

YOUR PRIME MINISTER IS DEAD

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ONE

Death strikes silently

IF THERE IS anything such as an angel of death, he was quietly lurking somewhere in a corner in Tashkent even as everything seemed to move around Lal Bahadur Shastri. He and his Pakistani counterpart, General Ayub Khan, were lodged in two different villas, or dachas as they are called in that part of the world. Running back and forth between them like an errand boy was Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin, more suave of the two leaders¹ in charge of the second most powerful nation in the world at that time.

The chilly morning of 10 January 1966 heralded a warm conclusion to the never ending parleys between Indian and Pakistani delegates for seven consecutive days.

¹ The other being Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Kosygin was Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers.

If you could somehow be transported there back in time, you would see Shastri with no sign of any strain on his smiling face. To the eyes of CP Srivastava, member of the Indian delegation, Shastri appeared 'beaming'. So full of life he was that one could have not believed that he had by this time suffered two minor heart attacks, the last one occurring in 1964. But then, as an assessment made by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that very year reveals, he was 'a fully recovered cardiac patient'. As late as 31 December 1965, Shastri was thoroughly examined by doctors in Delhi and declared fit.

The Tashkent agreement between India and Pakistan was signed around 4 pm in full glare of officials and media. All eyes followed the Indian and Pakistani heads of government. Shastri, of light frame and under five feet tall, amusingly looked up at an imposing Ayub Khan sporting a petit handlebar moustache in contrast to his unassuming persona. As they began to shake hands vigorously, everyone clapped. History was made. At around 8 pm both had joined a reception hosted in their honour by Kosygin. The evening was very lively; there was music, dance and good food. Shastri continued to look quite well. He carried himself with his usual ease throughout. Foreign Secretary, CS Jha, saw him chatting with Ayub Khan in an atmosphere that was 'though not

overly convivial [but] was good'. After 9 pm, Shastri, Foreign Minister Swaran Singh and Defence Minister YB Chavan left the reception.

Around 10 pm, Shastri reached the dacha where he had been lodged by his Soviet hosts. It was located at some distance from the Intourist Hotel where other members of the Indian Delegation and journalists were lodged. The PM was obviously not alone in the dacha. Accompanying him were his personal physician Dr RN Chugh, security officer R Kapur, private secretary JN Sahai, personal assistant MMN Sharma and Ram Nath, personal attendant. Chugh had been attached to Shastri since 1955, and Ram Nath was working with Shastri's family for more than twenty years. He was in charge of all of Shastri's personal belongings. He also used to work in the kitchen to help in the preparation of Shastri's food.

Shastri went to his suite on the ground floor. It comprised a bedroom, a bathroom and a study. Adjoining the study was a reception room for the visitors. Next to the reception room on the opposite side was a bedroom allotted to Dr Chugh and R Kapur. The first floor had two rooms where Sharma and Ram Nath were lodged along with Mohammed Jan, the cook for the Indian Ambassador in Moscow.

After Shastri had changed, Ram Nath enquired about

his dinner. At first Shastri did not want anything as he had eaten something at the reception, but then he asked for something light. Ram Nath went to kitchen on the ground floor and brought a dish of spinach and potatoes and a curry prepared by Mohammed Jan, helped by Russian cooks. Having had it, Shastri went to his study, where Sahai came to see him to discuss the schedule for the next day. At this time, (10.20 pm, corresponding to 9.50 pm IST), there was a telephone call from the Prime Minister's residence in New Delhi. Jawaharlal Nehru as India's first prime minister had taken up residence at the palatial Teen Murti House, built as the home of the second most powerful man in the British Raj era—the Commander-in-Chief of the British Indian Army. Shastri's office was located at 10 Janpath. But he and his family stayed in the adjoining 1, Motilal Nehru Marg bungalow, which was connected to 10 Janpath through a corridor.

Sahai received the call from VS Venkataraman, the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, who enquired whether Shastri had any particular wishes regarding the arrangements to be made for his reception at New Delhi airport on his return. Sahai conveyed this to Shastri. Never a fussy boss, Shastri said they should do whatever they considered appropriate.

