Ram Swarup (1920-98): outline of a biography

by Koenraad Elst, Leuven (Belgium), January 8, 1999

The wittiest mind in Delhi

In the long run, Ram Swarup will probably prove to have been the most influential Hindu thinker in the second half of the 20th century. He has, at any rate, been a crucial influence on most other Hindu Revivalist authors of the last couple of decades.

Ram Swarup was born in 1920 as the son of a rais/banker in Sonipat, Haryana, in the Garg gotra of the merchant Agrawal caste. He was a good student and earned a degree in Economics from Delhi University in 1941. He joined the Gandhian movement and acted as the overground contact (“postbox”) for underground activists including Aruna Asaf Ali during the Quit India agitation of 1942. He spent a week in custody when a letter bearing his name was found in the house of another activist, the later homeopath Ram Singh Rana. After his release, and until the end of the war, he worked as a clerk in the American office in Delhi which had been set up in the context of the Allied war effort against Japan.

In that period, his wit made him quite popular in progressive circles in the capital. He was a declared socialist, a great fan of Aldous Huxley and a literary imitator of George Bernard Shaw. In 1944, he started the “Changers’ Club”, alluding to Karl Marx’s dictum that philosophers have interpreted the world instead of changing it. Of course, it was never more than a discussion forum for a dozen young intellectuals, including the future diplomat L.C. Jain, the future Planning Commission member Raj Krishna, future Times of India editor Girilal Jain, and historian Sita Ram Goel. At that time, Ram Swarup was a committed atheist, and in the Changers’ Club manifesto he put it in so many words: “Butter is more important than God.”
The Changers' Club published two essays, both by Ram Swarup: *Indictment*, a highly critical review of the failed 1942 Quit India movement, and *Mahatma Gandhi and His Assassin*, written immediately after the murder of the Mahatma by the Pune-based journalist and Hindu Mahasabha activist Nathuram Godse on 30 January 1948. Written from a purely Gandhian perspective, its main thesis was that a society of small men cannot stand the presence of such a great man for very long; martyrdom was only befitting a man of Gandhiji's greatness. Ram Swarup showed no interest in Godse's motives, but he did appreciate that after the disaster of Partition, the urge to exact some punishment somewhere, though misguided (and in targeting Gandhi, misdirected), was a sign that Hindu society was not entirely dead, for suffering a calamity like the Partition and swallowing it without reaction would be a sure sign of virtual death.

At that time, the Changers' Club was already disintegrating because its members plunged into real life, e.g. L.C. Jain became the commander of the largest camp for Partition refugees and organized the rehabilitation of Hindu refugees from the North-West Frontier Province in Faridabad, outside Delhi. In 1948-49 Ram Swarup briefly worked for Gandhi's English disciple Mira Behn (Miss Madeleine Slade) when she retired to Rishikesh to edit her correspondence with Gandhiji. The project was not completed, but he was to remain close to Gandhism for the rest of his life.

**Anti-Communism**

Just around the time of Independence, Ram Swarup developed strong opinions about the ideology which was rapidly gaining ground among the intelligentsia around him: Communism. His first doubts developed in connection with purely Indian aspects of Communist policy. When the CPI defended the Partition scheme with contrived socio-economic arguments, he objected that the Partition would only benefit the haves among the Muslims, not the have-nots. His doubts deepening, he moved in a direction opposite to the ideological fashion of the day, and became one of India's leading anti-Communists.

In 1949, Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel set up their own anti-Communist think-tank in Calcutta, then as now the centre of Indian Communism. It was called the Society for the Defence of Freedom in Asia. Among its first
publications was Ram Swarup’s book Russian Imperialism: How to Stop It, written during the conquest of China by Mao Zedong, when the onward march of Communism seemed unstoppable. The book drew the attention of top Congress leaders worried about Jawaharlal Nehru’s steering the country in a pro-Soviet direction.

Still in 1949, Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel decided to set up a think-tank specifically devoted to monitoring Communism, the Democratic Research Service, which was formally started in November 1950. [Related in Minoo Masani: Against the Tide, p.54.] It was sponsored by the industrialist Birla family, and initially led by Morarji Desai, who passed the job on to Minoo Masani (1905-98), a Parsi and former co-founder of the Congress Socialist Party (1934), later founder of the pro-Western Swatantra Party (1959-75). It was as secretary of the DRS that Ram Swarup prepared a History of the Communist Party of India, which Masani published in his own name.

A lot of bad blood developed between Masani and Ram Swarup, who quit the DRS to join Sita Ram Goel in Calcutta. Meanwhile, the DRS continued to be operative, but beyond publishing the meritorious periodical Freedom First, it never became very dynamic. In his memoirs about the anti-Communist struggle, Against the Tide, Masani did not even mention Ram Swarup or Sita Ram Goel, much less acknowledge Ram Swarup’s hand in the History of the CPI.

