

A PRESIDENT AND THE NATION - MAPPING OF SYMBIOTIC DISCOURSE OF INTROSPECTION AND OUTLOOK

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Abstract:

V. V. Giri, the fourth President of India, through his autobiography braces the virtuous and courageous embodiment by practice of his life. In this paper, the lively discourse of introspection and ideation, by entwining the life of a talented and morally committed lawyer to a cause of Indian trade union movement, freedom struggle and strong legislation, is mapped. The mapping of a president's life and the course of the nation in pre and post-Independence phases gets harmoniously juxtaposed painting all that good in the public and private life and simultaneously exposing the intricacies and intrigue of the political dialogue. The memoirs offer a lyrical portrayal of vibrant family values on the way to the destination of a sound nation consisting of strong moral foundation. The introspection of the President presents a window on the national transformation through the life and time symbiotically synthesised.

Key Words: *President, memoirs, discourse, introspection, outlook nation, family, moral transformation.*

Introduction

V.V. Giri was the fourth President of India from 1969 to 1974. Coming from a rich Andhra Niyogi family known for its social service, culture, integrity and legal erudition, Giri started as an eminent lawyer and later abandoned his lucrative practice for the cause of workers and pioneered the working class movement in India and became the architect of Indian trade union movement. V.V. Giri actively took part in the freedom struggle, worked as a member of the Central Legislative Assembly and as Minister for Labour and Industry in Rajaji's and Prakasam's ministries (Chief Ministers) of Madras Province before Independence. His services as India's High Commissioner in Ceylon, Member of Parliament, Labour Minister in Nehru's cabinet, Governor of Uttar Pradesh, Kerala and Mysore states, Vice President and finally President of India enriched the nation in its formative years. He was regarded as the first President of the people because of his status as the leader of the working masses.

V.V. Giri's election as President of India was unique in the sense that he was the first unofficial candidate to have won the election. When President Zakir Husain died in office, V.V. Giri, the then Vice President of India, expected the ruling Congress Party to nominate him to the post as it was the unwritten convention for the Vice President to get the promotion since the days of S. Radhakrishnan. On the contrary, the Congress Party fielded N. Sanjiva Reddy as its official candidate for the election. Then V.V. Giri resigned as Vice President and contested the election as an independent candidate. Due to some serious, internal developments which took place in the Congress Party leading to a conflict between the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the Syndicate faction led by Nijalingappa and others, Mrs. Indira Gandhi announced that the Congress members were at liberty to vote as per their 'conscience'. As the Syndicate was in favour of Sanjiva Reddy, through this announcement, Mrs. Indira Gandhi indirectly hinted about her choice. A majority of the Congress members of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's group voted for V.V. Giri thus leading to the defeat of the official candidate. During the campaign, Giri stated: "The Head of the State is a symbol of the unity of the Nation and, therefore, it is necessary that the office of the President should be kept above party consideration. I am an Indian first, last and always before, I belong to this party or that

party, this group or that group. I stand for the fundamental rights adumbrated in the Constitution of India, especially the right to work and the right to live and for other amenities which will make the common man's life reasonably happy." [Pruthi 61] Thus his election, unwittingly, acted as a catalyst in the first major split of the Congress party and stood testimony to the free will of the legislation.

The Works

V.V. Giri was a learned lawyer who participated actively in the freedom struggle, trade union movement, legislative affairs and administration. This varied experience and his wisdom made him author many books of import such as *Industrial Relations* (1955), *Labour Problems in Indian Industry* (1958), *Problems of Public Administration* (1967), *National Regeneration - Problems and Prospects* (1969), *Civilization at the Cross Roads of Destiny* (1969) and *Jobs for our Millions* (1970) in the fields of Labour, Industrial Relations and Public Administration. V.V.Giri's contribution towards the growth, organization and progress of Indian trade union movement was remarkable. He was greatly influenced by the Irish revolutionary movement and International Labour Organization. The impact and the thoughts find mention in the books, which serve as authoritative sources for the students of Labour and Industry. The Indian Labour Research Institute was named after him as a tribute to his services. Apart from books on labour, he wrote a lucid autobiography, *My Life and Times* (1976), laced with lyrical emotion and empathy.

