaments." I told him that it would be impossible for me to take the ring back, and that since it had come to him as a gift from the President he should keep it, whether he wore it or not. The Prime Minister laughed and said, "Isn't it incredible! Now tell me, who was it that conveyed the news of my fall to the President? I want to know his name, because in his presence I would like to stage some more slips on the staircase and collect more pearl rings from the President." Then he reluctantly put the ring in his pocket, and I went off, thanking him.

When I told the President that the Prime Minister had put the ring in his pocket, he seemed quite satisfied and with a nod of his head, said, "That will do."

On several occasions I had discussed the subject of the psychic and the occult with the President, but I had always failed to understand his view that the supernatural world held the key to the besetting problems of our country; I could not see how the spirit could be activated without a simultaneous and healthy cultivation of morality. The sages and seers have taught that the law of morality is fundamental to the whole

cosmic drama. Occultism and psychic phenomena might provide a glimpse into the unknown world, but they surely cannot impart the necessary psychosomatic integrity of individuals, which is, ultimately, the stamina of a developing nation. The President did not agree with me in these matters, but would make no comment.

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Almost from the beginning of 1954, the President had been suffering from ailments of the eye. His vision had been affected, and with more and more reading material piling up, he was naturally getting worried; and he knew that his trouble would ultimately require surgical treatment. Apparently, the President wished to have himself treated in Europe, and had spoken about it to the Prime Minister, who I learnt had suggested his consulting Dr. B. C. Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal who had himself recently undergone surgery for a similar ailment. When the President next learnt of Dr. Roy's presence in the Capital, he asked me to remind the Prime Minister about the consultation with Dr. Roy. Afterwards, I called on the Prime Minister for his views, and he said firmly, "The President himself says that his trouble has not yet reached the stage for a surgical operation. Dr. Roy is of the view that merely for a preliminary examination, or even for the actual treatment, there is no necessity for the President to go to Europe. In any case, if the President desires a sea-voyage for a change or for relaxation, he can always visit the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. If he wishes so, you can draw up a suitable programme in consultation with the Chief Commissioner of those islands and with Admiral Pizey, the Chief of Naval Staff." I conveyed this suggestion to the President, and he said faintly, "Yes, you can arrange for my early visit to those territories."

The plans were settled in due course, and one day, the President and his none-too-small party left Calcutta on board the Port Commissioner's vessel for Diamond Harbour. Most of the time the President sat on the foredeck watching the panoramic riverside view. While cruising down the river, I pointed out to the President that the long stretches of land on either side of the river and its saline creeks could be utilised for extensive coconut cultivation under a state or cooperative enterprise. He listened to me and finally asked, "To whom shall I suggest this?" I said that a directive from the Central Government might set the state authorities thinking. With a faint smile, the President answered, "There is no organised system of work. Who will listen to me?"

In the evening, the President's party embarked on a cruiser waiting off Diamond Harbour, for the second lap of their voyage. The President relaxed well during the four days on board. He showed some interest in watching the naval exercises and manoeuvres performed in his honour. But he never came out of his cabin in the evenings. Wrapped in a shawl he would say, "It is a bit too windy."

The President had a slow-paced programme in the islands. One day the local authorities brought a batch of the primitive Ongies from their jungle homes to parade them before the President in the intense glare of daylight. They arrived in a batch of nine, undersized, sombre-faced adults of both sexes, nude, and with sores and scars all over their rough dark skin. Standing in a row before the President, with resentful and fear-stricken faces, these citizens of India presented a most pathetic sight. I was aghast at their wretchedness and had never thought that they would be so unhappily different from the granite-grey *adivasis* of the Indian plains, with their impressive features, grace, poise, and carefree ways.

The President tried to talk to them in Bhojpuri, but they did not understand him. He merely said, "These people are of great anthropological interest," and returned to his nearby

camp. And at this time an eminent anthropologist from far off Italy was carrying on a passionate research on that dwindling race, sharing with them the risks and privations of their wild and open existence.

Thoughts about those sad beings continued to haunt me for several days, and I wondered why visiting dignitaries could not meet these shy and retiring people in their own natural surroundings. On several occasions I had asked this question to local officers in various parts of the country, but the answer was the same always: It would be bothersome to take the President to their distant and secluded habitations. But curiously, nothing was too much botheration, when the President had to be taken to watch lions in their natural habitat. Quite obviously, the king of beasts would not follow as tamely official orders as would those lonely tribesmen.

While returning, the President disembarked at Vishakapatnam. He seemed unhappy about something, and after his return to the Capital, the cause became known. He told me that a couple of his proteges had been treated in a shabby manner on board. He complained that they had been denied access to certain parts of the ship. The President said, "The people of this country expect due justice and consideration from me. How can I live up to their expectations if my own people are denied simple consideration under my very nose?"

It disturbed me to hear the President talk thus. Obviously, he had been given a twisted version of what had happened on board. The fault, in a way, was mine because I had not told the President about the incident when it had occurred; but I had deliberately not done so as I didn't want to disturb the President's mood of relaxation and peace. What had happened was that one of the President's proteges, while going round the ship, had entered a cabin with certain delicate and vital installations. An officer had apparently told him to leave the cabin as it was out of bounds to unauthorised persons. I had in fact, at the start of the voyage, warned the civilian members of the President's entourage that they should restrict

their movements on board, to permitted areas. But I had assured them that a conducted tour of the ship would be arranged for the President and his entourage. And this tour had been made one day to the President's entire satisfaction. But this particular person had, either out of unsatiated curiosity or in order to establish his special importance, surreptitiously entered the radar room. He had been naturally asked to leave. The defaulter, no doubt, had given the President a totally distorted version of the incident.

From past experience, I had known that whoever got the President's ears first, always had an advantage over those who were not so fortunate. That was one of the reasons why certain subordinate and junior staff members were often on the lookout for opportunities to attract the President's attention. In the role of a *pater familias*, the President had a rough-and-ready way of disposing of certain matters, that often appeared to be simple to the point of informality; but from the more systematic angle it tended to be an insidious infraction of disciplinary standards. I now emphasised to the President that there could not have been an exclusive set of rules for the members of the President's party, and that the sooner they understood this elementary fact, the less would be the President's embarrassment in the face of their unseemly conduct. The President said nothing. But I felt uneasy, convinced that it was primarily the President's kindly and gracious ways that these petulant proteges were conveniently cashing in on, as well as their acquaintance with the President before he came to his high office.

I had also learnt of an instance where an employee had been discharged by a department for very valid reasons. He had been apparently advised by someone to hover around a particular corner of the Moghul Garden where the President often came and sat for a while in the afternoons. The discharged person thus found an admirable opportunity to submit to the President a concocted story about his dismissal. On a routine call on the President, I was surprised to hear him

say that this discharged employee (who was waiting some distance away) might be given an extension of service so that he could put his family affairs in order. When I said that I would look into the reason for his expulsion, the President merely repeated, with a sad face, "Arrange to give him an extension of service."

