

Legacy of Goodness

By Harsh Mander



Crowds surged to join his funeral procession, as it wound its way through the busy streets of Hyderabad, on a warm afternoon on 8 October, 2010. Senior civil servants and human rights workers jostled with tens of anonymous indigent men and women, each of whom wished the privilege to carry his body in its last journey for a few moments. Uniformed policemen lowered their eyes in tribute after offering an incongruous gun salute to a man the crowds extolled as a messenger of peace. Slogans continuously rent the air, hailing him to be the beloved son of dalits, tribal people, the poor and disabled persons. Few eyes were dry when his niece set aflame his funeral pier.

I doubt if there has ever been such a funeral of any civil servant before him. The diverse multitude which surged to bid this diminutive, frail, under-stated man his final farewell, represented the extraordinary range of people whose lives he had touched. SR Sankaran set standards of integrity and service to the most disadvantaged, for a whole generation of public officials. His courage of convictions inspired human rights activists. Despite his uncompromising opposition to violence, he was revered by Maoists as much as by Gandhians. And a lifetime of egalitarian compassion bound him to masses of India's poorest people, disadvantaged by indigence, caste, gender and disability.

Sankaran firmly believed lifelong that the foremost duty of the state was to uphold the dignity, rights and freedoms of India's most oppressed people, and his life's work demonstrated what a democratic government could indeed accomplish if it included persons like him. He drew up laws for land reforms, and pushed governments to implement these. He conceived of the Tribal Sub-Plan and Special Component Plan, to compel governments to set aside significant proportions of the state budgets for the welfare of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. He designed many programmes for justice and welfare of these socially most deprived communities, including thousands of residential schools for the education of tribal boys and girls. It was he who helped craft laws to release bonded workers.

Among the many legends which have grown up around his life's work, the story is often recounted of how a powerful Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh was furious when, as Secretary Social Welfare, Sankaran organised campaigns to release bonded workers from generations of debt bondage. The Chief Minister announced in a cabinet meeting that Sankaran was a trouble-maker, who went from village to village, held meetings with poorest people seated on the ground under trees, instigated them by declaring that they had the right to be free, and mobilised them to rebel against a lifetime of bondage. Soft-spoken Sankaran retorted that this indeed is what he did, and this was his duty. This enraged the Chief Minister further, and he asserted in the cabinet meeting itself that such subversives had no place in his government. Sankaran replied in his customary low voice that he too did not want to work in his government, and proceeded on long leave.

This proved a fortuitous turning point in his life. The legendary Marxist Chief Minister of Tripura, Nripen Chakravarty, invited him to shift to Tripura and serve there as Chief Secretary. Both austere bachelors, fiercely honest, had few worldly belongings, and even washed their own clothes. They formed a unique partnership, leading the state for 6 years. Few governments in India earned such a reputation of integrity, service and justice for the under-privileged.

Sankaran gained national fame when he was kidnapped by Naxalites from the jungles of Andhra Pradesh. After his retirement from government, he constituted a Concerned Citizens Committee, to mediate with government to end its human rights violations in its military-like offensive against the armed rebels, and its policy of 'encounter' killings of alleged Naxalites, which he condemned as 'targeted extralegal executions'. Many tribal or dalit youth, or their loved ones, would desperately contact Sankaran when they were in danger of being eliminated in fake encounters, and it was Sankaran's mediation which saved several of them. He reminded government tirelessly that it was decades, indeed centuries, of injustice against tribal people – their brutal dispossession from their lands and forests - which was the true source of the insurgency in the jungles of the state.

But Sankaran was equally unsparing in condemning the violence of the Naxalites, and their focus on 'military actions rather than on the mobilisation of people for social transformation'. He was convinced that this contributed to 'further brutalise the society and lead to the shrinkage of democratic space for mobilisation and direct participation of the people, impairing the very process of transformation that the movements claim to stand for'.

It was due to his unique moral stature that both government and the Maoists felt compelled to respond to his appeals, and defend to him their policies. It is another matter that neither altered their basic approaches to the conflict, and the unabated blood-letting by both sides of the conflict caused him great anguish. The efforts of this Committee dominated a decade of

Sankaran's life, and he grieved until his end that he could not free his people from the mutually reinforcing cycles of violence, and reclaim for them enduring peace and justice.

Another task which to which he devoted a significant part of his time after he retired was to lead the Safai Karmchari Andolan, an exceptional campaign for ending the humiliating age-old practice of people of particular castes being forced to clean dry latrines with their bare hands, and carry human excreta in baskets on their heads. He regarded this to be the most dreadful manifestation of untouchability and caste. A decade of Sankaran's leadership of the Andolan led to the substantial decimation of this centuries-old evil in many parts of India. This was through a combination of judicial interventions, compelling accountability of public officials, and a non-violent mass campaign for self-respect by people engaged in this vocation in which they burned their baskets and demolished dry latrines. But those Sankaran led to a life of dignity will mourn that will not be by their side to witness the historic final end of this scourge.

Sankaran set aside a significant portion of his salary, and his pension after he retired, to educate dalit children. He never spoke of this to anyone, but when he first suffered a heart attack, many young men competed to keep vigil at his bedside. We learnt later from this assortment - of doctors, civil servants, engineers and teachers - that whatever they achieved in their lives was due to Sankaran. He never married, but clearly several who loved and revered him like a father.

He was an intensely ethical person, but never didactic or judgemental. He displayed an unexpected impish sense of humour and mischief. After he retired from government, he lived in a small unpretentious and sparsely furnished apartment, which looked more like the home of a retired school teacher than a senior civil servant. Even the few pieces of furniture and gadgets in his house were forced on him by those who loved him. When he received his pension arrears, he was alarmed by this very modest swelling of his bank balance, and quickly distributed the money to street children's homes, and an organisation for disabled persons.

Sankaran's life and work illuminated the lives of literally millions of India's most dispossessed people with dignity, justice and hope. His compassion, simplicity and lifetime of public service will continue to light the way, both of those who work within government, and others who choose to struggle against it. His enduring legacy will be to demonstrate what true and authentic goodness in public and personal life can accomplish, to make this world a better, kinder place.