While Sahai and Venkataraman were still on the

telephone, Shastri asked about the reaction to the Tashkent accord back home. Sahai put this question to Venkataraman, who replied that the declaration had been generally well received, except that Atal Bihari Vajpayee and SN Dwivedy were somewhat critical. Shastri's reaction to this, as per Sahai's account to Srivastava, was: 'They are in the Opposition and it is their right to be critical.'²

There was a second call from Delhi during which Shastri spoke with his family members. He wanted to have a word with his wife but since the sound quality was poor, he conversed with VN Singh, his younger son-in-law. Lal Bahadur and Lalita had six children. Kusum and Suman were elder to brothers Hari Krishna, Anil, Sunil and Ashoke. Apart from Anil and Sunil, all others are deceased. During the course of his talk with his son-in-law, his last interaction with his family, Shastri tried to gauge the public mood over the Tashkent accord.

It was nearing midnight. Prem Vaidya of the Films Division (now reckoned as a legend in the field of documentary film making), was wanting to take shots of the PM. After obtaining permission a littler earlier, he and two more journalists were observing Shastri from

2 CP Srivastava, **Lal Bahadur Shastri: A Life of Truth in Politics**, Oxford University Press.

outside the dacha. ‘The view from the dark outside into the lighted room through a French window and a lone figure moving around in silhouette’, Vaidya would write in his memoirs published in 2009 by the National Film Archive of India. For posterity, he captured haunting last visuals of Shastri pacing in the dacha.

When Shastri retired to his bedroom, Ram Nath, following the daily routine, gave him some milk with Isabgol. The milk had been boiled in the kitchen by Ram Nath himself. The Prime Minister paced up and down for a while, brooding about something. After a while, he asked for water. Ram Nath gave some from the flask kept in his bedroom. He stayed with the PM till half past midnight, when Shastri asked him to leave. He put out the lights and left the suite.

Sahai had in the meanwhile returned to the staff bedroom. Together with MMN Sharma, Dr Chugh and Security Officer Kapur, he had completed the packing of the luggage. Dr Chugh had gone to asleep. This was 1.20 am on 11 January and Sahai, Sharma and Kapur had no clue about the nightmare that was already unfolding in the Prime Minister’s bedroom. Just as they were about to put off the lights, they heard something moving. Then all of a sudden the Prime Minister most unexpectedly appeared at their door. He

was in his nightwear, and he looked greatly distressed. 'Doctor,' he murmured in a feeble voice and turned his back on them. It took the staff a fraction of second to sense that something was terribly wrong. They sprang towards Shastri and held him. Sahai ran out to wake up Dr Chugh.

Hardly had Shastri walked the few steps back to his room helped by Sharma and Kapur when he started coughing. With difficulty he reached his bed and was made to lie down. The coughing became so intense that he started gasping for breath. He sat up and held his chest with his hands. His face turned pallid. '*Oh mere Ram*' was all he said repeatedly. He pointed to the flask of water kept next to his bed.

Dr Chugh rushed in at this juncture. He found Shastri's pulse to be very fast but feeble. Blood pressure could not be registered. The heartbeats were hardly audible. The PM was having a massive heart attack. Chugh panicked. Quickly, he put Shastri in a reclining position and administered an intra-muscular injection of Mepthentin Sulphate one ml (15 mgm) and one ml of Micorena. There was no effect. Within the next three minutes Shastri lost consciousness, his pulse disappeared, breathing stopped and the heartbeats could not be heard. Dr Chugh immediately began the revival treatment by

indirect massage of the heart and artificial respiration through the mouth by means of an air-tube. But he was distraught by now. '*Babuji, aap ne mujhe mouka nahin diya,*' he wailed. (Babuji, you did not give me a chance).

This was 1.32 am in Tashkent. In India, it was a little past 1 am and the nation slept unaware of the tragedy that had just struck.

The Soviet doctor on duty entered the room. Prof Evgenia Yeremenko too found that Shastri had no pulse. His heart was silent and there was no breath and no corneal reflexes. In the next few minutes, a team of senior doctors led by Dr Uktam Aripovich Aripov, Deputy Minister of Health of Uzbekistan, took charge of the situation. They started revival treatment. Indirect massage of the heart was done; in the left cavity under the heart a mixture of calcium chloride with adrenalin and glucose was introduced twice at an interval of fifteen minutes. Artificial respiration by means of the machine with the help of 'Intubation tube' was also attempted. But more than an hour-long effort to revive Shastri went in vain.