17

Though he was usually sedate and equable in temperament, the President occasionally showed extreme sensitiveness and irritability. But he also had a cultivated way of suppressing his ire before the public gaze. Highly sensitive to personal criticism, there were occasions when his judgment seemed to be completely overwhelmed by sentimental effervescence.

One day, the Comptroller, who was a foreigner, came to tell me that he had heard from some of his men that the beautiful carpets in the President's family wing were in bad shape due to misuse. He also wanted to know whether they could be replaced by some ordinary druggets. But he had already made the mistake of discussing the matter with one of the President's own men; for when I called on the President and asked for his opinion about replacing some of the carpets, I was surprised to see him flying into a rage. I had never before seen the President in so harsh a mood. I was dumbfounded to hear him stutter, "The Comptroller is not the master of this House!" He was panting heavily and his eyes became bloodshot. I waited uncertainly for his anger to subside. After a long pause he ordered, in a rattling voice, "Get rid of the Comptroller at once." I was greatly distressed. I tried to divert his mind to some other topic, but, sitting on the edge of his bed, he merely repeated loudly, "Give him due notice and make alternative arrangements."

Hoping for his mood to mellow down, I did not visit the President for the rest of the day. But the next morning when I went to him, his first words were, "Make quick arrangements to relieve the Comptroller."

Anxious for the future of the Comptroller, who though lacked competence in many ways, was not an ill-intentioned person, I discussed the matter with a Minister, who enjoyed the President's confidence. When he heard the details, he promptly said, "If Babuji was so violently agitated, then you cannot do anything about it. He will insist on his order being carried out." He continued, "Usually the President goes all out to assist a person who prayerfully seeks his help." That was no news to me, as I had witnessed several instances of the President distributing favours to persons who had approached him in the 'right way'. I had also seen denial of favours to persons whose approach was dignified and direct, and not sufficiently fawning. The Minister was categorical in saying finally that when the Comptroller had indirectly criticised the President's mode of living he had no hope for a reprieve. I had to take the painful measure that the President had ordered.

Soon after the departure of the Comptroller, a stocky gentleman of fairly advanced age, and dressed rather untidily in western style, came to see me. Almost synchronising with his arrival, came a ring from the President, who asked me to render necessary assistance to this gentleman whom he had told to see me. The gentleman spoke briefly about his past. Having retired some years back, he had tired of his idle life, and fearing that rheumatism would impair his health in this inactivity, he had decided to see the President whom he knew very well to seek his advice as to the possibility of procuring some type of light work. The President had asked him to see me in connection with the vacant post of Comptroller.

In the course of our talk, I found out that he had had some experience of management and of club life, but had no notion of the responsibilities of a *maitre d'hotel*. He was not sure about the differences in the preparation of jams and jellies,

syrups and squashes or even bun and bread. I told him that I would speak to the President and let him know the President's decision.

The President listened to me carefully, and asked, "Is it necessary for an officer to know all these petty details which are really the concern of the subordinate staff?" When I replied that for effective supervision, some broad knowledge of the duties performed by one's staff would be helpful, the President made the most astounding remark. "The nature of the food and the style of the service in this House has to undergo a change now. The old ways cannot be indefinitely continued in this House!" I was greatly perplexed by his words. He was not evidently stretching his vision far enough to view the country as a whole. The food habits of the Gangetic plains were not the food habits of the country. Moreover, the House had to cater to the tastes of distinguished people from all over the world. I then made a rational suggestion which seemed to upset the President further. I pointed out that the present Deputy Comptroller was managing the office of the Comptroller quite satisfactorily. We were thus saving nearly twenty thousand rupees annually. With a flushed face the President said, "What will your economy measures ultimately mean to a leaky reservoir? You are trying to save a paltry amount when huge sums of money are being drained away on imitative and unproductive measures." He grew silent for a while. I asked him for his final orders on the matter before withdrawing from the room. He kept quiet for a long time and then said, "I don't wish to find that person earning a bad name here. You can explain the position to him." Later, when I spoke to the gentleman about what a Comptroller's job involved, he immediately said that he had been given a different picture of the matter. And he himself was not willing to take up a job which had no fixed working hours.

Another occasion when I found the President in an emotionally upset state was in Mysore, where he was staying in the Lalitha Mahal palace, a magnificent structure which had

been originally built by the Maharajah as a provisional camp for visiting Viceroy. The President had fallen ill and some of his engagements had been necessarily cancelled. His illness naturally received publicity in some of the local newspapers. One of his assistants came running to tell me that the mention of his illness in the newspapers had greatly annoyed the President and that he wanted to see me immediately. I found him in a furious mood. "I have come here for a rest," he said, "and I find that some people are trying to proclaim me ill. A rejoinder must be issued at once to the effect that there is nothing wrong with me." I thereupon, advised him that a few gentlemen who had come for interview by prior arrangement had returned disappointed. Therefore, it would be unwise to issue such a pressnote at this stage. The President did not reply.

With the passage of time, I felt increasingly uneasy at the President's casual and indifferent attitudes in dealing with certain matters where discipline was becoming a repeated casualty. I could neither comprehend the reason for such actions nor reconcile them with the explanation advanced by some of his men that all his life the President had been doing such things in a mood of philosophic resignation. I wondered how they could equate the chaotic past with the present, when the office of President of this infant democracy was an important part of a new vision.

He was quite ignorant of, and indifferent to, the layout of the Moghul Garden and the flowers and trees grown there. He was confronted with embarrassing moments when visitors asked him questions about the Garden, which, no matter how simple, he could not answer. To avoid such future situations, I gave the President a plan of the Garden showing the prominent flowerbeds and the location of the rare trees, specifying their names. But the President looked at the plan for some time, and told me, "Ask the ADCs to familiarise themselves with the names of these plants and trees."

For the informal entertainments at the Rashtrapati Bhavan,

the President had mostly indicated that certain Ministers alone were to be invited. Certain others had never found their place on the invitees' list.. Assuming these omissions to have been unpremeditated and accidental, I mentioned to the President the names of some neglected Ministers and wanted to know if they could also be invited. I was taken aback when the President remarked, "These gentlemen were neither in the fighting column nor in the supporting column, during the entire liberation struggle. Putting on a closed-collar coat in 'fair weather' does not amount to subscribing to a solemn creed." The words sounded somewhat harsh and I made bold to ask the President if he still felt politically inclined in his neutral office. He replied with a smile, "This academic question has struck many of us for a long time when Bapu was alive. But how can anyone steeped in politics suddenly become a turn-coat and be deemed to have been rid of all affiliations, merely because of his assuming a particular office? If that unwritten code is rigidly followed, then the President's office should be the proper office to look after the people."

