



KAMARAJ IAS ACADEMY
Only IAS Academy by Grandson of "Perunthalaivar Kamarajar"

K Kamaraj's 120th birth anniversary

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Why in News

July 15 marks the 120th birth anniversary of Kumaraswami Kamaraj, freedom fighter and politician, known as much for his simplicity and personal integrity as for his astute political mind.

From humble origins to the top

Kamaraj was a self-made leader and a man of the people. A school dropout from a poor Nadar (a backward caste) family, Kamaraj started working in his uncle's grocery shop near Madurai at the age of 11.

During this time, he developed a deep interest in politics and the ongoing freedom struggle.

Like many in his generation, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was a formative moment which motivated young Kamaraj to actively dedicate his life for the betterment of the nation.

Starting as a volunteer for the Congress party, Kamaraj rose through the ranks to head the party's state unit in 1940.

He would retain his position till 1954, when he was made the chief minister of the Madras state by the party. It was under his leadership that the Congress developed a robust party organisation in the state.

Kamaraj was imprisoned as many as six times by British authorities for his participation in the freedom struggle, and spent more than 3,000 days in prison.

As the president of the Indian National Congress, Kamaraj steered the party during testing times post the death of Jawaharlal Nehru. While he never became prime minister himself, he was instrumental in the appointments of both Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi.

As a leader and two-time chief minister of the Madras State (present-day Tamil Nadu) between 1954 and 1963, he is credited for investing heavily in the state's welfare infrastructure, especially in education and health.

Under Kamaraj, Madras became one of the most industrialised states in India, garnering him the respect and affection of Jawaharlal Nehru himself. He was conferred a posthumous Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour, in 1976.

A school dropout who fought for education

C Rajagopalachari, a veteran Congress leader and devout Gandhian became the chief minister of the Madras state in 1952.

However, by 1954, he was falling out with then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the party decided to replace the veteran leader for the younger, more grassroots presence of Kamaraj

At a time when the upper echelons of politics still remained reserved for the elite, Kamaraj was perhaps the first non-English speaking chief minister in India.

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However, what he lacked in formal education, he made up for in wisdom.

He removed the caste based Modified Scheme of Elementary Education introduced by Rajaji in 1953 and reopened 6,000 schools that were shut in the state citing 'financial reasons'. He built another 12,000-odd schools during his tenure and introduced free and compulsory education up to Class 11.

After massive enrollment drives, by 1962 as much as 85 per cent of the state's population was receiving free education, with schools opened even in some of the poorest, most marginalised communities of the state.

Interestingly, today's extremely popular "mid-day meal scheme" is said to have been a brainchild of Kaka Kamaraj. On one of his tours, he came across a young boy rearing cattle.

When he asked the child why he was not in school, the child answered "If I go to school, will you give me food to eat?" This led to Kamaraj beginning a noon meal programme in schools.

The Kamaraj Plan

Nationally, however, Kamaraj is perhaps best recognised as the veteran Congressman who "saved" the party after the death of Nehru.

In 1963, Nehru was ailing and the Congress faced crisis after crisis – from losses in bypolls to the embarrassing defeat against China in 1962. After a decade in power, fatigue had set in among Congress functionaries and the cadre. The question, 'Who after Nehru?', was beginning to sound ominous.

Kamaraj came up with a plan to re-energise the party and strengthen the government. He proposed that leaders in government should quit their ministerial offices and take up organisational work, while those in the organisation should join the government.

Notably, he himself wanted to quit as chief minister to work for the party instead, in order to ward off the emerging threat of the DMK.

An All India Congress Committee resolution endorsed the Kamaraj Plan on August 10, 1963.

All Union Ministers and Chief Ministers put in their papers to Nehru, who then accepted the resignations of six Union Ministers — Morarji Desai, S K Patil, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Jagjivan Ram, K L Shrimali and B Gopala Reddy — and the CMs of Madras, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Kashmir.

Political scientist Rajini Kothari writes in his classic work, *Politics in India* (1970), that "the Plan, on the one hand, gave to Prime Minister Nehru an unprecedented opportunity to carry out a massive reshuffle of officeholders, but on the other hand asserted the principle of equal status of the party organisation with the government".

Power vacuum post Nehru

Nehru passed away on May 27, 1964.

An astute Kamaraj knew that Nehru was irreplaceable, and the party needed a new leadership model to manage both power and its ambitious leaders. His first task was to ensure a smooth transition in the Prime Minister's Office, which he skillfully managed by rallying the party behind his choice for PM, the non-controversial Lal Bahadur Shastri.

His next step was to infuse vigour in the party organisation, and thereby, the government. He sought to steer the party towards a federal system of leadership and won the confidence of powerful state satraps such as Atulya Ghosh, N Sanjiva Reddy, Nijalingappa and S K Patil.

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Kamaraj's emphasis on collective leadership helped the Congress navigate a difficult time when it lost Nehru and Shastri in quick succession. Two wars and drought had left the economy in a bad shape.

Kamaraj was also instrumental in the Congress opting for Indira Gandhi as Shastri's successor instead of a more experienced Morarji Desai.

The later years

Under Indira Gandhi, however, the Congress moved away from Kamaraj's vision of collective leadership and consensus-building, and towards a leader-centric high command.

Indira's own personality slowly started taking over the party organisation, causing friction between Indira's supporters and the Old Guard or Syndicate which finally resulted in a split in 1969.

Kamaraj's influence had waned by then — the DMK had defeated the Congress in Madras state in the 1967 Assembly elections, and Kamraj himself lost.

Without the guiding hand of Kamaraj as chief minister, the Congress government in Madras failed to handle the anti-Hindi agitation that rocked the state in 1965 and the food shortages of 1965-66.

Kamaraj became the leader of the INC (Organisation) party in Tamil Nadu, but electoral success did not follow. The party fared dismally in 1971, despite having hopes of beating Indira and failed to ever compete with Indira's INC (Requisition).

Kamaraj passed away in 1975, at the age of 72

Conclusion

Kamaraj birthday is celebrated as 'Education Development Day' in schools across Tamil Nadu