

Obituary

Professor M. L. Sondhi

P. R. Kumaraswamy

Professor Manohar Lal Sondhi had the rare distinction of being a career diplomat, committed academic, renowned scholar and, above all, a rare politician who believed in principles and values. His experience in the world of politics, bureaucracy and academia molded him to be doggedly independent until his very end.

Born in the industrial city of Jalander in the province of Punjab on December 14, 1933, Professor Sondhi pursued his initial education in his hometown before heading for the Delhi School of Economics and, then, the London School of Economics for higher studies. He also studied at Balliol College in Oxford and Charles University in Prague. He was married to Madhuri, a writer of considerable standing and the daughter of a well-known freedom fighter. They both pursued an active public life that stretched over four decades.

In 1956, Professor Sondhi topped the all-India civil service examination, joined the prestigious Indian Foreign Service, and served in Indian missions in Prague and the United Nations. In 1962, he resigned from the Foreign Service to become a faculty member at the New Delhi-based Indian School of International Studies, the forerunner of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). Subsequently when the School merged with the JNU, he became a professor of international politics.

Professor Sondhi's quarter of a century association with JNU marked a fine period in his career because it gave him an opportunity to pursue his passion: to interact with, enlighten, and enrich the student community. The priority he placed on students' welfare often placed him at odds with the University's administration and at times resulted in personal hardships. At the height of the infamous 1983 student agitation, he decisively sided with the students and in the process stepped on the toes of the establishment. He guided and supervised scores of theses and dissertations, and passionately worked on conflict management. Following his retirement from JNU in 1998, he was recognized as a Distinguished Scholar.

He made his electoral debut in 1967, when he successfully contested the prestigious New Delhi parliamentary constituency on the Jan Sangh platform. Even though his career in parliamentary politics did not continue beyond 1971, until the very end, he remained a member of the Jan Sangh and, later, the Bharatiya Janata Party and he occupied senior positions.

The 1967 Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian parliament) elections were a watershed in Indian politics. Compelled by electoral reversals and diminished parliamentary support, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi accepted support

from the Communist Parties and, in the process, brought India closer to the then Soviet Union. Professor Sondhi emerged as one of the strongest critics of Indira Gandhi's foreign policy, especially her policy on the June war. He was unable to comprehend — let alone support — the official policy, which was virulently critical of Israel's pre-emptive strike against the Arab armies. On June 8, 1967, in a speech to the Lok Sabha, Professor Sondhi lamented that India was behaving like the "fourteenth Arab state."

For decades, Professor Sondhi remained the staunchest advocate for normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel. Until full relations were established in January 1992, he remained a main reference point for Indo-Israeli diplomatic contacts and parleys. Beginning with his maiden visit to Israel in 1963, when he met David Ben-Gurion, Professor Sondhi visited the Jewish State on numerous occasions and met many important Israeli personalities, including Moshe Dayan, Golda Meir, and Yitzhak Rabin.

Likewise, Professor Sondhi strongly advocated the Tibetan cause and was highly critical of what he considered to be India's abandonment of its historic responsibility toward the Tibetan people. Through his academic works as well as his public activism, Professor Sondhi constantly championed the Tibetan cause in India and outside the country. He remained a close personal friend of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and was an Indian nominator of the Dalai Lama for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Professor Sondhi was widely traveled. At the height of the Cold War, he was often seen on both sides of the ideological divide. In 1956, he was elected as a Rhodes scholar and he served as a visiting scholar at a number of well-known international institutions, such as the Research Institute on Communist Affairs at Columbia University in New York in 1964, the Research Institute of International Affairs in Warsaw, the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security in South Korea, and the Harry S Truman Research Institute for the Advance of Peace in Jerusalem. He also served on innumerable international bodies and organizations. He was one of the advisory members of the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* and was actively interested in promoting Jewish and Hebrew studies in India.

He authored and edited scores of academic works. His writings include *A Peace Agenda for Indian Foreign Policy* (1995) and *Non-Appeasement: A New Direction for Indian Foreign Policy* (1971). He also edited or co-edited scholarly works, including *US and India Changing Strategic Parameters*; *Hinduism's Human Face*; *Towards a New Era: Economic, Social & Political Reforms*; *Nuclear Weapons and India's National Security*; *Terrorism and Political Violence A Sourcebook*; *Democratic Peace*; *Vajpayee's Foreign Policy: Daring the Irreversible* (1999); *Beyond Perestroika* (1989); and *Foreign Policy and Legislatures: An Analysis of Seven Parliaments* (1988). He also wrote scores of scholarly articles and chapters

on such diverse issues as conflict management, international relations, regional cooperation, and nuclear proliferation.

In 2000, in recognition of his public service, Professor Sondhi was appointed Chairman of the esteemed Indian Council of Social Sciences Research (ICSSR), the highest authority in India that supports research in social sciences. He disproved his critics, mainly from the Indian left, who alleged he would transform the ICSSR into an extension of the ruling BJP and impose its ideological baggage. He fought for the institution's autonomy and independence, and refused to yield to official pressures to run the ICSSR along narrow ideological dictates. This maverick and independent position did not endear him to party bosses and as a result, in July 2001, Professor Sondhi was unceremoniously removed from his position.

Professor Sondhi never bothered about political correctness and popularity. Despite being an active member of the governing Bharatiya Janata Party, he was appalled at the communal violence in the western Indian state of Gujarat in 2002 and co-edited a volume aptly called *Black Book on Gujarat*. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Professor Sondhi never compromised on his principles. He never hesitated to take on the establishment, institutions and, above all, his own political party in defense of his principles.

Following a brief illness, Professor Sondhi passed away on November 24, 2003. May his soul rest in peace!