

S R Sankaran: Champion of the safai karmacharis

Mari Marcel Thekaekara (Infochange News & Features, Decembe, 2010)



S R Sankaran, who died recently, transformed the lives of countless people. As a civil servant he worked for the poor, bonded labourers and dalits, and as mentor to the Safai Karmachari Andolan he saw the number of women manually cleaning excreta decline from 13 lakh to 3 lakh.

This is a column with a difference. It focuses on how one incredible man, S R Sankaran, an IAS officer, transformed the lives of countless others. Not by being heroic, but by simply doing his job. In effect it's what all IAS officers are mandated to do, rather ought to do! Merely by doing what a civil servant is paid to do, and doing it well, Sankaran has moved mountains.

Eulogies have been written about 'Sankarangaru', as he is respectfully called. Really moving ones too. I cannot claim to have known him for decades, as have others, but his passing left me with a sense of great loss, as though a much-loved family member or friend had died. I heard about his passing in a brutally casual manner.

Sankarangaru's brother had died and I thought I should call him to condole his loss. I asked Bejawada Wilson, leader of the Safai Karmachari Andolan, almost a son to Sankaran, for a contact number. Wilson's face was ravaged; I wondered if he was ill or merely exhausted. He said: "He's gone, Mari. Our Sankarangaru has left us."

I shook my head in disbelief, the words refusing to sink in. "What are you saying? I heard his brother had died. I wanted to phone him," I said. "He had a massive heart attack. We couldn't save him," Wilson replied.

Thousands of people like me went into shock as news of their beloved Sankarangaru's passing spread through the country. They came flocking to his home in Andhra Pradesh on October 7, 2010, to follow this much-loved man till the very end. It was a bitter blow to everyone. Why should such a good person be taken from us before his time? Why did all of us feel such a sense of loss? It was because Sankarangaru was one of those human beings who brought hope to us. Who restored our faith in humanity when events around conspired to shatter it. This was a man who was diminutive, simple, quiet and soft-spoken. There are people around us who are colourful and charismatic, larger than life. He was neither. He would never stand out in a crowd. You would barely notice him, and he wanted it that way. He dismissed the trappings of power, the retinue of servants, the pomp and paraphernalia of the office of the IAS, and camped in dalit bastis, adivasi hamlets. He ate the barest minimum, simple vegetarian fare, and lived frugally, in sparsely furnished quarters, donating most of his income to educating dalits, adivasis and other poor students.

But this was not Sankarangu's claim to fame.

As his reputation spread, he became iconic because of his commitment to fighting injustice and poverty. He dedicated his IAS career to making the government work for the poor. He focused his formidable intellect on exposing injustice at every level and in ensuring all government programmes meant for the poor reached them. He worked ceaselessly to this end, and he created waves because he upset the status quo. Oppressors in villages, the owners of bonded labourers, exploitative landlords and the like, generally have relatives in high places, in the corridors of power, both in the IAS and police and other government circles. So justice rarely prevails.

Sankarangu was not fazed. He fought fearlessly to improve the status of dalits in Andhra Pradesh. In 1976, at the Andhra Pradesh State Harijan Conference, he managed, with sensitive, like-minded IAS officers and ministers, to convert recommendations into government orders. Protection of dalits and adivasis under the Prevention of Atrocities Act, improvement and expansion of reservations, assignment and distribution of land to the landless, under the Land Reforms Act, integrated development under various government schemes, removal of indebtedness, releasing bonded labourers, women's issues, housing, conversion to other religions -- the list goes on. Sankarangu turned these into practical, doable government programmes and actions.

Some change was possible. Sankaran became secretary, social welfare, and soon mere words were translated into action plans.

His determination to rid the state of bonded labour when Indira Gandhi's 20-point programme came into force with the Abolition of Bonded Labour Act 1976, earned him many enemies. Politicians who had bonded labour in their employ, and their powerful feudal landlord votebanks, opposed the abolition vociferously.

In his second tenure as principal secretary, Sankaran took up the issue of bonded labour again. He went from district to district holding meetings in villages, sitting on the ground with dalits and telling them that they had the right to be free, urging them to break out of bondage, and promising them government support. This enraged Andhra Pradesh's feudal landlords who complained to the chief minister. At a cabinet meeting, Sankaran was publicly rebuked by the chief minister who asked him if it was true that he was going to the villages urging bonded labourers to revolt. The soft-spoken Sankaran replied that it was indeed true and that he believed that it was his duty and the duty of the government to do so. The outraged chief minister shouted that there was no place for subversives in his government. In an even softer voice, Sankaran declared: "I believe this is true. I have no desire to work in such a government." He left the room with an air of quiet dignity and self-confidence, while the entire cabinet gawked. Sankaran proceeded on long leave.

The story became the stuff of legend. The Marxist chief minister of Tripura, Nripen Chakravarty, himself the epitome of integrity, invited Sankaran to work with him as chief secretary of Tripura. For six years, these two fearless, incredible men worked together. Few places on earth have had the privilege of such a team. No government in India ever benefitted from such an administration. Both men were scrupulously honest, decent and fearlessly dedicated to fighting injustice. Both were deeply committed, frugal men, bachelors, abhorred consumerism, detached from normal worldly interests, concerned only with improving the life of the poor in their care. It was an ideal partnership.

Sankaran's abiding sorrow was that his 2004 negotiations for the end of violence in Naxal areas did not bear fruit. His stature and integrity were such that he was in the unique position where both government and the Naxals trusted him. He condemned the violence of the state as well as that of the Naxals, equally. But he saw that the Naxal violence, though counter-productive and untenable, was a result of tremendous injustice and exploitation in rural areas. The breakdown of talks left him heartbroken, but he continued to help people who were under threat of extermination because of false accusations against them.

Sankaran spent the last decade of his life working for one of the most exploited groups in the country, the safai karmacharis, people at the absolute bottom of the caste ladder, despised even by other dalits. The women are forced, even after 63 years of independence, to clean human shit with their bare hands, a broom and a piece of tin. And often, to carry baskets or containers of waste on their heads or hips. The men plunge into blocked sewers to unblock them. One person dies doing this work every day, in India.

Sankaran was guide and mentor to the Safai Karmachari Andolan. In his decade of involvement with the SKA, he had the satisfaction of seeing the numbers of women cleaning excreta decline from 13 lakhs to 3 lakhs, thanks to the SKA. This group of mainly young people from the balmiki community went from village to village, basti to basti, exhorting people to throw down their brooms, for the sake of the dignity of future generations, their children and grandchildren. The SKA is completing a task that Gandhiji began but did not finish.

Sankaran brought his knowledge and expertise to the campaign. Years of getting government to work paid off, as he drafted countless petitions and memoranda, wrote to IAS officers, and penetrated the inner workings of government for his beloved balmikis. He inspired and gave courage and direction to the movement. It was a bitter pill for everyone involved that he died months before the campaign came to a close.

His passing has left an enormous void in many hearts. What can one say of such a man. Shakespeare comes to mind. But while the world might say, "This was a man", to the thousands who wept at his funeral, words were not necessary.

Sankaran had no biological children. But the inheritance of integrity, compassion, commitment and passion for dignity and justice for the most downtrodden in this country will live on in the hearts of all those who knew him and recognised what he stood for. We hope his actions will inspire generations of IAS officers to go out and do likewise. That would be the most fitting tribute to this incredible man.

(original article: <http://infochangeindia.org/Livelihoods/Sidelines/S-R-Sankaran-Champion-of-the-safai-karmacharis.html>)