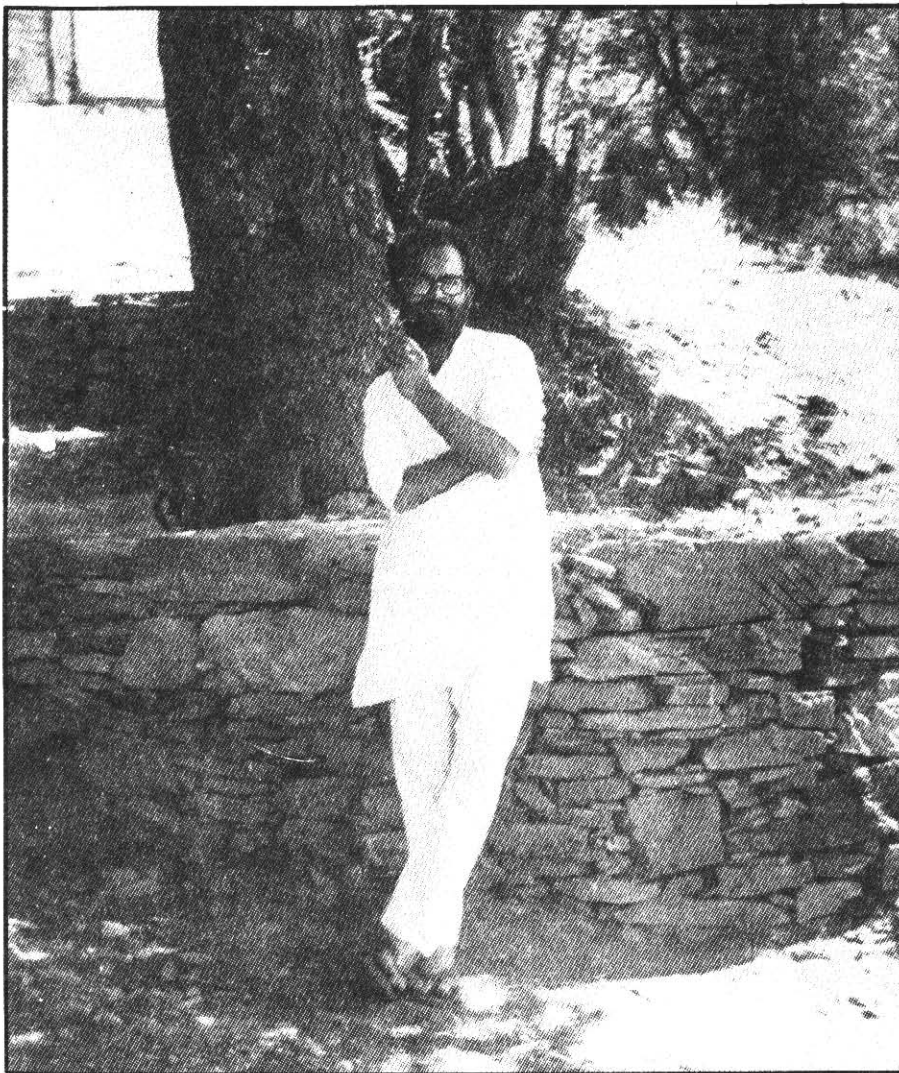


Remembering C.V. Subba Rao



**People's Union for Democratic Rights
Delhi
February 1994**

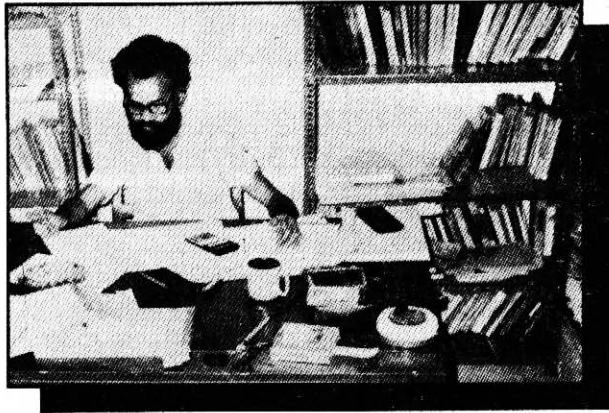
तुम्हारे साथ रहकर
अक्सर मुझे महसूस हुआ है
कि हर बात का एक मतलब होता है,
यहां तक कि घास के हिलने का भी,
हवा का खिड़की से आने का,
और धूप का दीवार पर
चढ़कर चले जाने का।

