

## **'It should have by now become clear that a mosque could not come up at Ayodhya'**

**Interview/'Cho' S Ramaswamy**

For an 'eternal Opposition leader', Tamil journalist-satirist 'Cho' S Ramaswamy has been bridled. Or, has he been given an official forum, at last?

Typical of him, Cho created a flutter with his maiden speech in the Rajya Sabha, where he is now a nominated member. He recalled the cover-cartoon in his magazine Thuglak involving two donkeys, for which the Tamil Nadu assembly had hauled him up for breach of privilege.

Here too, Cho, as a 'representative of the people', if you could describe a nominated member as one, speaks to N Sathiyamoorthy, on his first days in Parliament, and of course, on his views on various issues concerning the nation, its polity and democracy. Excerpts from an interview at Madras:

How do you feel as a member of Parliament?

There is too much of noise and redundancy in the proceedings. People shout out their views on various views, as if there is no tomorrow, even though most of these views had been made known through the media for weeks, if not months.

What about your own role?

As a nominated member, I know I cannot have my way, or have my views heard on every issue. And, I think, that's right. Members elected by the MLAs (members of legislative assembly), who in turn are the direct elected representatives of the people, should have a greater say in the Rajya Sabha than nominated members like me.

As an infant-member of Parliament, what do you say about Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's advice to his Bharatiya Janata Party members, not to raise controversial issues through private member's bills?

I think members should have the freedom to express their views, and move whatever bills they want to move. But what Vajpayee may have been saying is pragmatic politics, where the BJP is working on the NDA (ruling National Democratic Alliance) agenda, and the commonly-agreed National Agenda of Governance.

Still, I feel, members should have the freedom to move bills of their choice. Maybe Vajpayee can have his party members vote it out.

Do you see a contradiction between Vajpayee wanting his party MPs to get prior permission before moving private member's bills on controversial issues, and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pramod Mahajan saying earlier that the member who moved the cow-slaughter ban bill had his permission to do so?

Here, of course, we don't know whether Pramod Mahajan was speaking for his party...

What's your assessment of the Vajpayee-led NDA government at the Centre?

On the whole, they seem to be faring well. Even on ticklish issues like the WTO, they seem to be faring well...

But don't you think that they are in too much of a hurry to push the reforms, including the WTO affair, through?

Most of these issues have been discussed threadbare for long. But, of course, there may be need for a broad-based discussion on clause-by-clause issues, relating to these reforms, which is not happening.

About the reforms...?

Whatever the government may say, there is no denying that they are being implemented on the dictates of the Western powers, their funding agencies and the like. That being the case, the government doesn't seem to have wangled any concessions from them, on the application or implementation of any part of the reforms. Instead, it has been pushed into the defensive mode, telling our own people that jobs won't be lost, that the reforms won't hurt the common man and the like. What's there in the reforms for the government to show up the people as its positive side?

What about constitutional reforms? There seems to be a sudden surge towards it these days...

It could open up a Pandora's Box, when different regions, different states and different sections of the populace could come up with different demands that could be unacceptable, non-reconcilable, or both.

After all, our Constitution has been amended, clause by clause, to give it a wholly new character, over the decades. Maybe, those who want more changes could adopt this 'time-tested' method, rather than rush in, too far, too fast. Maybe, it will all take another 20 or 30 years...

What then about the presidential form of government?

It may have its own benefits, like ensuring stability, yes. There is also the possibility of one political party with a strong electoral base in one region, fielding a presidential candidate from another region, thus contributing towards greater political cohesion and integration.

But given the present political scenario, which may not change, even a strong presidential nominee may have to still depend on his regional allies, for winning a direct election. Such dependence always comes with a tag attached to it. That can make him weak, and can thus defeat the very purpose...

Does it mean, you don't foresee the possibility of the BJP forming a government on its own at the Centre?

Looks like that. Given the power-equations within the National Democratic Alliance, and the events like the BJP split in a strong state like Uttar Pradesh, where Kalyan Singh has been sacked from the party, the party may have to contend with coalition politics.

But what about the question, "After Vajpayee and Advani, who?" Do you think the NDA equations will shift away from the BJP?

I think the BJP will continue to be at the centre-stage of NDA politics, though a lot will depend on the party leader of the day.

Outside of NDA, do you think politics will once again take a Congress-centrist course, with a Nehru-Gandhi in Sonia Gandhi at the focus in an era without Vajpayee and Home Minister Lal Kishenchand Advani?

That needs a lot of political astuteness, which I think, Sonia Gandhi lacks.

What do you think about the role of the Opposition in the current Parliament?

Maybe, they are acting on the dictum that they are here not to govern, but only to oppose. But that will not do. The mood of the people has changed, and opposing the government for the sake of opposing should also end.

Of course, there may be need for working out ways and methods to involve the Opposition in the governance. After all, they too represent a substantial section of the population, and there may be some truth in what they may have to say.

What do you think about the Bofors case?

It's going on the right track. I do not subscribe to the view that Rajiv Gandhi's name should not be involved in the chargesheet. His name will be required if the conspiracy angle has to be proved.

What about the 'Ayodhya demolition case' then? Is there not justification in the inclusion of Advani's name and those of other BJP leaders?

If you had to arrest and chargesheet everyone who was present at Ayodhya during the demolition, then you may have to chargesheet at least a lakh of people. As far as Advani is concerned, he was known to have opposed the demolition, and even shouted at the hooligans from his dais. His post-demolition statements also expressed a similar sentiment...

What could be the solution to the 'Ayodhya issue'?

It should have by now become clear that a mosque could not come up on the disputed site, in any form, at any time. The question thus is: whether a temple could and should come up there? A decision on this can be taken only on the basis of a consensus, and this may take years, if not decades, for the right mood to be created.

What then about the pending court case on the disputed site?

Does anyone want it disposed of, immediately?