My Life and Times

V.V.Giri's autobiography, *My Life and Times*, published in 1976, four years before his death in 1980, had its germination dating back to September 1954 when he demitted the office of Minister of Labour in Nehru's cabinet. At that time, he thought that he would be free from responsibilities of office and wanted to concentrate on writing two books: one on labour and the other on his memories of sixty years from 1894 to 1954. However, destiny willed the other way, after barely three years of respite, in 1957 he was called upon to don the mantle of Governorship of three states for about a decade and then two years of Vice Presidentship and five years of Presidentship ending in 1974. V.V.Giri always considered the various posts that he had occupied as opportunities of service to his fellowmen. He made it clear in his preface that the motive behind his memoirs was to present a view of the happenings, which he was privileged, to witness and participate. He adds, "It has been an age-old practice for individuals who have been in the limelight of the public life of a country to write their memoirs, so that the period in which they figured and played a part could be recorded for posterity. Historians deal not only with personalities and events but with policies and their interaction, in a broader national and international context. In our country the practice of writing autobiographies is fairly recent. It is only in the last few decades that eminent men have attempted to present to the world some of the 'inside' stories of many crucial events which influenced and shaped the social, economic and political policies and programmes of the country. These accounts are perforce subjective; nevertheless, they shed considerable light on many vital issues of historic importance and help in getting a better perspective against the historical background." [Giri ix] He is not interested in claiming superiority for his achievements and humbly ascribes his positions to the will of the fate. He desires that "if my account can be of some value in shaping the younger generation and helping them to contribute their share of service to the nation, this work will have attained its purpose." [Giri xii] In the memoirs, his hopes and aspirations are entwined with the unfolding historical narrative with the objective of shaping the nation into a viable socialist state, which V.V.Giri hopes, is destined to occupy its rightful place among the great nations of the world. He terms the attainment of freedom neither as an end nor as a beginning of an end but as "the end of a beginning" [Giri xi] and deems it his proud privilege to be associated with great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

My Life and Times is divided into thirteen chapters. In the beginning, V.V.Giri sketches his family background and early life in Berhampur, his education in Ireland, his entry and success at the Ganjam Bar and the subsequent entry into politics. Then in the middle part of the memoirs, he describes his dynamic role in the stabilization of trade union movement especially his outstanding work in Bengal Nagpur (B N)

Railway and other Railways. His assignments as a member of the Central Legislative Assembly and minister in Rajaji and Prakasam ministries and as representative in Ceylon find detailed mention in the final part of the autobiography. A small comparative note on history of Irish Independence is appended to the volume.

Family and early life

V.V. Giri talks of his maternal grandfather, D.V. Ramaiah Pantulu, in glowing terms. Ramaiah Pantulu was an undisputed legal luminary of Ganjam District Bar and was greatly respected for his legal acumen and practicality. Giri brings the portrait of his grandfather to the reader's attention in simple phrases: "He upheld truth as the guiding force of his life. He never took up a case which he felt was not a just one, so much so that the contesting parties in many a dispute, instead of putting the whole case to the proverbial 'laws' delays' approached him in the court itself to arbitrate and give judgement, even though he might have been engaged by one of the parties. His decisions were accepted without question and further litigation was invariably dropped...He believed that older people should not block the advancement of the younger generation by clinging on to office. Consequently, he gave up original suits in 1900 when he was about 55 and finally retired from the Bar at the age of 60. He inculcated in us a sense of mental and physical discipline, advising us to learn to sit still and concentrate till the work was done. We benefited greatly from his training." [Giri 1-2]

