

P S Appu

A Tribute

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P S Appu, an extraordinary civil servant who had a keen awareness of land issues and who also had a different understanding of reforms, died in Bangalore on 29 March. A tribute.

P S Appu was 14 years senior to me in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). He belonged to the Bihar cadre of the service, whereas I had worked all along in Andhra Pradesh. However, these distances never stood in the way of my following his work and sharing his views and values.

I first heard about P S Appu from my highly respected IAS colleague, Syed Rizvi, who worked with him when the former was director of Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA) at Mussoorie. When Appu found a young IAS trainee guilty of misconduct, he recommended to the government that the officer's services should be terminated forthwith. He felt that the officers belonging to the premier civil services in India should be fully aware that the people of the country expected them to show exemplary conduct. However, when the government dragged its feet in following his advice, Appu promptly submitted his papers for voluntary retirement from the IAS. This had an electrifying impact on the civil services in the country. As a result of the resolve displayed by Appu the government had to relent and accept his advice, though Appu himself stuck to his decision to quit.

Anita Agnihotri, an IAS trainee who was at LBSNAA at that time, aptly recalled the collective response of most young officers by saying, "his resignation from service prematurely on a matter of principle..... had sent ripples through the Union Home Ministry and the entire bureaucracy and has left a lasting impact on our minds till date. Uncompromisingly, with great clarity of mind combined with erudition, Shri Appu was an admirable example of courage and principle. As a senior colleague, he was a true leader orienting his juniors towards a pro-people accountable and transparent public service delivery system."

What Agnihotri said conveyed a very important message for the civil services

in this country. Those who work with courage and conviction, who accord the highest priority to transparency in the functioning of the public authorities, and who ensure accountability to the people, they alone can lead the civil services in the country. Unfortunately, such leadership is in short supply these days.

When P S Appu announced his voluntary retirement from the IAS in 1980, I was a director in the Ministry of Power. Though I did not know Appu personally, I, along with a few other service colleagues, thought it imperative to meet and express our solidarity in support of his decision. The principled way in which Appu chose to quit the service left a deep impression on my own mind. In a way, this had something to do with my own decision to quit the service voluntarily, two decades later.

Problems of People

The problems of the majority of the people in India revolve around land and agriculture, not around the stock markets, luxury housing and modern car manufacture. Reforms that address the insecure landownership rights, informal owner-tenant relationships biased heavily against the tenants, capital-scarce agriculture, and lack of sufficient education and public healthcare facilities should have been at the top of the agenda of reforms in the country. Unfortunately, the post-1991 reform programme hardly addressed these concerns. It was in this context that the contribution made by Appu assumed great relevance.

For example, his article "Tenancy Reform in India" in August 1975 in EPW read like a treatise on the subject, founded firmly on his own hands-on experience with tenancy problems in Bihar and his excellent analytical overview of the subject at the national level. He chaired the Committee on Land Reforms set up by the Planning Commission and the plain-speaking no-nonsense report of that committee spoke volumes about his insights and ideas on the subject.

In October 2009, I came across a comprehensive, well-argued article contributed by P S Appu on the improvements called for in the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee

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Scheme (NREGS). While conveying to him my views and reservations on what he suggested in that article, little did I realise then that I would get into a regular correspondence with him thereafter, on a variety of topics of mutual interest. In our email correspondence that went on uninterrupted until June 2011, we exchanged views on the need to strengthen the panchayati raj system, the implications of the post-1991 economic reform programme, the necessity to strengthen the public distribution system and the need to provide adequate food subsidies, the ways and means to address the problem of food-grain storage, the issues that are relevant to tribal empowerment and development

and so on. We even discussed the pros and cons of nuclear power and the adverse implications of imposing a cap on civil nuclear liability! I would seek his views on my own articles and letters to the government. He was prompt in providing me valuable feedback.

When he came across a report that the central government had asked a multinational corporation to make recommendations on the problem of foodgrain storage in the country, he expressed his deep anguish by saying, "What a fall, my countrymen! We have lost not only our pride and self-respect, but also our common sense". What he meant was that there was enough professional expertise available in India to

address such problems. He added, "I am not a jingoist.....I recall the sound advice given by (Nicholas) Kaldor, (Daniel) Thorner, (Wolf Isaac) Ladejinsky".

While P S Appu is not physically among us today, his ideas and views, his aspirations and vision, I am sure, are deeply embedded among all those who had the fortune of working with him in one capacity or the other. Persons like Appu will always remind us that the civil services can justify their existence only when they are fully attuned to addressing the concerns of the majority of the population. Their accountability should be to that majority, not the self-serving political and bureaucratic elite!