Towards the latter part of my term, my hands were too full even to bother about my own affairs. But whenever I received a call from Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (who occupied one of the President's Estate bungalows on rent) for afternoon snacks or evening meals, I invariably responded; her parties were small, lively and full of good humour. She came from a Christianised branch of the Kapurthala princely family, and it was remarkable how she combined in herself the charm of an ancient culture with the refinements of a modern outlook. Once a favourite disciple of Gandhiji, she had many an anecdote to tell about some of the Mahatma's lieutenants, one of whom was Dr. Rajendra Prasad. One of her brothers, Sir Maharaj Singh, a former Governor of Bombay, occasionally dropped in and regaled the invitees with saucy and snappy stories.

Once Sir Maharaj Singh approached me to ask if an incident related to him by Sir Homi Mody, then Governor of Uttar

Pradesh was true. The unfortunate, and somewhat amusing event had taken place at Banaras. The President was approaching the Vishwanathji Temple, and his car was surrounded by an immense crowd on the road. The police and volunteers could not clear a path for the President's convoy through that sea of humanity which stretched as far as the eye could see. Suddenly I noticed a chivalrous assistant of the President emerge from one of the accompanying cars and rush into the thick of the crowd with a threatening fist. Failing in his attempts, and in desperation, he struck someone a hard blow on the back. Immediately the inevitable scuffle ensued. I saw the President getting highly agitated; I got out of the car, but before I could extricate the assistant from the hands of the angry mob, I saw him receive a heavy blow from a policeman's truncheon. I was in uniform and without much difficulty dragged the assistant out of that menacing crowd and literally shoved him into his car.

As soon as I took my seat in the President's car, he asked me in an excited voice to take down the number of the constable on duty. He continued, "It is surprising that this sort of thing should happen before my eyes. An innocent fellow has been hit for nothing!" Seeing me silent, he resumed with greater vehemence, "On several such occasions in the past my assistants have helped to control the crowds, but never before have they been assaulted!" I ventured to explain to him how the outlook of the policemen had changed since those pre-independence days. I personally thought that no undue fuss needed to be made over the incident. The President said nothing; but the same evening when Mr. Lal Bahadur Shastri, the then Police Minister met me; he very anxiously asked, "Rashtrapatiiji appears to be extremely unhappy over this morning's incident. Was it the fault of the constable?" I replied that I personally did not think so, because he had acted under provocation. Shastriji with a beaming smile said, "That was exactly what the district officers had said."

Somewhat similar was the incident that occurred one morn-

ing when the President was on his way to the Kalkaji temple. The convoy came to a stop at a railway level crossing that had been closed as an unscheduled goods train was due to pass. The accompanying ADC and the security officer walked up to the gateman and requested him to allow the President's car to pass. I noticed soon that they were getting involved in a heated argument and went over to find out what was happening. The President said excitedly, "It is strange that the President of the country has to wait on the road at the pleasure of a gateman!"

As I approached them, I could hear the gateman say, "So many *burra sahibs*, flying flags on the bonnets of their cars pass through this point every day. How is it possible for me to recognise them, or specially open the gate for them, in the face of danger? If I open the gate for one car to pass, then all the other cars waiting their turn will immediately rush to the crossing and it will take a long time for them to cross." He absolutely refused to open the gate. I could sympathise the poor fellow's line of argument, which was quite correct. Returning to the car, I was surprised to hear the President say, "You must report that gateman's conduct to the Railway Board."

While the President was returning from the temple, the gate happened to be open and I saw the gateman dutifully saluting and bowing low. Again the President reminded me, "His misconduct must be reported." The following morning, I spoke about the incident to the General Manager of the railways, who at once asked me what he was supposed to do. I could offer him no suggestion. After some days, the Prime Minister spotted me at a reception in the House and said, "I hear from the Railway Minister that a poor gateman is to be hanged for an offence of grave misconduct!" The President did not refer to the matter again.

One day I told Sir Maharaj Singh how the President was unhappy, because in a group photograph of the Prime Minis-

ter's Secretariat taken in the Rashtrapati Bhavan forecourt, the Prime Minister was flanked by Mr. Dharmavira and myself. The President had felt that I should have stayed away. With a resigned sigh, Sir Maharaj Singh said, "During the Governors' Conference, I had a private talk with the President and I felt that he was very keen to preside over the Cabinet meetings and to recast his office on the independent lines of the Parliament and the Supreme Court. May the Lord help you, my friend!"

18

The President obviously wanted to follow some of the Prime Minister's ways. I was not, therefore, surprised when he asked me if the *Holi* could be celebrated in Rashtrapati Bhavan. He pointedly told me that if the general public wanted to greet him on that day, arrangements should be made for their unrestricted access to the Moghul Garden.

My first difficulty was that of communicating the novel desire of the President to the public. I sought his advice and he said that I should pass on the message informally to some of the Ministers and officials. As for the general public, he would ask some of his own men to pass the word round. But the attendance on the day of celebration proved very disappointing. The few who came on their way back from the Prime Minister's house did not appear sufficiently enthusiastic. It was altogether a dull affair from the start. The President was disinclined to move about and he remained seated in one place. The visitors' spirits also received a damper when they were individually told that they should not use liquid colour on the President; and as for the coloured powder, it was to be applied very carefully on his forehead, taking care to see that no particle entered his nostrils. The celebration soon fizzled out.

But in 1954 an element of boisterous hilarity pervaded the *Holi* games, thanks to the irrepressible 'Timmy' (General Thimayya). He was then an honorary ADC to the President. The President was seated on the eastern lawn close to a fountain reservoir. Suddenly he heard a frantic scream followed by a splash. The Army Chief of Staff, General Rajendrasinghji, who was walking along the edge of the fountain, had been pushed into the reservoir by General Thimayya. The Army Chief was soaked to the skin. With a look of horror and surprise, the President rose from his seat, while the Army Chief clambered up the reservoir in his wet and bedraggled uniform. The President walked up to him anxiously to ask if he was hurt. The General replied, with a cheerful grin, "My heart is still beating, Sir, but my watch has stopped beating!" He was then led to an ADC's apartment where he took a shower and changed into a young officer's uniform. Unfamiliar with such horseplay, the President appeared somewhat shaken, and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces slowly walked away towards his private apartments.

The President decided, in 1953, to have his birthday celebrated with public participation. When I checked with him on the invitation procedure and other details, he merely said, "Many people know that December 3, is my birthday. Some of the Ministers may be reminded about it; as for refreshments, people will be coming here to greet me and not to be greeted."