V.V.Giri's paternal grandfather was engaged in trade and commerce and later worked as translator in a bank, *Dewan* (Minister) of Mandasa Zamindari Estate and as Manager of one of the oldest sugar factories - Aska Sugars. Giri's father, V.V. Jogiah Pantulu, a highly educated teacher turned lawyer and a devout Gandhian, was known for his outspokenness, courage of conviction, honesty, democratic principles and legal knowledge. He never cared for power or status and always followed his conscience. When T. Prakasam, famous lawyer, freedom fighter and Chief Minister of Andhra, was ostracised by the caste Hindus for crossing the seas, a taboo in those days, Giri's father, in defiance of the society's blind belief, invited him to be his guest and offered the seat of honour close to the place of worship in the dining hall. This incident naturally attracted the attention and wrath of the orthodox Brahmins who threatened to ostracise Giri's family also. V.V.Giri learnt from his father the spirit of relentless fight for the cause of conscience against heavy odds and the tenets of disinterested duty. He recalls an event fresh from his memory: "My elder brother died in 1907 at the age of sixteen. The funeral took place at about 9 in the morning and at 11 my father attended the court as usual. He appeared for his client without any reference to the calamity, which had befallen him. When the presiding judge and some of his colleagues suggested that he could have absented himself and asked for an adjournment, he told them 'what is lost cannot be retrieved'. He had done his duty to his son who was no more and it was now his duty to look after the interest of his client." [Giri 3]

V.V.Giri's mother, Subhadramma, was a lovable, noble woman who had groomed the children with inborn purity and impartial affection. The family values that Giri followed in his life were inculcated in him by his parents and other members of the family. He evocatively presents the family atmosphere: "My mother made no distinction between her own children and her various nieces and nephews. They brought us up simply and did not allow us any expensive indulgences. The family was fairly affluent and could have afforded any comforts but it was the conviction of my parents that we should go through the mill and come up in life by our own efforts. We practice complete equality in the family. While children, though immature, we were given full liberty to express our views on many matters. When we committed a mistake, it was pointed out to us without any rebuke or admonition, so that we could realise the mistake and correct ourselves. As long as we realised and repented our errors, he used to say, we deserved every consideration, for then we would commit fewer and fewer. He taught us to acquire the spirit of humility combined with a sense of self-respect. He also stressed on all of us the need to inculcate a habit of introspection, to review our actions before retiring to bed each night, and to resolve to continue the good

acts and avoid the bad one. One must do this diligently and thus steadily become purer in thought, word and deed... My loving mother, Subhadramma, was the embodiment of the ideal Indian woman. She had the good fortune to receive ideal training from her father who, even in the early nineteenth century, believed in the education of women at a time when there were hardly a handful of educated women and the cause of the education of women had made little progress. She was generous to a fault and never uttered a harsh word in her life. She appreciated others' viewpoints. Even the worst sinner, she used to say, had his good points and while one may at best deprecate the act, the individual should not be condemned. In spite of having been born in a highly orthodox Hindu family, she had no prejudices - her religion was humanism embracing all living beings...She retained her unruffled temperament and equanimity through the tragedies she suffered in the course of her life. Of the twelve children she gave birth to, seven died during her lifetime and four of her children were imprisoned for their participation in the Non-cooperation Movement of 1921. The wayward course of destiny never left a scar on either of my parents.”[Giri 5-6] He admits that this background ably equipped the young minds to take a plunge into the freedom struggle.

Irish Days

In 1913, V.V.Giri went to Ireland to join the National University of Ireland at the King's Inn, Dublin to become a Barrister in pursuance of the family tradition of legal profession in which both his grandfather and father had made a name and built up a massive practice throughout the district. The initial hurdles he faced were the table manners, foreign dishes and dress code. In an alien environment, he confidently learnt how to handle a knife or fork. On the issue of dress, he mentions about an interesting meeting with Mr. Gandhi: “While I was in London, Gandhiji came on a visit on his way to India from South Africa, and stayed in the house just across the road. At that time, he was merely Mr. Gandhi, better known as a brilliant lawyer defending the rights of the Indians in South Africa. I paid my respects to him and later called on him frequently to discuss matters of common interest. I asked him at my first meeting why he was wearing a foreign suit and a bowler hat, while I was wearing a Lal-I-Mli suit and fez cap. He replied, “Giri, when you are in Rome, be a Roman.” I must admit I was already regretting the trouble and expense my father had gone to in getting my wardrobe tailored in Calcutta. Very soon, I had to replace it with more suitable English clothes. Eighteen years later I attended the Second Round Table Conference in London as a delegate and Gandhiji's principal Adviser on Labour matters; we were invited to meet Their Majesties at Buckingham Palace and he wore a loin cloth - which prompted British journalist to call him a 'half naked fakir'.”[Giri 13-14]