तुम्हारे साथ रहकर
अक्सर मुझे लगा है
कि हम असमर्थताओं से नहीं
सम्भावनाओं से घिरे हैं,
हर दीवार में द्वार बन सकता है
और हर द्वार से पूरा का पूरा
पहाड़ गुज़र सकता है।

शक्ति अगर सीमित है
तो हर चीज़ अशक्त भी है,
भुजाएँ अगर छोटी हैं,
तो सागर भी सिमटा हुआ है
सामर्थ्य केवल इच्छा का दूसरा नाम है,
जीवन और मृत्यु के बीच जो भूमि है
वह नियति की नहीं मेरी है।

सर्वेश्वरदयाल सक्सेना

**People's Union for Democratic Rights gratefully
acknowledges the sympathy and support of peoples
organisations, friends and associates in our time of loss.**



C.V. Subbarao died of cardiac arrest on 17 January 1994

Oh ev'ry foe that ever I faced,
The cause was there before we came.
An ev'ry cause that ever I fought,
I fought it full without regret or shame.

.....

And though the line is cut,
It ain't quite the end

.....

I'll bid farewell and be down the line.

Restless Farewell Bob Dylan

The past leads us
Only when we force it to
Otherwise, it shuts us
In its asylum with no gates.
We make history
Or it makes us.

Marge Piercy

For the generation that was born amid the euphoria of a new India, as envisaged in the Nehruvian vision, the dilemmas and distortions of this vision and its development strategy were becoming all too apparent by the mid sixties. This legacy - that of the temples of modern India — the large dams and heavy industries, could no longer hide the pressing urgency of the food crises, the swelling ranks of jobless youth. At least, some of this first generation of youth in post colonial India, repudiated this inheritance, and the path of development it entailed. It is in this context, that peasant and tribal movements under Marxist-Leninist leadership, arose in parts of the country. The 'spring thunder' of 1967 and Naxalbari came to signify for some of these youth, not just a political departure but also an alternative vision and a metaphor for their discontent.

C. ~~Subba~~ Venkata Subba Rao was born in Rajahmundry, East Godavari district, a growing commercial centre of the region, on 17 November 1953. The neighbouring district of Srikakulam witnessed, in the late sixties, an armed uprising of tribals. Their struggles to resist landlord oppression, the system of forced labour (vetti) and to assert their right to land and a life of dignity, spread to the surrounding parts of the forests of Godavari Valley and Telengana. The battles of these tribals, the songs and ballads of Subbarao Panigrahi and others, set off sea changes in the realm of culture. Integral to this tribal revolt was a move to restore culture to the people. Dimensions of culture that had largely been the preserve of an exclusive elite were infused with the spirit of the times. Even in the face of the most brutal repression, culture became a space where the revolutionary movement in Andhra Pradesh remained the most resilient. The *digambara* poets, Cherabanda Raju, Jwalamukhi and others, launched an attack on the ossified and debased cultural ethos pervading Telugu literature. It was in these turbulent days that a radical literary group of students in Vishakhapatnam - *Vishakha Vidyarthulu* - challenged the poets gathered at a literary convention, by questioning the relevance of their literature. This encounter was in a way a catalyst to the formation of *Virasam* (Revolutionary Writers Association) in 1970, and the crystallisation of the currents of revolutionary literature.

Subba Rao who had spent much of his childhood in his grandfather's house in Rajahmundry, imbibing these literary radical currents, was a member of the *Vishakha* students and a part of this encounter. He was active for many years in *Virasam* and later became a member of *Sahitti Mitralu* a circle of radical literary friends that brought out a journal *Srijana*.

It was Subba Rao's passion for literature more than anything else that first drew him towards revolutionary politics. At the age of 13 he wrote his first poem dedicated to Gurujada Apparao, a nineteenth century litterateur, whose pathbreaking work *Kanyasulkam* is a milestone in Telugu literature. The poem was read out at a Vishal Andhra meeting where Sri Sri was the chief guest. His fascination for this litterateur persisted to the end. In fact his last public presentation on 14 January 1994, at a seminar on the contemporaries of Fakirmohan Senapathy, organised by Sahitya

Akademi, was also focussed on Gurujada Apparao. Subba Rao has written short stories, poems, essays in literary criticism, a play (*Thodimilleni Povullu*), and edited an anthology of writings by social scientists on literature (*Vibhata Sandhyalu*).

