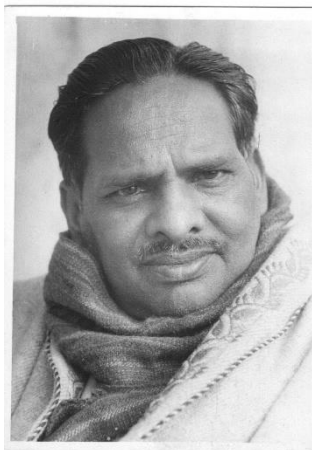


Sunder Lal (1923-87)

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Sunder chachaji as I used to call him was a very dear friend of my father [Jagdish Rajvanshi](#). They both were fellow students in Allahabad University and plunged into the freedom movement in 1942 for which they went to jail. [Sunder Lal](#) was one of the stalwarts of Congress Party. He was the youngest Member of Parliament (MP) of India in the First General Election of 1952 and won all his Lok Sabha elections till 1977.

My earliest recollection of him was his regular visit to our house in Hazratganj. Anytime he came to Lucknow from Delhi he would stay with us. Though his elder brother Choudhary Girdhari Lal was an important minister in UP cabinet and stayed in Lucknow but Sunder chachaji always stayed in our house.

He never married and always considered me as his son. He used to tell me later on that when I was a year old and teething, he was visiting us in Lucknow and one day whole night he carried me on his shoulders to lull me to sleep so that I would not cry.

Another early recollection of him was his eating tandoori chicken in our living room. Since my mother was a vegetarian, no meat was cooked in our house. The tandoori chicken was procured from [Salam Hotel](#) on Nawal Kishore Road. He used to also drink and always brought his own whiskey. I used to be curious as to what he is drinking, and he would tell me it is medicine!

When I went to [IIT Kanpur in 1967](#) my contact with him got reduced but once he and my father visited me in my IITK hostel and took me to meet his friend - a big leather industrialist of Kanpur. I had fabulous dinner in the industrialist's house.

Anytime we went to Delhi we always stayed in his Canning Lane house. He was a sportsman and probably played cricket once or twice in Ranji Trophy tournament and thus had an excellent cricket bat. So once when I went to Delhi, I requested him to allow me to play with that bat. Knowing my love for cricket he obliged but kept on eagle eye on my use of the bat!

He also once arranged for us to see the cricket match between India and England in December 1961. Unfortunately, the match was washed out by rain so we could not see the match. Otherwise that would have been my first Test cricket match viewing opportunity.

Another time he took us to witness the Parliament debate regarding budget when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Finance Minister Morarji Desai participated in it.

After my [graduation from IIT Kanpur](#) he helped me in getting the National Scholarship for studies abroad. I have written about that in my book [1970's America – An Indian student's Journey](#). He lost the election for Lok Sabha for the first time in 1977 during the general defeat of Indira Gandhi and somehow was not given the ticket in 1980 since Sanjay Gandhi always considered him to be very close to [H. N. Bahuguna](#) who was perceived as Indira Gandhi's enemy.

After Sanjay Gandhi's death he was given the Congress (I) ticket in 1984 and won the Lok Sabha election and remained an MP till his untimely death in January 1987 due to heart attack caused by excessive drinking. At the time of his death he was the senior most Member of Parliament of Lok Sabha.



My father and Sunder Lal seated,
and I am standing. December 1978

After my return from U.S., he had introduced me to [Shri K. C. Pant](#) who was the chairman of Advisory Board of Energy (ABE). Pant ji put me in couple of committees of ABE. This allowed me to go to Delhi frequently. After my work I spent most of the time with him.

Those were really enjoyable times - talking with him and he telling me about old times. Unfortunately at that time in my life I was not very keen on knowing about the past and so never questioned him much. I now feel that it was my loss since he really knew the innards of Congress Party inside out.

Whatever tidbits he told me, I have written them in many essays on [Nehru](#) and [tehzeeb](#) (politeness) in politics.