The President's birthday party was in full swing when the old Deputy Comptroller came running to tell me that a group of visitors was pestering him for refreshments and that some were being rude to him. He wanted me to meet this group and talk to them. I agreed to do so, but was myself at a loss as to what to tell them. More than a dozen persons strode up to me. Taking my cue from the President's words I calmly said that we did not expect any visitors that morning who might ask for something in return for the tributes they paid to the President. I could see that my words had some

effect. Then, a lone and rather effeminate voice from the rear of the group was heard to say, "If we had come in trousers and ties then we would, surely, have been offered *laddoos* and *samosās*!" His patent sarcasm wore my patience thin. I asked them to accompany me to the President to whom they would complain directly. That worked like magic; all with one exception, fell back. The one who followed me looked a typical young no-gooder with his dishevelled hair, acne-pitted face, and apologetic attitude. Grovelling servilely, and with folded hands, he told the President, "We are waiting for some sweets on this auspicious occasion." The President turned to me and said, "Please explain the position to them."

Id was an annual function introduced by the last Governor-General into the House. One year, the President wanted to explore the possibility of arranging a meeting, on the day of *Id*, with a few distinguished members of the Moslem community, in the Rashtrapati Bhavan. I was worried since I had to figure out ways of getting some of these distinguished people to the Rashtrapati Bhavan on that day when they would be primarily busy with their own families. However, taking advantage of Maulana Azad's and Mr. Kidwai's kindness to me, I asked them for advice on how to set about that delicate task. Raising his bushy eyebrows and with an amused look, Mr. Kidwai said, "Since many people will be coming to meet me on that day, you must not count upon my attendance." Maulana Sahib said, puffing out a cloud of smoke, "Rajen Babu is in the habit of putting the cart before the horse! It is not an occasion when others should come to see him. Rather, he should go around; but since he will not do that, he can at least broadcast his greetings." So saying, he gave me a smile and drove away in his car. I rang up Mr. Humayun Kabir and a couple of other gentlemen whom I knew, but received replies more or less on the same lines as that of Mr. Kidwai's.

Thus, the *Id* function in Rashtrapati Bhavan remained practically restricted to the House staff. Accompanied by their children and *burqa*-clad women folk, the staff turned up

in full strength. The seniormost employee among them made a brief speech and offered the President some nuts, which he touched as a token of his acceptance. The gathering was then treated to sweets and *sherbet*. Lastly with a benevolent, fatherly air, the President delivered a short speech.

Whenever he went to his village for private visits, at his request word would be sent round to expect him; and one morning a crowd of villagers would gather under a shady tree to listen to their Babuji. They would all squat reverentially round the chair on which the President sat, dressed simply in a *dhoti* and a *banian*. In Bhojpuri he spoke to his listeners on a variety of subjects, mostly relating to the multidirectional national development programme that was under way. But when he came to agricultural matters, the predominantly peasant gathering listened with rapt attention. And they would say that they were not afraid of famine or pestilence, drought or flood; for, after all, it was the will of God that must prevail over all else. But what they wanted was the kindly eye of the *Sircar* over them.

One of them asked the President, "If water does not fall from the skies, cannot the water under the earth be brought to the surface?" These innocent people seemed satisfied with the President's explanations on these matters. They were, for the most part big-built, sturdy villagers with harsh voices and determination writ large on their faces, and all alike inarticulate. I was reminded of the President's often repeated remark, "They are the leader-makers."

Whenever he came across similar groups of people, the President repeated more or less the same ideas: Our country has a great future. There are a number of urgent problems to be tackled on a priority basis. Everyone must gird up his loins and work hard. We must all be honest, and have faith in the country's destiny. Floods and droughts are upsetting our calculations. Such was the common theme on which the President usually dilated. Particularly during his travel by

road and rail, he liked to say a few words to the crowds gathered by the wayside. And he would want the security cordon to be lifted so that the crowd could come close to listen to him. This invariably resulted in utter disorder placing the police and the peacekeeping machinery in extremely difficult situations.

The common people were naturally impressed with the President's simple ways, and were particularly fascinated by his intimate solicitude for their personal and domestic affairs. Occasionally, a few such people were asked to join him at lunch in Rashtrapati Bhavan where the meals were served in his private dining room.

The President's face would brighten up with happiness and satisfaction, whenever people praised him for his innocent, artless, kindly, and accommodating ways. But to some people his attitude appeared anachronistic when viewed against the background of the pomp and vanity of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. On the other hand, at large functions and distinguished gatherings, the President's aloof and indifferent manner did not help to project his essential sociability; in fact, new acquaintances and foreigners interested in entering into a conversation with the President very often found themselves at a loss as to what to say because of his cold and listless ways.

One evening, the Prime Minister had arranged a film on the life of Queen Victoria in the auditorium of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. He asked me to find out whether the President would like to attend the show. The President said, "I am not particularly interested in such films; but since the Prime Minister will have a distinguished guest with him, I might attend and suffer the agony of sitting through it." After the show the Prime Minister's guest—a scientist of international repute—asked the President, "What kind of films interest you most, Your Excellency?" With a faint smile the President replied, "I have not seen many films, but I can put up with short documentaries." Turning to the Prime Minister the guest

inquired, "Does His Excellency mean the micro-filmed documents?" The Prime Minister hastened to explain, "No; the President means the publicity films." Whereupon the guest asked, "How did Your Excellency enjoy today's film?" The President candidly replied, "I saw the first part of it; but afterwards I felt inclined to doze." With a hearty laugh the guest said, "Ah then, you must have appreciated the picture, because all's well that ends well." "Yes," said the President casually.

The President's innocence of worldly ways once created some amusement among the distinguished guests at a formal luncheon hosted by a prince in honour of the visiting President. The prince had earlier confided in me that the guests had all indicated that the luncheon should not be 'dry'. Although the President had never broached the subject of Prohibition to me, I knew how totally he was committed to it. The President had, of course, attended receptions given by heads of diplomatic missions where liquor was served. However, having been informed of the arrangements at the last minute, I could only tell the host to try to understand the President's sentiments and to use his discretion in the matter. When the luncheon began, there was a liberal supply of *Nimbu Pani* on the table; but there was also an abundant supply of gin, selected that day obviously for its colourlessness. As the party progressed, the gin was, of course, flowing profusely into glasses, and at one stage, the President asked the host, who was seated opposite, "There is a nice smell here. Is it coming from the garden?" With a straight face, the host replied, "No, sir; it is coming from this table. We are having a special kind of scented *sherbet*. But it was not served to you because it was iced." The President approvingly said, "Yes, ice does not agree with me."

The replacement of the china and glassware in the Rashtrapati Bhavan by silver was done in stages. The President was happy with the new arrangements and he privately invited some of his intimate friends to share his simple menus in those silver appointments which he borrowed from the silver room for his private table. At state functions, the simple process of serving food all at once on the large silver platters and side-bowls proved advantageous in a way as the heavy losses incurred due to breakages were totally eliminated. The silverware on the table certainly added glitter to the room but the task of cleaning and polishing it fell heavy on the scullery-boys.