The Srikakulam struggle sparked off a movement among students in the early seventies. Various student organisations were formed. Subba Rao, after completing his schooling from municipal and government schools, took up Physics as a college student in Vishakhapatnam. His first political involvement was with the Jai Andhra movement, ~~which raised the demand for linguistic reorganisation of states~~. He was later drawn to the revolutionary students movement. He became the first Vice President of the Radical Students Union in 1974, and contested the presidential elections for the college union.

If the early seventies were years of protest they were also years of brutal repression. The brunt of this repression was largely borne by Marxist-Leninist movements. Civil Rights organisations in this period arose as a specific regional response to the large scale arrests under Preventive Detention Act, imprisonment, torture and killings through which these movements were sought to be suppressed. Thus Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) was formed in West Bengal and Andhra Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) in A.P.

With the declaration of Emergency on 26 June 1975, after the Navnirman and Vahini mass movements in Gujarat and Bihar, a reign of terror was let loose. Thousands were arrested under the draconian MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act). Student activists in Andhra too were picked up in large numbers. After spending a few months underground, Subba Rao returned to Vishakhapatnam and was arrested on 25 October 1975. He fought his own case, the beginnings perhaps of his lifetime engagement with law and juridical systems. He completed his M.A. in Economics, in jail, with a first class first. It is a tribute to the values of academic freedom even in those scoundrel years, that the professor who took Subba Rao's viva-voce, protested when faced with a handcuffed youth weighed down by chains. He refused to conduct the interview until the fetters were removed. Subba Rao was finally released on 28 March 1977, after the Janata regime took charge at the centre.

Till 1975, the brunt of state repression had been targeted mainly against communist movements. But during the Emergency repression was imposed on all shades and forms of opposition. This extraordinary situation called forth extraordinary initiatives. Opposition groups from different political streams came together in a campaign for the repeal of Emergency and release of political prisoners. The ignominious 42nd amendment catalysed the formation in October 1976, of a broad civil rights organisation under the leadership of Shri Jai Prakash Narayan. It is to this organisation, People's Union for Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights (PUCL & DR) that both the present People's Union for Civil Liberties (a national body formed in 1980) and the People's Union for Democratic Rights trace their roots.

Subba Rao came to Delhi a few months after his release. The Delhi unit of PUCL & DR had organised the Convention for the Release of Political Prisoners, in August 1977. Subba Rao contributed a paper on student repression in Andhra Pradesh, and

helped in bringing together a slim poetry collection (*Dissenting Voices - Raktbeej*), voices of protest in the Emergency. He had been involved in some of the activities of APCLC in Vishakhapatnam in his student days. But it was only now, as an activist of the Delhi PUCL & DR, that he became part of the emerging civil rights movement. Later when the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) was formed in March 1981, he devoted his energies to the visible and invisible work of the organisation.

Even though Subba Rao's arena of political activity shifted to Delhi his association with Andhra Pradesh — *Virasam, Srijana*, APCLC continued. And increased in a different way. He attempted to transmit to activists in Andhra, his vital concern for movements in other parts of the country. Thus Subba Rao wrote on nationality movements in the North east (*Raagulukune Raakshasuboggu*) in Telugu. But equally he imparted to many in Delhi and elsewhere, an active concern for the Andhra people's movement and the repression it faced. His roots in Andhra remained, but his concern for the lives and struggles of ordinary people was never confined to a specific region or movement. So too with his literary interests which crossed linguistic, political and geographical boundaries.

The post Emergency period saw on the one hand the resurgence of Marxist Leninist movements particularly in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and the Central Forest region and on the other the emergence of popular movements, independent of party organisations, like the trade union movement in Chhatisgarh, M.P. Both streams of popular movements envisaged an alternative paradigm of development, but the latter sought to achieve this, within the threshold of constitutionally guaranteed rights. On 3 June 1977, just after the emergency was lifted, police opened fire on the workers of the Chhatisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh, at Dalli Rajhara. Twelve persons were killed. A year later in October 1978, Jagtial and Sircilla talukas in Karimnagar where Marxist Leninist organisations were waging peasant struggles, were declared 'disturbed areas'. 150 police camps were set up. The repressive machinery of the state, thus, was brought to bear on both kinds of struggles irrespective of whether the methods adopted were legal or illegal.