At the National University of Ireland, Professors of repute taught him Jurisprudence, International Law, Personal Property, Law of Contracts, Law of Equity and Law of Torts as a part of Constitutional Law Course. In this context, his observations on why Indian students preferred to study in Ireland are worth noting: “Indian students preferred to study in Ireland in preference to England because there was neither a colour bar nor racial prejudice of any kind among the Irish, probably due to the adverse circumstances of their history. They felt a great affinity for the Irish who were also chafing under British rule, suffering from very similar problems as Indians, both economic and political, largely due to the exploitation through British imperialism.”[Giri 14]

Although V.V.Giri came to Ireland to pursue legal studies, he was drawn deeply into the Irish freedom struggle during his three-year stay. He made an intensive study of Irish history and found political, economic, religious and cultural causes besides patriotic urges for their continued struggle for self-determination. In *My Life and Times*, he extensively wrote on Irish history and pointed out the similarities between Ireland and India. He was particularly impressed by the working class movement and their solidarity with their national movement. His deep study of stories of sacrifice of martyrs like Wolfe Tone, Emmet and others strengthened his resolve and reaction to assist the Irish against the British. Giri along with Unnava Lakshminarayana (famous Andhra social reformer and writer) formed a little group called Anarchical Society, which advocated the adoption of violent methods to achieve freedom and he in fact

learnt the techniques bomb making. He also organized the Indian Students' Association in Dublin and worked as its Secretary for three years. They published and circulated a pamphlet entitled 'Horrors in South Africa' describing the struggle of Indians in South Africa. About 100,000 copies were despatched to various schools and colleges in India. The British authorities grew suspicious of the contents of the consignments and started an investigation into the matter. They zeroed in on the Irish printer who alerted Giri about the ongoing enquiry. He vividly describes the thrilling experience: "I destroyed all evidence of my connection with the pamphlet and when the police raided my rooms they found no incriminating evidence and I escaped arrest and deportation to India. This was perhaps one of my earliest experiences of a threat of prosecution for direct involvement in the cause of India's freedom." [Giri 15] In later years also he narrowly escaped prosecution during a couple of raids. Hence, he resolved to avoid the habit of writing a diary, however commendable the habit might be, to escape the threat of prosecution based on written evidence.

V.V.Giri was greatly fascinated by the experiences of the Irish sojourn. The Irish people, history, politics, culture, environment and freedom struggle made an indelible impression on his mind and shaped his adult outlook. He was impressed by the economic philosophy of Griffith and Connolly who advocated the concepts of economic conscription for development. He strongly believed in their concept that a judicious interaction for the mutual benefit of the growth of the economy and that of the population was the only way a developing country could be transformed. Giri admits, "My Irish experience made me aware of the binding nature of duty and the overwhelming importance of character. The moral rigours of my upbringing as a child and vows I made to my parents when I sailed from my country confirmed my determination to adopt right thinking, speech and conduct under all manner of conditions, whatever the provocation. My Irish contacts and observances strengthened these convictions. The passion for the political freedom of my country, and the economic emancipation of the working class and all those exploited, were the twin ideas richly painted before me in bright colours, though on a dim canvas. As I looked at this vision which constantly enthralled and fascinated me, my path was set and the goal was only to rapidly rush towards reaching and realising it." [Giri 34] Thus in the 'other' he saw his fully realised self as the Sanskrit word *parikrama* for travel includes the connotation of self-discovery in the other's territory. He sets out to return to Indian shores with the object burning brightly in his heart.