However, the President must have been pleased at the many compliments he received on the changeover. In fact, many of the guests at large formal dinners very often overlooked the presence of forks and spoons and used their hands freely. When one such guest was reminded by his neighbour that he had been provided with cutlery, he retorted with Socratic irony, "What if so?" Another guest remarked, "Don't forget that there are no arrangements here for washing your hands. So you had better use your spoon." A sympathetic guest added, "The fork has only four fingers while our god-given one has five. The manner in which my friend is doing justice to his food suggests that eating with spoons and forks will not do for him."

But there were also complaints, the same night. A guest asked the ADC where he could wash his hands, and he was requested to use the finger bowl. The guest exclaimed, "How is it that though the food is now served in a *thali*, the old finger bowl persists? You should now have a large basin in a convenient place for the use of the guests." He also complained to the President about the matter after dinner; and in the presence of the other guests the President told me to do something

about the matter so as to avoid inconvenience to the guests. This led me to introduce the system of bearers carrying a basin, a jug of water and a towel to the seated guests who wanted to wash their hands with soap.

Then there was the time when, after dinner, the fruits were being passed round, a guest wanted to have a gargle. He asked the steward whether there was a washbasin nearby for him to have a gargle and to clean his dentures. He was told that he would have to go downstairs. With disappointment in his voice, the guest said, "Then I had better take a couple of apples in my pocket, because the President will have left the dining room by the time I return."

There was a flutter in the Banquet Hall one day when the orderly posted outside the closed door came in quietly and whispered something to the staff officer seated at the far end of the table. The officer tiptoed out of the hall with the orderly and returned very soon to inform me that an angry gentleman waiting outside wanted to see me at once. I found the gentleman fuming and fretting, and freely cursing the orderly for not having opened the door to let him in. He complained, "I have come here at the invitation of the President and this devil of an orderly has the effrontery to challenge me and keep me waiting here for the last quarter of an hour. Am I to be blamed if my car breaks down and I arrive late?" I gave him a patient hearing and was about to take him in, when suddenly, with an air of superiority he said, "This sort of thing was unknown in the Viceregal times." Then I had to tell him that if he was so familiar with the practices of the Viceregal times, he ought to have waited in the reception hall, to present himself afterwards to the President as a post-dinner guest. For, during the Viceregal days, once the Banquet Hall doors were closed, they remained so till the Viceroy rose from dinner. Then the gentleman said, with a hollow laugh, "I know you will not let me miss a lavish Rashtrapati Bhavan dinner." I showed him the vacant chair in the Hall reserved for him, and resumed my seat, only to hear him

loudly apologising to the President for the delay in his arrival, for which he held the poor orderly primarily responsible. And, the following morning the President commented, "Sometimes for unavoidable reasons some of the guests might arrive late for functions in this House. You might instruct the staff to see that such guests are not put to any inconvenience."

Another day, at a large reception in the House, an invited couple had brought their children—three of them and all very young. According to the system I had introduced, all children were separated from parents at the gate, taken to a room below and left in the custody of the lady housekeeper who entertained them with things to eat and with indoor games. The irate father went straight to the President and complained of the 'kidnapping' of his children at the gate. The President smilingly asked the staff officer on duty to allow the children to remain with the parents. Soon the three of them were romping merrily all over the place. The parents then requested the President to pose with the family for a photograph. The President graciously consented, and the House photographer was requisitioned. Suddenly the Prime Minister made his appearance there, and his first question to an ADC, with quite some annoyance in his tone, was: "Is this a children's party?" Sensing trouble, when the photographer had finished, the President told the parents, "Yes, now you can send your children downstairs."

Trouble arose again, when a guest once inquired of an ADC, after a dinner, whether a Rashtrapati Bhavan car could take him back to his residence. The ADC politely expressed his inability, explaining that even the Members of Parliament were not provided with such a facility though many of them did not have a car of their own. The gentleman went away, but not before issuing a threat to the officer that he would report the incident to the President. A few days later the President showed me a letter wherein the gentleman had concocted a story of how in the cold forecourt of the Rashtrapati Bhavan the engine of his car had failed, and how his request for a

conveyance had been rudely turned down by a staff officer. Handing the letter to me the President asked in puzzlement, "What should be done in such cases?" I said, "The President may perhaps approve that we maintain a uniformity of practices in this House so that we are not caught in the trap of our own unhealthy precedents." He merely remarked, "You will have to explain the position to him."

20

Towards the middle of 1954, the President was showing signs of fatigue and mental unease. He began to spend more and more evenings all by himself, and was no longer interested in the informal evening drives. Noticing his frequent phases of reticence and growing irritability, I made bold to ask the President one day if any particular matter was causing him concern. He gave me a surprised look and then, ignoring my question, said that henceforward he had decided to draw a reduced salary, and specified the amount he would forego. I did not, at that time, know the developments that had led to his decision, nor was I anxious to know them. But as there was a principle involved I thought I should get some clarifications on the matter.

I had had, in fact, an occasion to ask the then Governor-General, Rajaji once whether such a voluntary reduction in one's authorised salary would be in keeping with systematised procedures and administrative discipline. The implications were several, including embarrassment to the successor. Should such practices be permitted to become a convention, I had asked him. With a chuckle, the Governor-General had replied, "There are many ways of cashing in on the credulousness of our ignorant countrymen. The authorities may be turning a

blind eye to such questions, more for reasons of politics than for the sake of propriety."

Of course, on more than one occasion the President had said that these were individual and private matters. The subject now cropped up again when one of his close friends from Bengal visited him. The guest was one of the few with whom the President conversed in Bengali. His friend's laconic comment was that if it were left to individuals to voluntarily reduce their salaries and allowances, then if they so wished it should also be left to them to raise the amount to a convenient level!

Soon after, I found the President in a disturbed frame of mind. Frowning at me, he asked, "I wonder how the Prime Minister comes to know that my private entertainments are too few. He has now suggested that the Government Hospitality Organisation can easily look after my private entertainments also. That would mean that I must forego my official allowance! I have already informed the Prime Minister that as a gesture of economy and austerity I have started drawing a reduced salary. The matter has remained at that stage. If you receive any communication concerning my allowance, consult me before you reply."

This last suggestion particularly upset me, because he knew, just as much as I did, that I was not in any way competent to deal with matters directly related to the powers and privileges of the President. His initial remark about the Prime Minister's knowledge of his private entertainments was still ringing in my ears, when the President again asked me, "How often do you visit the Prime Minister's house on official work?" I replied that I seldom went there and usually sent the Deputy Military Secretary whenever occasion demanded. I took the opportunity to remind the President that except for his own people none knew what went on in his private kitchen or in his private dining room, though, outsiders were struck by the fact that there was no mention of his private en-

tertainments in the House Circular issued to the Press every day.