By this time, the word had gone around in Intourist Hotel. Fatigued, CS Jha was half asleep when he was woken by agitated, loud voices of Swaran Singh and Ambassador TN Kaul coming from the corridor. Kuldip Nayar, Shastri's media advisor was in for a shock he

would never fully recover from. He was rudely awoken by frantic loud thumps. He opened the door to find a Russian lady telling him, ‘Your Prime Minister is dying.’ Fellow journalist Prem Prakash (now chairman of news agency ANI) had it even worse. The telephone rang in the middle of the night. The caller at the other end dropped the bombshell. ‘Your Prime Minister is dead. Please come down as soon as you can.’³ When Kuldip Nayar reached the dacha, he saw Kosygin standing in the verandah with a look on his face that portended a disaster. He walked past him and saw Russian doctors in confabulation with Dr RN Chugh in the dining room. His heart in his mouth, Nayar went inside and saw Shastri crumpled on the huge bed. His face had shrivelled but was serene as in life. His slippers were in place on the carpeted floor. But the dressing table was overturned and it appeared to Nayar as if Shastri had struggled with the thermos.

Nayar asked Dr Chugh what had happened and he just said, ‘Shastriji did not give me time.’ Sahai told him that Shastri had come to their door past midnight. ‘It was a heart attack and this walk was fatal,’ Dr Chugh said.

3 “Come down your Prime Minister is dead”—A first hand account of the night PM Shastri Died. Accessed from <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/come-down-your-prime-minister-is-dead-a-first-hand-account-of-the-night-pm-shastri-died201801111841140001/>.

Foreign Secretary Jha had arrived when the Soviet doctors were still making futile attempts to revive Shastri. He saw Swaran Singh and Chavan standing transfixed in shock. According to Jha, once the doctors gave up, a telegram was sent by Swaran Singh and Chavan to President Radhakrishnan in Delhi. However, then Home Secretary LP Singh would write that the onerous task fell on his shoulders as protocol required: "Home Secretary to inform various authorities about the death of the holder of any high office of state". After failing to get anyone on phone at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, he called the Home Minister's residence and got through to Gulzarilal Nanda quickly. Genial-looking Nanda was shell-shocked.

The words Kosygin uttered after Shastri was gone were: 'The world has lost one of its greatest leaders.' By 3.30 am, General Ayub walked in. To both Jha and Nayar, he appeared genuinely grieved. 'Here is a man of peace who gave his life for amity between India and Pakistan,' he said. In time, more tributes poured in. US President Lyndon Johnson said Shastri's death was a 'grievous blow to the hopes of mankind for peace and progress.' Pope John Paul said he was 'profoundly saddened' by Shastri's demise 'during his mission of pacification.' Queen Elizabeth spoke of a 'sense of loss which will be felt throughout the world.'

With the breaking of dawn preparations were underway to send Shastri's body to India. At 9.30 am Tashkent time, the body, draped in the Tricolour, was put in a wooden coffin and placed on a gun carriage. Followed by cars carrying Kosygin, Uzbek premier Kushanov, Foreign Minister Swaran Singh and Defence Minister Chavan, the procession left for the airport. The entire route of 17 kilometers was lined with countless shocked locals, who had braved freezing temperatures to bid goodbye to their guest.

At the airport, thousands watched as the coffin was carried into the aircraft with Swaran Singh, Chavan, Ayub Khan and Kosygin turning pall bearers. As CS Jha bid Ayub goodbye, he said, '*Jha Saheb, yeh kya ho gaya? Khuda na karen iska nateeja hamare mulkon per bura ho.*' (Mr Jha, what a terrible thing to happen? God forbid that the consequences of this tragedy are harmful for our countries).⁴ Jha was moved.

The Soviet Aeroflot Illushin-18 plane carrying Shastri's body landed at Palam airport at 2.31 pm IST. Swaran Singh and Chavan emerged from it first and then conducted PM's weeping eldest son, Hari Kishan

⁴ CS Jha, **From Bandung to Tashkent: Glimpses of India's Foreign Policy**, Sangam Books, 1983.

Shastri, into the plane. After half an hour, Shastri's body was moved out of the airport in a gun carriage used for the funeral of Pandit Nehru. By the time it reached 10 Janpath at 4.10 pm, the procession was nearly a mile long. As in Tashkent, but in far bigger numbers, countless people had stood in silence on both sides of the roads from the airport to Lutyens' Delhi. It was an unimaginable nightmare. Less than two years after Jawaharlal Nehru departed, his successor too was gone, barely hours after hogging international limelight.