Practice at the Bar and political entry

On his return, V.V.Giri was enrolled as an advocate of Madras High Court. Eminent lawyer, T. Prakasam, (later Chief Minister of Madras Presidency and Andhra State) moved his enrolment before the Chief Justice who upon a perusal of his antecedents and education background, immediately offered the post of District Munsif at Ramachandrapuram of East Godavari District. It was an attractive offer for a young man fresh from the completion of education. V.V.Giri refused it and revealed his determination he had taken in Ireland to work for the country and free it from the clutches of foreign power. He had selected the "rough and tumble path of political struggle rather than one of personal comfort and material security." [Giri 36] The English judge was shocked at the resolve of young man.

V.V.Giri started practice as a lawyer under his father's guidance and soon became successful in several adoption suits and other cases. He became a much sought after legal authority across the nation. It was a profitable profession and in a short time, he earned more than what his father had spent on him. Yet he gave up full time practice much to the disappointment of the family, which had over half a century practice. In response to the call of Gandhiji, he joined the Non-cooperation Movement of 1921. He says, "Personally I have never had any regrets because my only determination in life was to serve my country and help it to secure *Swaraj* (self rule)." [Giri 37] During his teens, V.V.Giri had a liking for Gokhale, the moderate leader of Congress, and his policies of conciliation. In school days, he used to memorize and repeat great speeches of great orators like Surendranath Banerji, Bhupendra Nath Basu, Ambika Charan Mazumdar, Ras Behari Ghosh and L.A. Govindaraghava Iyer. The childhood wishes coupled with his

resolve of Irish days made him plunge into the freedom struggle.

V.V.Giri used to interact with several stalwarts of freedom struggle and attend Congress sessions wherever they were held. He was present at one such significant session, the Lucknow session of 1916. At this session the moderates, the extremists, the home rulers and the Muslims were brought on to one single platform. Influenced by Gandhiji's revolutionary concept of passive resistance and the unity that had been achieved at the Lucknow session, he joined the Congress and Home Rule Movement of Mrs. Besant. He terms Gandhiji's *Satyagraha* as a 'many sided sword.' Gandhiji's revolutionary leadership energised people as there was an all-round resentment and unhappiness at the British policies. V.V.Giri courted arrest along with thousands of persons and in those days going to jail as a form of resistance and protest was indeed a new and exciting experience. In jail, Giri and others staged a hunger strike demanding better amenities and food for the prisoners which resulted in the improvement of the conditions. During his imprisonment in 1922, he had a peculiar dream, which was the direct fallout of the prevailing situation of the times. He narrates the dream thus: "I was under sentence of death for a political offence. My parents, my wife and children came day after day in sorrow, to comfort me and to take their leave of me. I, in turn, consoled my mother in my dream, that the dread of death was something like the aversion young children have towards a dose of castor oil. They take it after being coaxed and cajoled, but once they drink it the fear of it vanishes. This dream, however, had a happy ending. While I was being taken to the gallows, a reprieve was received by the Superintendent of the Jail who came rushing to say that, under orders of the Government, I was not to be hanged but was to be awarded only life imprisonment. This dream made a deep impression on my mind and must have been the result of my awareness of the impending execution of a condemned prisoner - the days of anguish and suffering, the helplessness of his parents, wife and children in the face of his doom as the day drew nearer and nearer." [Giri 44]

The Trade Union Movement finds a leader

The rise of V.V.Giri as an unquestioned leader of the working classes was described comprehensively in the middle part of the autobiography. He nursed an ambition from his student days in Ireland to bring order into the unorganized trade union movement and rally the forces of workers against the British imperialism. Until 1920, the working class movement in India was wayward and leaderless. The dynamic leaders of the society concentrated their attention on the nationalist movement and thus trade union movement was a much-neglected sector in need of a vigorous leadership on the lines of freedom struggle.

