

A Life Complicated and Strange

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A Chequered Brilliance

The Many Lives of V K Krishna Menon

By Jairam Ramesh

Penguin Random House India, 2019

He is not a household name in India today, much less in the rest of the world, but to those who encountered him 60 years ago, the face on the jacket of this hefty biography is instantly recognisable. The white wings of hair fly down both sides of his head, the nose juts out – V K Krishna Menon (VKK) has the memorable appearance of an emaciated badger.

For 30 years, from the mid-1930s to the 1960s, VKK was never far from the major figures of Indian politics, and for more than half that time, he was such a figure himself.

He entered my life on 9 October 1957 when he gave one of his marathon speeches to the United Nations (UN) in New York. Representing India, he had delivered the longest speech in UN history the previous January – eight hours over two days.

On the October day that VKK was making his monumental speech, New York hosted another major event – the sixth game of the baseball world series between the insufferable New York Yankees and the Milwaukee Braves. Right-thinking schoolboys (I was in Grade 7) raced home in the forlorn hope that they would catch the last innings on television. Instead, they found a dark-skinned, wild man giving a speech. I had never heard a speech like it. It captured me. It threw up names and places I did not understand but now needed to find out about, and it was delivered with such passion and flourish. *Mon dieu!* He was memorable.

Jairam Ramesh's interest in VKK does not stem from boyhood fascination. "I'm willing," he modestly told interviewer Samira Sood, "to write a book on anyone as long as there is mountains of primary material." He makes it sound too simple. It takes an intrepid explorer to find the mountains and an informed prospector to extract the ore. As a well-connected public figure, Ramesh has had the contacts to unlock the VKK papers at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi and to gain access to other rich sources.

The great strength of this book is the wealth of original material that Ramesh presents. For anyone interested in the struggle of Indian nationalists to present their case in Britain in the 1930s, it will be an essential reference. Similarly, the richness of the material enables Ramesh to offer insights into world diplomacy of the 1950s and to add to accounts of India's defeat in the China war of 1962.

What some may find that the book lacks is an attempt to answer the question, "What made VKK tick?" The 28 early years of his life are covered in 22 of the book's 725 pages. To explore and understand these early years require a special interest in Kerala, and that may

require a different book and author. However, the clues to VKK's tempestuous personality surely lie there.

It is not that Ramesh glosses over foibles and frailties. He presents evidence of VKK's failed relationships with women, his dependence on various drugs and painkillers, his inability to get on with others and his self-pity and mock-modesty. All this and more is revealed in long letters appealing for praise and reassurance from his patron, Jawaharlal Nehru.

VKK was born in 1896 "in his mother's ancestral home" in today's Kozhikode into "a wealthy Nair family" (p. 3). This was Kerala at the turn of the last century. Nairs were matrilineal (but not matriarchal, it needs to be emphasised). Because family property descended through females, women had a stake in their family's assets, and the restrictions on girls and women were different from that elsewhere in India. A husband had no legal right to the assets of his wife, and in the event of his death, his own self-acquired property went to his mother's family, not to his offspring and wife.

A book written by a member of another branch of VKK's extended Vengil family suggests the tensions and uncertainties in Nair families as the matrilineal system crumbled. "The world in which I was born [in 1934] and grew up," wrote journalist V K Madhavan Kutty, "was both complicated and strange" (*The Village Before Time*, p. 3).

"Complicated and strange" well describes VKK. He was devoted to two sisters and gave one the power of attorney over his Indian property. He had a relatively close relationship with his father, which for his generation, was not a universal experience among Nairs. In those days, "No Nair knows his father" was a taunt sometimes thrown at matrilineal people in Kerala.

There is scope for a book about Kerala and VKK in those 28 years from 1896 until he left for Britain in 1924. But it is the politics that attract Ramesh.

The outlines of VKK's life from the 1930s have been sketched before. He lived almost entirely in Britain from 1924 to 1952, first as a drifting student, then as a lawyer and semi-official propagandist for Indian nationalist causes. He joined the Labour Party, became a local government councillor and an editor in the new Penguin publishing operation of Allen Lane.

"The year 1935 was to be a watershed year," is the way Ramesh introduces Chapter 6, entitled "Enter Jawaharlal Nehru." It was also the year VKK's father died and a love affair ended. But meeting Nehru in London was "the beginning of an unusually intimate relationship, with VKK becoming an integral part of Nehru's family" (p. 112). Thirty-nine years later, he still had a tie to the Nehru family close enough to summon the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, to his hospital bed to give her "more than a bit of his mind" for having approved India's first nuclear explosion (p. 662). He died five months later.

Nehru appointed him High Commissioner to the United Kingdom in 1947, a post he held till the end of 1951 when he became Indian ambassador to the UN. From 1953, he was also a player in parliamentary politics, having been elected from the old Madras state to the Rajya

Sabha (Upper House). He won a seat in the Lower House as a Congress candidate in the general elections of 1957 and became defence minister.

His downfall came in 1962 as India stumbled into a war with China, and a disorganised Indian army, poorly led and equipped, was called on to fight a war it could not win. VKK was forced to resign.

He remained a minor presence in Indian public life until his death and managed to get elected with the support of non-Congress parties from West Bengal in a by-election in 1969 and from Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram) in 1971. However, with Nehru's death in 1964, the extraordinary relationship ended, and VKK lost his booster and protector.

In the final chapter, Ramesh digests a multitude of tributes and critiques since VKK's death in 1974. The broadest consensus might be digested something like this: "Here was a man who was very clever, well read and energetic, but so self-absorbed that he was a nightmare to deal with and often believed only what he wanted to believe." Ramesh's summation is a life "not smooth but ... certainly captivating." Readers enthralled by the history of modern India are likely to agree.

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