Now the President again asked me if there was a descriptive manual on the office of the Military Secretary. I explained to him that no set rules governing the post existed. I further suggested that if he so wished, a comprehensive manual could be prepared; but I also struck a note of caution: his successors might want to change some of the provisions. After some thought, the President asked me to draft as complete a manual as possible to cover all possible contingencies, and to present it to him as early as possible. I spent three sleepless months compiling the manual which ran into three volumes. When the President read through it, he seemed quite displeased at the mention of certain Ministries with whom my office had frequent dealings.

During this time, Sardar K. M. Pannikar was once having tea with the President. He casually brought up the topic 'After Nehru Who?', which had become a matter of general speculation, both within the country and abroad. The President asked enthusiastically, "What is your personal opinion? With your wide knowledge of history you may have a clearer vision." The guest replied with his usual flamboyance that the Congress did not seem to believe in training suitable 'possibles' for the line of succession. After Jawaharlalji there would be, in all probability, a tussle between the 'proposed' and the 'imposed' leadership. Nodding his head, the President remarked, "After me, the deluge!" Promptly the visitor said, "Yes, such thoughts if harboured by the top leaders will be disastrous for the country." The President then made some eulogistic references to the Prime Minister and concluded, "He is at the zenith of his career and he will remain there for many more years."

After a few days the President asked me for a complete list of the Rashtrapati Bhavan staff, excluding the bodyguard, the army and police contingents, and the subordinate staff. In particular, he wanted to know the religion and original pro-

vince of birth of the members of the staff. He spent a long time over the list and then said, "I find that people of all religions are here: Hindu, Moslem, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist and Christian; but I also find that all the states are not evenly represented. Since this is the House of the Head of State, it is necessary that all the states are proportionately represented here; or, at least there should be a semblance of equity." I explained to him that employment opportunities in Rashtrapati Bhavan were very limited. Moreover, the eligibility for absorption in the occasional vacancies had to be determined not on provincial considerations, but on merit only, as was the practice in all public or private offices.

He then switched to another topic on which he had spoken to me very often in the past. He said, "Before appointing the ADCs you should make sure that they are fully conversant with Hindi. I hear that even among themselves they speak in a foreign tongue. That certainly does not go well in this House. Only yesterday, one of our Ambassadors came to visit me and today a Minister called on me. Both complained that at meetings and conferences they found great difficulty in conversing with their Indian staff in Hindi." The President was so obsessed with the language issue that at times he tended to overlook the logic of an argument; but I mentioned that in general conversations it was certainly not in good taste to speak in a language which would not be understood by the majority.

As this issue was constantly coming up, I thought I should tell the President honestly of the difficulty I had in the matter of Hindi. I told him that the habit of speaking Hindi could be easily developed among the staff if the Hindi-speaking members refrained from adopting a Big Brotherly attitude. I told the President that there would be little chance of my instructions being carried out, if the learners were laughed at for every little mistake. I had felt free to speak my "broken" Hindi with persons like Mr. Ram Manohar Lohia, Mr. Bal Krishna Sharma, Lal Bahadurji and many others who, though eminent Hindi scholars, never showed xenophobic intolerance.

On the contrary, they were extremely considerate. We who prided ourselves on our civilisation, did not seem to have learnt to understand the feelings of others, I told him. The President merely sat gazing at me impassively.

Around this time, he asked me one evening why he had not been told about the baskets of mangoes sent from the Rashtrapati Bhavan as a present for the visiting Chinese Foreign Minister. The President had also heard that the Foreign Minister had reciprocated by sending some baskets of seedless *leechis* for the Prime Minister. I explained to him that the matter did not concern him as the courtesies had been exchanged between the two Foreign Ministers (the Prime Minister was then in charge of foreign affairs). I also assured him that the expenses incurred in this matter had been borne by the Government Hospitality Organisation.

The President then turned, to my great surprise, to another subject, the details of which he knew only too well. "The Government Hospitality Organisation," he said, "is a part of the Prime Minister's Secretariat, and you who head that Organisation are my Military Secretary! I do not know how and why such a curious arrangement was made. It seems to me as altogether unsatisfactory." I had to then remind him that even before he assumed office, I had explained to him the basis of the arrangement at a meeting in his residence.

After a long pause, the President said, "In a democratic republic the Head of State has a distinctive status which should not be confused with that of the Head of Government. It was precisely for this reason that I decided to call the Government House by the new name 'President's House' (Rashtrapati Bhavan). Now, after my brief experience here, I feel that it will not be proper for you to remain associated with the Hospitality Organisation which is an organ of the Prime Minister's Secretariat. If you wish to be relieved from your duties there, I will speak about it to the Prime Minister." I told the President that it was not left to the wishes of an officer to take on or give up responsibility, especially where large funds were in-

volved. I suggested that he speak to the Prime Minister about how the affairs of the Hospitality Organisation should hereafter be conducted. I would act according to the final orders received from the President. Within a few days the President did discuss the matter with the Prime Minister; but he apparently was not agreeable to making any change in the existing arrangements.

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Since then I noticed a palpable change in the President's mood. He spoke very sparingly and only in Hindi. One day he sent for me and told me about his desire to celebrate a happy event in his family in the Rashtrapati Bhavan. A similar event had been celebrated earlier in his village home when wagon-loads of people and things had been despatched from Delhi. As on the previous occasion, I suggested without hesitation that it would be better if the ceremony were performed elsewhere instead of in Rashtrapati Bhavan. I said that a suitable place in the Capital could be found, even on rent, and the necessary materials could be transported from the Rashtrapati Bhavan; or alternatively arrangements could also be made in his home town. This time however, the President took my suggestions completely amiss. He said excitedly, "How is it that you are reflecting the same views as those of the Prime Minister?" The implications of the President's somewhat unkind words were not lost on me and I hastened to remind him that what I had just told him was exactly what I had said on the previous occasion, when he had actually appreciated the reasonableness of my advice.

Apparently—from what I learnt from the President—the Prime Minister had cautioned him that if any nuptial celebrations of the President's dependents were held in the

Rashtrapati Bhavan, the invitees would be compelled to be present and to bring gifts. And that would not be a desirable precedent. The President continued as though soliloquising, "I do not come under the definition of 'government servant,' nor can the word 'family' be interpreted to mean the same thing as in the case of a government employee. My position is unique and extraordinary, and I find that my own Military Secretary is still unable to appreciate it. I shall ask the invitees not to bring any presents; but in spite of that if they do, I shall throw them away. I have decided that the ceremony will be performed in this very House. Of course, there are still a couple of months to go." Breathing heavily, the President kept staring at me. I then told him that as Head of State, it was entirely up to him to do whatever that pleased him. I had only recommended what I felt would be appropriate, decorous, and dignified for the President of a democratic country to do in a matter which was essentially his own private affair.