After his release from imprisonment in 1922, V.V.Giri was extended invitation to take up the leadership of Bengal Nagpur Railway Union (B.N. Railway) which was accepted by him. Thus a leader was found for the B.N. Railway workers and consequently for the Indian Trade Union Movement. During that time, Railways were controlled either by the Governments of the local provinces or by the Company, which was represented by the Agent from England. Under V.V.Giri's effective leadership, the Union grew quickly into numerous branches and got recognition too. He fiercely fought with the managements over issues like unjustified retrenchment of workers, death benefit fund, minimum wages and other welfare measures. He was instrumental in the establishment of Employees' Urban Bank with the objective of promoting thrift among the workers. He expounds the role of trade union in unequivocal terms: "It was my conviction that while the Union should present the grievances of the workers to the management; it also had to play a positive and constructive role in running the Railways efficiently. The reasonable approach made the management extend its support to the Union." [Giri 47]

Retrenchment of workers was an issue on which V.V.Giri fought fierce battles with the management of B.N. Railway by applying many methods like petitions, persuasion, consultations, negotiations, strikes and direct action. He achieved remarkable successes by uniting the workers on several ticklish issues and made the workers realize the power of the union. The B.N. Railway strike of 1927 was the biggest successful strike organized by the union under the leadership of V.V.Giri. The

situation is described vividly: “The workers had made many sacrifices for achieving success and for the fulfilment of their legitimate demands. We collected grain, *atta* (wheat flour) and other essential articles from individuals and institutions to maintain the workers. Every morning volunteers would take these throughout the colony and the women would take only as much as was needed by them. The British Trade Union Congress and the Transport Workers' Federation of Amsterdam and other international Trade Unions contributed large sums of money for attending to the needs of the men on lockout at Kharagpur... The strike was called off. It was the first time in the world that full lockout wages were paid for a period of nearly three months. It was a great moral victory for the workers in India. ...The International Transport Workers' Federation said that the payment of three months lockout wages to so many thousands of men was unknown in the world. It was truly a feather in the cap of the B.N. Railway Union.”[Giri 63-64] V.V.Giri played a key role in shaping the All India Railwaymen's Federation consisting of all Railway Unions of different provinces and zones. His work in the unification of A.I.T.U.C. and N.T.U.F. was arduous and epoch making. His proposals were christened as 'Giri Proposals' which helped the Trade Union Movement in India to take firm root. He represented the workers at II Round Table Conference in 1931 and argued for the inclusion of labour under Concurrent list instead of Provincial list.

On the issue of strikes, V.V.Giri's comments are worth relevant: “I have always held that merely getting more emoluments and material advantages would not constitute success in a strike, and that the moral victory of a strike was most important. Even if all the demands of the union were not conceded, so long as the workers could get back to their work without victimisation and with a general assurance that their grievance would be looked into it was enough.”[Giri 75] He avers that on the subject of negotiations nothing is the last word and cautions, “In dealing with problems of industrial relations neither of the parties can afford to take an unalterable stand. No doubt one is tempted to do so, but any rigid or inflexible approach, however reasonable the demands be, would make the other party equally rigid and this would not be conducive, in the long run, to arrive at a reasonable settlement of the differences. While trade union leaders may pitch their demands very high, it is equally necessary for them to see the viewpoint of the management. This will not only help in securing a settlement of some of the basic issues but, also, make the employers realise that the Union is not an agitational one but one which adopts a constructive approach to problems.”[Giri 79]

Speaking at the fifty fourth session of the International Labour Conference in Geneva on 10th June 1970 V.V.Giri made the following comments which carry contemporary relevance in the context of globalization: “No longer can the 'isolationist' policy of competing nationalism be considered as an ideal. Political or economic disturbances in one area are bound to create far-reaching repercussions in other parts of the world. The developed countries have realised that if they are to enjoy the fruits of progress, it is essential for the world to unite and work in close cooperation with one another. It has now been recognized that nations do not and cannot live along by themselves but only as parts of 'One World'...The labour movement is a world movement. It is more international than national in character. ...National governments should accept the rule of morality and the stronger ones should give up all attempts to dominate and exploit weaker nations. Equality among human beings should be fully recognised and no special privileges or superiority should be assumed by or attached to any race or nation.”[Giri 96]