At the heart of both the movements was the struggle to ensure a life of dignity to those who bore the cost of a distorted development process. A process which left large sections out of its ambit, continually eroded the basis of their survival, and pushed them to the brink of subsistence. In doing so these movements were merely asserting the rights envisaged in the directive principles of the Constitution. While these are not enforceable in any court, they are meant to serve as interpretative guidelines to be progressively realised. But in a society riven by inequities - social, economic and cultural, any assertion of these rights impinges on the interests of those enjoying power over society at large and over the agencies of state. Any struggle to realise these rights is met, paradoxically, by an infringement of even those rights which are otherwise justiciable - the Fundamental Rights.

This paradox that confronts any struggle for the rights of people by denying them their civil liberties and transforms a political conflict into a law and order problem, is starkly illustrated by the fate of the abandoned miners of Santhal

Parganas. Following coal nationalisation some mines were closed and the tribals working there were faced with loss of livelihood. In June 1979, they occupied six acres of forest land near central Saharjori Mines of Eastern Coalfields. For two years they organised and ran the mines in a manner that embodied the spirit of the planning ideals of cooperative enterprise and community action. On 25 November 1981, without any warning police opened fire on the workers and bulldozers destroyed the mines. The miners were arrested.

This paradox also provided the space where organisations like PUDR came to operate - whether it was struggles for land in Bihar, Rajasthan or Madhya Pradesh, resistance to displacement in Baliapal or Narmada, workers struggles in Bhilai or Dalla, or the more anonymous struggles of unorganised contract workers. The genesis of the Civil Rights movement out of the social movements of the time, explains why investigations of organisations like PUDR came to address not just the symptoms of social tensions — police firings, arrests, encounter killings — but also their roots in society, polity, and economy. The civil rights movement came of age after the Emergency. It inherited the combined legacy of civil rights groups which arose as an offshoot of the seventies Marxist Leninist movement, and of the civil rights organisation launched during the Emergency. Several trends emerged. Over the past fifteen years these trends have contributed to both the widening of the ambit of civil rights, and to developing organisational forms and methods. PUDR too, has been part of these efforts.

Except for a two year stint in Hyderabad, Subba Rao had been tirelessly involved in the activities, functioning and development of PUDR, its attempts to face new challenges and to make professionals and intellectuals more conscious about people's struggles. He pushed his lean body to its limits, prodding activists to develop their potential, building a strong basis for democratic functioning in warm human bonds within PUDR. Fraternal relations too were grounded in warm personal ties with civil rights groups like AFDR (Punjab), CPDR (Maharashtra), APCLC, APDR and PUCL and with individuals and activists in different people's organisations. The sharp imprint of Subba Rao's vision and personality shaped PUDR through more than 500 activist meetings. To acknowledge his role, however, is impossible, for any such acknowledgement would negate what he stood for and tried to build.

The arena of organisations like PUDR is defined no doubt within the institutional safeguards provided in our constitutional framework. But the task undertaken was not simply to force these institutions to work. These safeguards are but the reflections of the struggles and aspirations of the people. PUDR has tried to engage with both the enforcement and extension of the scope of constitutionally guaranteed rights. Often these rights are obscured by debates whose terms are set by those who dominate society. In such debates the dice are inevitably loaded. And the debates can acquire a menacing quality. This was brought home most painfully after Operation Bluestar and the 1984 carnage. And more recently as the country tried to come to terms with the bloody consequences of the controversy around the Mandal Commission Report and reservations for backward castes, or the Ramjanambhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. Recognition of the need to interrogate the dominant debates, in

media, academia and at a popular level, to unearth hidden agendas, has informed efforts in PUDR. We have not always succeeded, but we are still trying.