The atmosphere of the House was fast becoming a little too stifling for my liking. The President, on the one hand, tended to equate his office with those in countries very different from ours in the administrative setup. The Prime Minister, on the other, was profoundly concerned about the popular image of the country as one that was wedded to democracy. It was also clear that with the responsibilities and obligations of his office, the Prime Minister could not possibly dissociate himself from many of the official affairs of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. I was therefore hardly surprised when one day the Prime Minister told me that according to the rules, all Ministers, diplomatic representatives, and other dignitaries of the country were required to notify and surrender all valuable gifts which they received in the discharge of their official duties. Such gifts received by the President would also, therefore, have to be surrendered. The Prime Minister then asked me to prepare an inventory of such gifts which the President had received at functions in the Capital or on tours. He also

suggested that for the time being, some of them could be kept displayed in the state rooms of the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Knowing the President's current state of mind, I asked the Prime Minister if he would like to discuss the matter with the President. Ignoring my suggestion, he said laughing, "No personal right is established on any article received when in occupation of a public office, high or low. You make out a complete list." So saying, he went away. After arranging to have the inventory prepared, with much hesitation, I approached the President to speak to him about it. With a surprised look, he asked me, "You mean that only the garlands and the addresses will remain in my possession, and that all other articles will have to be sent away? Let me hear more about this from the Prime Minister and then I shall decide." After a few days the President told me that the gifts would remain temporarily in the state rooms. What to do with them, he said, could be decided later.

Unpleasant situations were now constantly cropping up in rapid succession. One day the Prime Minister held an unscheduled meeting with the President, and though I did not know that exactly transpired, I found the Prime Minister emerging from the President's study in an agitated manner. He asked me, "It is over five years now that the Hospitality Organisation has been functioning. But why is not the President not taking advantage of its facilities? When everything is readily available and handy, the President surely does not need to draw on his entertainment allowance." I told the Prime Minister that without written authorisations it would not be possible for my office to make changes in the President's salary and allowances bills. The matter should, therefore, be discussed with the President and the necessary directive issued.

Hardly had the Prime Minister left when I got a call from the President. With a very grave face he asked me if I had received any modified instructions from the Prime Minister's office relating to his allowances, and whether my office had sent

any statement on his personal entertainments to the Prime Minister's office. I answered both his questions in the negative and further clarified that the only report that usually went from the House to any authority was the annual report of the entertainment expenses sent to the Auditor-General, a practice that had been introduced by the Viceroy. But even this report had not been sent for the last few years. The President listened to me and then gave me an extraordinary verbal directive which, coming as it did from the Head of State, carried all the force of an authoritative order. It took me a day to coax my conscience to fall in with the President's directive; but on further consideration I found it impossible to reconcile myself to a proposal which would have tormented my mind.

The next morning I, therefore, told the President that working as I did in an office where there were many other responsible people it would make my position easier if the President would issue written instructions on this subject. This request did not seem to please him; he merely said that there was no difference between a President's verbal and written orders. Before I took leave, the President informed me that the Prime Minister had come to him a short while before to inform him that in view of the existing facilities of the Hospitality Organisation there was no longer any justification to continue the President's entertainment allowance. He added, "There is far too much interference in the affairs of this House."

22

The year (1954) was drawing to a close and the President was feeling far from well. About this time, he received a message from the Prime Minister to the effect that the President of a European country was due to arrive in Bombay in his special yacht and would tour the country before finally leaving from the port of Calcutta. The President told me that

as it would not be physically possible for him to receive the distinguished visitor in Bombay, I should keep myself in readiness to go there at short notice to receive the guest on his behalf and probably also to see him off at the Calcutta port at the end of the tour. I had already received the travel programme of the visiting dignitary, and I knew that some gifts would be presented to him during his brief stay in the Capital. The President wanted it made sure that all these gifts were presented to the guest in his name.

As I was preparing to proceed to Bombay, a lady assistant of the President came to my office and anxiously inquired if there was any truth in the rumour that I was thinking of resigning my post in the Rashtrapati Bhavan. This was news to me, and I told her so. Soon after came another person, whom I had appointed to a post in my office on the wishes of the President, to express a similar concern with greater dramatic flourish. He even begged me to send the President a note right away to say that the rumour that had reached his ears was totally baseless. That was a telling suggestion and I told him that the question of my writing such a note did not arise. This person persisted with his entreaties, and I could easily make out what was cooking and that the broth on the boil was almost ready to be served!

After a couple of days the President asked me to see him in his study. I entered, and he continued to read a file, handing me at the same time a letter which was addressed to him. The gist of the letter was that the Military Secretary had been in his post for a long time and that perhaps the President might now be pleased to consider appointing another senior officer in his place. The name of this officer was also mentioned. The letter had come from a Minister.

I read the letter and returned it to the President remarking that as it was from a Minister to the President, I did not feel competent to comment on it. The President said immediately, "It is entirely up to me to accept or reject anyone's suggestion, whoever he may be. I merely wanted to know

your personal reaction.” I told the President that the question concerned my personal interest. The code of service discipline demanded that the competent authority should look after the service interests of an officer. If officers were allowed a free hand in advancing their personal interests, then the very principle of public service—service before self—would be destroyed and the administrative machinery would be bogged down. Therefore, I repeated that it would be presumptuous on my part to express my feelings in such a matter. The President kept gazing at me in a fixed manner. As I was withdrawing, he repeated in a hoarse voice, “It is left entirely to my discretion to accept or reject the suggestion I have received.” There was an obvious ring of condescension in the President’s words. I knew the details of how the letter had come to the President. The murky episode had dispirited me, and I stood listening to the President say. “I want to tell you something to which you might perhaps give some thought. Let me have your views some time tomorrow. I have necessarily to look after the interests of those who have served me in the past. They will continue to be of service to me if and when I leave this office. Besides, in the House of the Head of State, excessive military discipline sometimes causes misunderstanding and even hardship to people. Finally, your office is best suited to ensure that there is no interference from outside in the internal affairs of this House. I have already spoken to you a few times on these matters. Now, you can think it over and tell me some time tomorrow if these wishes of mine can be given effect to.”

I told the President immediately that it would not be proper for me to comment on the President’s extraordinary interest in his old associates. But I requested his permission to state that any inequality in the President’s concern for the staff could not but be prejudicial to their morale. I then told him that I could not shirk my responsibility with regard to the maintenance of the dignity of the President’s office; and this meant my ensuring an optimum standard of discipline in the

House. Finally, I asked him for an explicit definition of the word 'outside' before I could express my views on his last point. The President repeated softly, "You can tell me about these things some time tomorrow."