Member of Central Legislative Assembly

When Congress decided to contest elections in the pre independence India, V.V.Giri contested from Ganjam-Visakhapatnam non-Muslim constituency in the elections to the Fifth Central Legislative Assembly in 1934 and won the election. Owing to his association with the trade union movement, he used to concentrate on legislative matters relating to labour. He was nominated to the Select Committee appointed to amend the Indian Mines Act of 1923. He suggested that a forty-hour week should be introduced to solve the problem of unemployment and further suggested that the age of those employed in mines be raised to fifteen, or preferably sixteen. It was his conviction that child labour should be abolished.

V.V.Giri acted as the member of Standing Finance Committee for the Railways. He recommended that a civilized state should provide employment to all those who were able-bodied and who were willing to work. He advanced his argument by saying that if committing suicide was punishable under law, then the law should see that the right to live and right to work were enforceable. The welfare economist in Giri can be seen in the narration of his experiences and speeches as a Member of the Central Legislative Assembly.

Ministership in Madras Province

Under the Government of India Act of 1935, elections were held to the provinces of India in 1937. After much dithering and discussion, V.V.Giri contested the election for a seat in Madras State Assembly from Bobbili against a formidable candidate, the Maharaja of Bobbili and emerged victorious. He was allotted the portfolio of Labour and Industries, which included Co-operation, Commerce, Fisheries, Electricity and Harijan Uplift. He used to deftly handle the British officers and prevent them from dominating the new Ministers. Once on a certain administrative issue of convening of labour officers' meeting by the Ministers, one senior officer, Sir John Hall got V.V.Giri's order cancelled by directly going to the Prime Minister, Rajaji. V.V.Giri strongly objected to this and wrote a letter of protest to Rajaji. He felt it was discourteous on the part of one Minister, even if he was the Prime Minister, to countermand the order of another Minister. Further, he added that it would create a feeling in the minds of the Civil Servants that they could approach the Prime Minister directly and upset the decisions of other Ministers, which would lead to an incongruous situation. Rajaji immediately expressed his apologies for the inconvenience caused to him. Later, V.V.Giri admonished the officer concerned. This incident evoked a comment from another officer that in nearly thirty years of his service he had never seen a senior Englishman trembling in his shoes as on that occasion. In spite of this desire for strictness, V.V.Giri admits that no one is infallible and narrates an incident wherein he erred in his judgement of an official and expressed his apologies to Rajaji. He hastens to add, "Perhaps many of the conflicts that arose were merely a result of misunderstandings, but hypersensitivity also accounted for a few." [Giri 117] He was of the firm opinion that the English officers were in no way superior to Indian officers and he differed greatly with Rajaji who preferred soft treatment of English officers as 'crotons and roses'. During his tenure, he became famous for his uncompromising stand on numerous administrative matters and for his courage of conviction with which he surmounted the problems.

As Minister of Labour, V.V.Giri formulated a labour policy for the Madras Province, which envisaged measures like employment insurance, holidays with pay, housing of labour, dispute-settling machinery etc. He always recommended rapid industrial development and planning for the prosperity of the nation and had taken active part in the discussions of National Planning Committee in 1938. He opined that the political events that led to the making of Indian history in the present century could not be disassociated from the economic factors. It had been his conviction that scientific planning for harnessing the country's resources in an effort to transform the social and economic life of the population is essential.

V.V.Giri was a champion of Harijan cause. Soon after he became Minister, he declared that he would not visit any temple, which would deny their entry to its precincts. Incidentally, his parliamentary secretary, B.S.Murty, was a Harijan. V.V.Giri narrates an incident: "When my younger sister Sarojini got married in 1938, I invited Murty also to the wedding. He was given a prominent place at lunch, which was attended, by the most orthodox Hindus and Brahmins. By that time people knew my forthright views on the subject and they accepted him without a murmur." [Giri 153]

