

# Remembering Menon: The hand behind the Iron Man

STANLEY CARVALHO

Vappala Pungunni Menon, V P Menon as he was better known, is a name that may not ring a bell. That's not surprising because little is known about this extraordinary Indian, who, during much of his professional life, remained in the shadows of the political giants of the time.

As India celebrates 75 years of independence, Menon must be remembered not only as a man who rose to a high bureaucratic position in colonial India from humble beginnings, but also as a man, who, alongside Sardar Patel, smartly strategised in getting the over 500 princely states to accede to India as the country won its freedom from the British rule.

After his outstanding stint under the British, notably as Reforms Commissioner to the last three Viceroys – Linlithgow, Wavell and Mountbatten – and later as Secretary of the States Ministry in independent India and the right-hand man of Patel, Menon spent his twilight years in Bengaluru until his death in 1965.

Menon's tenure under Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, was the highlight of his career, particularly his role in formulating the plan (Menon Plan) for India's independence and the integration of the princely states. He travelled across the length and breadth of India, meeting the princes and nawabs, coaxing, cajoling and compelling them to integrate with the newly independent India.

While many fell in line, some were hesitant to sign up. One story goes thus: Maharaja Hanwant Singh of Jodhpur, used to the royal life, was a hard nut to crack. Menon arranged a meeting of the Maharaja with Mountbatten where the former grudgingly signed the Instrument of Accession to India. After the signing, Mountbatten left, leaving Menon with the Maharaja. The Maharaja took out a .22 calibre pistol and pointed it at Menon, saying "I refuse to take your dictation." Menon told him he would be making a very serious mistake by threatening him and would not be able to get the accession abrogated in any case. The petulant Maharaja handed the pistol to Menon!

Menon also worked with Sardar Patel over the military action against the hostile states of Junagadh and Hyderabad as also advising Nehru and Patel on relations with Pakistan and the Kashmir conflict. The Cabinet had dispatched Menon to obtain the accession of Kashmir to India in 1947. Post-independence, Menon was appointed Secretary of the Ministry of States, headed by Sardar Patel. The two worked closely over the political integration of India as the 'Iron Man' respected Menon's po-

litical acumen, astute diplomacy and work ethic.

He had a hand in many reforms including women's suffrage. Later, Menon, along with C Rajagopalachari and others founded the Swatantra Party which advocated free market policies.

Menon's *The Story of the Integration of Indian States* gives a detailed account of the heroic efforts that went into pulling some 554 native princely states under the wings of the Indian republic. His other book, *The Transfer of Power in India* is a definitive account of the events that led to partition and independence; and how power was actually transferred.

His biography penned by his great grand-daughter, a historian, candidly explores his personal and public life, drawing from official documents, letters, family sources as well as his last interviews recorded by his friend and boss, Harry Hodson in 1965 in Bangalore.

All the three books are comprehensive works on the political integration of India on the eve of independence and also shed light on the extraordinary feats of a man unjustly consigned to the footnotes of history.

Born in 1893 in a village in Kerala, Menon had a difficult childhood, trudging miles to school and back. At 13, when his teacher failed him for poor attendance, Menon ran away from home after setting fire to his school. After five years of working various jobs including as a labourer in a gold mine and selling towels on the roadside, he came to Bengaluru and found a clerical job at the Imperial Tobacco Company, now ITC Ltd.

The young man with a sharp mind, photographic memory and exceptional letters writing and document drafting skills, moved to Bombay and then to Delhi. In 1917, he secured a job with the Home Department, marking an entry into the world of Indian political and constitutional reforms, where he stayed until retirement.

Rubbing shoulders with the Brits, he picked up some of their traits including to dress impeccably in Saville Row suits, joining in tiger safaris and a fondness for fine cigars and whiskey.

For a school dropout who ran away with nothing to become one of the top civil servants in British India by sheer grit, hard work and believing that "you can only learn if you start from the bottom", Menon's life story could well serve as an inspiration for all, not just those interested in history or politics.

It is over five decades since Menon passed away but the man and his legendary contributions must not be forgotten.

(The writer is a senior journalist based in Bengaluru)