I had no illusions about what was taking shape. In fact I had a fair inkling of the predisposing factors that had led up to those events. For me, it had become impossible to toe the President's line unreservedly. The thought weighed heavily upon my morale. Clearly, there was only a Hobson's choice before me. In medical practice there is a saying: When in doubt, consult. I was already up against a mountain of doubt. Naturally, I acutely felt the need for dependable advice. I was in a critical phase of my life's journey, feeling somewhat helpless; I received much sympathy from a few influential men; but not the necessary guidance. I therefore, decided to follow the old maxim: When there is no solution, ride the tide of time, and time will provide the answer. Thus I came to the conclusion that in fairness to the President, and in fairness to myself, the time had come for me to take leave of the President as early as possible. But the pain of it all vanished as I read the unexpected letter I received from a great and good man—Rajaji:

I read the note in *The Hindustan Times* about your impending retirement with a sense of sorrow. I feel your leaving Rashtrapati Bhavan as an event in my own life and a kind of parting.

God bless you and may Rashtrapati Bhavan and its master find an equally good caretaker and diligent servant.

You were like a faithful son to me all these years.

Yours affectionately,

C. Rajagopalachari.

I went to the President in the evening, to hear him repeating, to my utter surprise, "Whether or not to accept the Minister's suggestion is a matter for me alone to decide." Then he referred to the matter in which I had regretted my

inability to obey him in the absence of a written order from him. Then the President grew silent, and I produced from my pocket a seven-line letter of resignation and handed it to him. The President read the letter carefully and said, returning it to me, "Keep it with you. I shall speak to the Prime Minister." Evidently he had a talk with the Prime Minister, because the same evening I was summoned by the Prime Minister to his residence. I gave him all the information he wanted, and he asked me merely whether I had actually seen the Minister's letter; he then advised me not to press my resignation, and asked me to give him all the relevant details in writing.

While I was busy with the preparations connected with the fifth anniversary celebrations of the Republic I received a congratulatory message from the Prime Minister's Secretariat informing me that a proposal for presenting me a national award had been sent to the President for his approval. Shortly afterwards, I received a call from the President. The moment I entered, the President said, with a very serious expression, "The Prime Minister has just informed me that he desires to send you abroad on a diplomatic assignment." Then looking at a file, he continued, "Your name has been recommended for a national award, but my difficulty is to give my approval in the face of the developments that have cropped up." The President kept peering at the file, and I silently withdrew. Needless to say that the proposal did not receive the President's approval.

While I received much support and encouragement for my stand from a few distinguished men, some of my friends and colleagues, however, thought that I could have made my conscience a little malleable to accommodate a desire of the President. But they were overlooking the fact that I was already willing to obey if I were given a written instruction as that would make it clear that I was not acting on my own, but only carrying out an order of the President. This logic of duty, admittedly cold, nevertheless would save me the mortification of surrendering a principle voluntarily, and the alien-

ation at one stroke, of the regard and respect of my juniors. And that was not all. To continue in office in accordance with the wishes of the President, I would have had to acquire an extraordinary psychology which, viewed in the light of my training and convictions, would have been impossible for me at that stage of my existence. A palace, for me, is a palace, and a bazar, a bazaar; I was capable of adapting myself to both environments. But I could never have persuaded myself that the characteristics of these two places were interchangeable.

At the end of his tour, the distinguished visitor from abroad presented me with some personal mementoes and spoke of his intention to offer me an honour of his country. He said that at his suggestion, the Prime Minister had agreed to relax the rule binding the acceptance of foreign honours by Indian citizens. And the award was presented to me at a later date.

Before returning to the Capital from Calcutta, I paid a courtesy call on the then Governor of West Bengal, Dr. H. C. Mookerjee, who knew me from his Delhi days when he was Vice-Chairman of the Constituent Assembly. This great educationist, humanist, and true Christian spoke with great anguish about the callousness with which Gandhian principles were being thrown to the wind in the country, even as they continued to excite the imagination of thinkers all over the world. He regretted how the invigorating climate of independence was being fouled by hatred and jealousy born out of old acrimonies and antagonism, reducing everything to a dull and depressing gloom. What bewildered him about our young democracy was the self-importance and self-righteousness that were being cherished in transient posts of power, and the morbid desire of old people to see the fulfillment of their random fancies during their lifetime. The Governor continued, "The Mahatma was second to none in admitting his mistakes, and never allowed a good man or a friend to go the enemy's way. But these things have changed so soon. The virtue of receptiveness seems to have evaporated in every field. The existence of leaders in the non-political fields is now hardly recognised.

And in this vast and variegated country where there is a plenty of everything, including talents, we seem to suffer from an all-round scarcity. Some people tenaciously park themselves near the 'power stations' and thus deny a distant vision to those in power." Sooner or later, he predicted, the people themselves would grow confused and frustrated as they continued to hear the talk *ad nauseam* of the blessings of democracy, while simultaneously witnessing the fearful sight of their rulers groping in the opposite direction.

Back in Delhi, I found that the news of my impending departure had spread into the press. The President was peeved at a comment in a journal that had equated my departure in the middle of the President's term, to the changing of horses in mid-stream. The different departments in the Military Secretary's establishment were planning their own farewell functions for me; the President who heard of it asked me if all these could be combined into one occasion. But the suggestion apparently did not appeal to the organisers. At another special farewell function, the President was to present me with certain personal mementoes; but that evening I was a little unwell and he was kind enough to send his gifts down to me. The officer who was proposed by the Minister as my successor could not relieve me as the proposal did not receive the approval of the Prime Minister. Shortly after, the Minister too vacated his office. According to the Prime Minister's wishes, a retired Major-General took over charge from me. When I took him in to the President for a formal introduction, I made use of the opportunity to hand over to the President some of his personal papers and articles which had been in my custody. The President chose this moment to graciously invite me to the impending Republic Day celebrations and to the happy domestic function in Rashtrapati Bhavan which was to follow. With my preoccupations preparatory to going abroad, I had regretfully to deny myself the pleasure of attending both the functions. January, 1955, saw the close of a certainly interesting, and in-

structive chapter of my life, as I prepared to leave for Mauritius on my diplomatic assignment.

I mused upon all that had happened. I thought of the mysterious dance of time, and of what I had seen and known in the stream of its inscrutable flow; the rewards that men received, and the retributions that followed them for harking to or missing a single beat of time's eternal rhythm; the abrupt and strange transmutations of giants and dwarfs; the pain and suffering; death, devastation, and war; the mirth and gaiety of high places....

I knew that in what happens to a nation which had started with the favourable wind of time in its sails, and yet was leading itself astray, time could not be held a scapegoat. For, time proves tame when tapped by men of prudence, honesty, and discipline. And the greater the delay, the more furious would be the *thandava* of the coming times. The poignancy was all the more for a nation that had been blessed by a vast treasure of ancient knowledge, and hallowed by some of the finest minds and movements the world has known—and yet utterly lost without direction....

At the end of my term in Mauritius, I paid a visit to Delhi, and I had an opportunity of meeting the President at his invitation. He seemed to be in a poor state of health, and I did not realise then that it would not be possible for him to gain another term of office. I learnt that his proteges had all gone away, and my successor too had left unexpectedly early.