Ceylon Days

V.V.Giri was appointed as High Commissioner to Ceylon in 1947 and he worked there until 1950. He accepted the position because of several reasons: "The most important among them was the fact that I was disgusted with petty local quarrels. All along in my public career I had functioned on an all-India level on behalf of the working class. Undoubtedly, I had been drawn into provincial politics in 1937-39 but even

then, I was more interested in questions relating to planning or to evolving a national labour policy. Another reason was that both in 1937-39 and in 1946-47 I was in charge of emigration. I was aware of the problems of the South Indian labourers who had gone to Burma, Malaya and Ceylon and I felt I would be able to contribute to the solution of the problems of the Indian settlers in Ceylon.” [Giri 193]

In the book, *My Life and Times*, while tracing the history of emigrant workers in Ceylon, V.V.Giri demanded that the Ceylon government should guarantee decent living and working conditions and should not treat them as second-rate citizens. He further said that Ceylon Indians should feel that their interests - political, economic and cultural - were identical with those of the Ceylonese. He added that important matters relating to the status of Indians in Ceylon have to be carefully handled by both the Ceylon and Indian Governments and settled satisfactorily. He hoped that it would be a notable page in the history of both these countries if they succeed in settling this issue. Giri's words sound prophetic in the light of agitation for human rights and the consequent mayhem that happened in the histories of modern Sri Lanka and India. Middle path was the path that Giri had selected to tread without upsetting the fine balance and in that process; he endeared himself to the high and low.

Conclusion

V.V.Giri's autobiography is a significant contribution towards the enrichment of the genre. In the restricted area of political memoirs, the book has carved a place of its own. In the book he reaches out to the major facets of his life through the window of movements and agitations for a cause. The broad thematic presentation of memories instead of following a strict chronological structure lends a charming interface of past, present and future to the book. While narrating the incidents and sketching the people, V.V.Giri adopts a mixed approach of utilizing his observations and written exchanges transacted among the people in question. This method added an authoritative canopy to the descriptions. The perceptions of V.V.Giri are carefully painted through simple expressions and clear structured sentences. His elaborate exploration of the Irish history, growth of Trade Union policies, progress of pre independence legislative functioning, fall of Prakasam Ministry and the problems of Indian immigrants in Sri Lanka is a reliable method of communication which will prepare the reader for a clear understanding of the events and people.

Giri's account of Irish history, growth of Trade Union movement and the policies of government, progress of pre independence legislation, fall of Prakasam Ministry and the problems of Indian immigrants in Sri Lanka in *My Life and Times* offer an insight into the issues of those times. His legislative and administrative experience in planning and labour and how several socialist ideas have been morphed into policy making makes interesting reading owing to the touch of personal reflection. Giri describes the incidents of his life in a level tone and in graphic detail. As K. Chandrasekharan says, “In an autobiography incidents associated with such high-class-men as Gandhiji and Rajaji are likely to raise much public curiosity and interest. Still, how Giri in his narration has not betrayed any self-consciousness or a spirit of bravado is what makes the reading highly edifying. Maybe there is not much of art in this writing but a clean mind and a healthy outlook are evident in every page of a none-too-prosaic narration.” (Chandrasekharan). Giri's prose in his autobiography is lyrical and innocently candid. His description of his childhood, the upbringing and short sketches of his parents and grandparents are picturesque. The cherishing of his childhood is felt in the initial chapters. He describes the passing away of his father in these words: “As we were talking, my father suddenly collapsed and fell sideways onto my lap. A physician was called immediately - but it was too late. He was moved to the hospital but could not be revived. His death was a great blow to all of us and it was only because of his training that I was able to maintain some semblance of poise and equanimity in the face of this calamity. [Giri -8]

Concern for issues, disinterested action and exercise of moderation were the principles that guided V.V.Giri's life. Courage of conviction and adherence to the conscience made his life remarkable. The portrayal of his patriotic zeal and integrity is original that speaks of the learning of the mind. The memoirs of V.V. Giri serve to exemplify the graphic morale of the life that life can not only be a dream, vision but

also the joyful realization of the ideals too. *My Life and Times* is truly about a life of class and a time of mass movement.

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