There was yet another anti-Communist centre in India, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an international network with chapters in most countries of the free world. In India, it published the periodical Quest (Calcutta) and, for the Chinese public, China Report (New Delhi); Girilal Jain was among its Indian collaborators. However, it lost all credit when, in 1966-67, it was found out to be financed by the CIA (though by early 1966, its financing had been taken over by the Ford Foundation). [See K. Vanden Berghe: "Het Congres voor de Vrijheid van de Cultuur", Onze Alma Mater, Leuven, 1997/2, p.193-211.]

The most authentic and effective Indian centre of fact-finding and consciousness-raising about the Communist menace was and remained undoubtedly the Society for the Defence of Freedom in Asia. Though routinely accused of being lavishly financed by the CIA, this organization started with just Rs. 30,000, half of which was brought in by Goel personally, and continued its work with the help of donations by friends, its budget seldom exceeding Rs. 10,000. It published some important studies, which were acclaimed by leading anti-Communists in the West and Taiwan, and on one occasion vehemently denounced in the Pravda and the Izvestia. Until its closing in December 1955, the centre was the main independent focus of ideological opposition to Communism in the Third World.

**Ram Swarup’s main books on Communism are:**

- Let us Fight the Communist Menace (1949);
- Russian Imperialism: How to Stop It (1950);
- Communism and Peasantry: Implications of Collectivist Agriculture for Asian Countries (1950, but only published in 1954);
- Gandhism and Communism (1954);
- Foundations of Maoism (1956).
His Gandhism and Communism, which emphasized the need to raise the struggle against Communism from a military to a moral and ideological level, was brought to the attention of Western anti-Communists including several US Congressmen, and some of its ideas were adopted by the Eisenhower administration in its agenda for the Geneva Conference in 1955.

Later, Arun Shourie wrote about Ram Swarup's struggle against Communism: "Ram Swarup, now in his seventies, is a scholar of the first rank. In the 1950s when our intellectuals were singing paeans to Marxism, and to Mao in particular, he wrote critiques of communism and of the actual -- that is, dismal -- performance of communist governments. He showed that the 'sacrifices' which the people were being compelled to make had nothing to do with building a new society in which at some future date they would be heirs to milk and honey. (...) He showed that the claims to efficiency and productivity, to equitable distribution and to high morale which were being made by these governments, and even more so by their apologists in countries such as India, were wholly sustainable, that in fact they were fabrications. Today, any one reading those critiques would characterise them as prophetic. But thirty years ago, so noxious was the intellectual climate in India that all he got was abuse, and ostracism."

[Fomenting reaction", in A. Shourie: Indian Controversies, p.293.]

**Ram Swarup as a Hindu Revivalist**

Initially, Ram Swarup saw Gandhism as the alternative to Communism, and he has never really rejected Gandhism. He continued to explore the relevance of Gandhism to real-life problems, e.g. in his booklet Gandhian Economics (1977). Gandhian inspiration is also palpable in his The Hindu View of Education (1971), the text of a speech given before the convention of the RSS student organization Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad. But gradually, he moved from the Gandhian version of Hinduism to a more comprehensive understanding of the ancient Hindu tradition.

His first booklet on Hindu religion was written just after Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956: Buddhism vis-à-vis Hinduism (1958, revised 1984). It took a moderate view of the much-debated relation of Buddhism to its mother tradition, affirming that the Buddha was a Hindu (just as Jesus was a Jew), but conceding that Buddhism had a typical atmosphere setting it apart from the Hindu mainstream.

By the late 1970s, his focus had decisively turned to religious issues. Apart from a large number of articles published in Organiser, in Hinduism Today (Honolulu), and in some mainstream dailies (in the 1980s the Telegraph, the Times of India and the Indian Express, in recent years mostly the Observer of Business and Politics and the Birla family's paper Hindustan Times), Ram Swarup's contribution to the religious debate consists of the following books:

The Word as Revelation: Names of Gods (1980), on the rationale of polytheism; Hinduism vis-à-vis Christianity and Islam (1982, revised 1992); Christianity, an Imperialist Ideology (1983, with Major T.R. Vedantham and Sita Ram Goel); Understanding Islam through Hadis (1983 in the USA by Arvind Ghosh, Houston; Indian reprint by Voice of India, 1984); in 1990, the Hindi translation was banned;
Ram Swarup was a quiet and reflective type of person. He never married, never went into business, hardly ever had a job, never stood for an election, never joined an organization or party. When I first met him in 1990, he lived in a rooftop room in the house of the late industrialist Hari Prasad Lohia, a sponsor of a variety of Hindu sages (including even Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh). He had been living with the Lohia family in their Calcutta or Delhi property since 1955; in 1996 he moved to his late brother's house. At any rate, his biography is not very eventful apart from his daily yoga practice and his pioneering intellectual work.

He had been in rather good health when unexpectedly, he was found dead on his bed after his afternoon nap on 26 December 1998. The family doctor gave brain hemorrhage as the cause of death. He left no children but many Hindus felt orphaned when the flames consumed Ram Swarup's earthly remains.