Sunder chachaji once told me an interesting episode about [Subramanian Swamy](#). Sometime In 1969 Indira Gandhi gave him a 45-minute interview time. Apparently, Subramanian Swamy was regularly in the news and since he was a Harvard trained professor there were indications that Mrs. Gandhi was thinking about him for a suitable position in the Finance Ministry. Mrs. Gandhi according to Sunder Lal ji, sized Swamy in 5 minutes and cut short the interview. She found him loud mouthed and bombastic!

He also told me about [Govind Ballabh Pant](#) and his debating skills. The constitution of Delhi had to be discussed in the Parliament. Since this was a huge document all the MPs, had been invited for a special session and had come to Delhi thinking that it will be discussed threadbare clause by clause and may take couple of months sitting of the Parliament. Thus young MPs

including him had planned to have gala time in Delhi with partying and other activities.

On the first day of the discussion Shri. Govind Ballabh Pant got up in the Parliament and said that the bill and all the papers were sent to each M P to get their feedback and since none was received it is assumed as passed!

Sunder chachaji told me that all young MPs including him ran to the Central hall to get their return train reservations done, all the while cursing the old man for being a spoil sport of their Delhi social activities.

Since in Delhi I stayed with him so in the evenings we went for after-dinner walks. One day after dinner we both walked from his house situated in Baba Kharak Sing Marg area to a nearby Ram Manohar Lohia hospital where Shri [H.N. Bahuguna](#) was admitted for his heart ailment. Bahuguna ji was fond of me and so as we entered his room, he asked everybody to leave, and we had a very pleasant half an hour chat on various issues on renewable energy.

In 1985 Sunder chachaji came to Phaltan and stayed with me for couple of days. He had come to Mumbai to attend the [famous All India Congress Centenary Conference held in December 1985](#). From Mumbai we both travelled to Phaltan. He wanted to see what I was doing in Phaltan and then wrote a nice letter to Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi](#) about the activities of [NARI](#) and the potential of good work at our Institute. Unfortunately, he died in early 1987 so there was no follow up on that letter.

He was very fond of playing cards (in fact gambling was his passion), drinking and interaction with his friends.

I remember one evening in December 1986 at his house he invited [Sitaram Kesri](#) (Congress Party treasurer at that time) and [Jitendra Prasad](#) (Rajiv Gandhi's political Secretary). They both were his close friends. I was staying at that time with him so over a bottle of finest scotch whisky the card party

started. Sitaram Kesari was surprised that I did not drink even after spending 7 years in U.S. I told him it is by choice. He and Jitendra Prasad (JP) (a close friend of my father) were also unhappy that I will not be playing cards with them. I guess this is how some of the top brass of Congress party passed their evenings!

It is also sad that though J. P. and Sitaram Kesari were such close friends, yet in [1998 JP together with Pranab Mukherjee was responsible for removing Sitaram Kesri from the Presidentship of Congress Party](#) and instead hoisted [Sonia Gandhi](#) to that position. Sonia Gandhi then ditched JP and he died a broken man in 2001. Strange are the ways of politicians and as the saying goes politics is the art of infinite possibilities!

Though Sunder Lal was MP for a very long time, yet he was not corrupt and hardly made any money. Except for drinking he hardly had any other vice. I believe all those who were part of India's freedom struggle were by and large non-corrupt people.

Sunder Lal was a back-room operator and a King maker. He told me that he was one of the key persons responsible for selection of [Pratap Singh Kairon](#) as C. M. of Punjab. Similarly [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) tried many times to make him a junior minister in his cabinet but he refused since he felt he will be doing nothing else but signing files! [Shri K. C. Pant](#) once told me that had Sunder Lal been alive Congress would have been a very different party.

His untimely death in 1987 was a tremendous personal loss to me since he was like a father figure to me. To my mind Sunder Lal ji was an unsung hero of Congress Party.

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