With the emergence, in the eighties, of religious and ethnic nationality movements, and the dominance of issues of the integrity and unity of the nation, repression came to acquire ominous proportions. Crime and criminals have come to dominate the arena of politics. The first casualty necessarily is the rule of law. This crisis helped engender the growth of fundamentalist, criminal, and sectarian forces, that are eroding the basis of democracy and democratic values within civil society. In the face of this crisis the state is taking increasing recourse to repressive legislation and greater authoritarianism. The problem posed for a democratic rights organisation is a vexed one.

Institutions of democracy depend on the will, values and aspirations of the people. So PUDR has tried to face the issues of violence on people, unleashed by forces other than the state. In doing so, PUDR had to grapple with the complex interactions between state and civil society, material life and culture, popular perceptions and the emerging reality, through which oppressive mechanisms operate. For in these interactions lie the spaces for change and the sites of resistance. The range of issues taken up now includes apart from the repression faced by tribal, peasant and worker struggles, impact on life and livelihood of environmental degradation and displacement, oppressions based on class, caste, ethnic and religious community and gender. The heightened consciousness about patriarchy raised by the growth of both an autonomous women's movement and the participation in large numbers of women in popular struggles, filtered into the democratic rights movement. Thus the many faceted implications of flexible patriarchal mechanisms began to inform civil rights work be it an investigation into army atrocities in the North-East, communal riots in Bhopal, or a custodial rape in Delhi.

Most of Subba Rao's intellectual activity was addressed to comprehending emerging realities and their changing contexts. Apart from being an activist he was also a teacher and a social scientist. He worked on topics as diverse as development in Maoist China (M. Phil., Dept. of Japanese and Chinese Studies, Delhi University) political economy of Hyderabad (ICSSR project), nationality movements in North East, and feminist theory. Among other things he helped towards bringing the works of Alexandra Kollantai to Telugu readers. Ruthless rigour and discipline led him to issues of method, methodology, and their philosophic foundations. But his intellectual pursuits were always directed towards enriching movements. Thus a cherished project - a textbook on political economy (*Raajkiya Arthikashastram*) - was written for activists. In an age of careerism and projecting the individual, he despised intellectual attainment for personal gain. His social and political commitment impelled him to make severe demands on himself. He probed into the grey areas of understanding society, and shared his insights into state and society, life and struggle, with as many people as possible.

Which perhaps is why he made such a good teacher. He taught undergraduate students at SGTB Khalsa College (Evening), Delhi University. Apart from that he

was associated with schools like Vikas Bharati in Hyderabad, and Vikasa Vidyavam in Vijaywada, taught courses in Methodology and Development theory at Centre for Economic and Social Sciences, guided informally many a research work. For fellow activists too, he was both a spur and a guide to intellectual activity. But all whom he came in contact with, he never failed to infuse some of his passionate political and social concerns. All this with ironical humour towards self and others, love for masala Bombay films, old favourite songs, evenings of poetry reading and fun-loving camaraderie.

In what he often called his hyphenated existence as an intellectual-activist, as one committed to people's struggles while defining his political space on its fringes, Subba Rao's life was an exploration of these restless frontiers. The dialogue with Marx and Mao, Sartre and Marquez, made him resist received wisdom and dogma. His creative energies were devoted to tracing uncharted paths in the border country that lies between knowledge and action, interpreting the world and changing it. In a sense his life was also an attempt to obliterate the hyphen.

Needless to say Subba Rao was not always the most comfortable person to be with, and had provoked a fair share of controversy. All of which he fought with wit and vigour. But not without bearing the cost. A cost which is borne by all those who take a position in the historical muddle of our times.

In the nineties a new sanitised, depoliticised notion of human rights, uprooted from its historical and social moorings, has been gaining currency. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the U.N. Declaration of Rights, the International Covenants of Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant of Social, Cultural and Economic Rights, have set the broad parameters of democratic rights movements internationally. The developed nations of the West promoted greater emphasis on civil and political rights, and the Socialist States advocated priority to social, cultural and economic rights. Both, with their different ideological premises, enriched and informed the struggles to achieve democratic rights. The current Human Rights notion, however, attempts to deny this history. By imposing a 'non-ideological', eclectic definition of human rights, it seeks to wipe out the rich heritage of struggles that sought to give meaning to peoples rights. The collapse of the Soviet Union facilitated a new human rights agenda to be instituted internationally. This process is fraught with peril. Not only because of dubious attempts to link questions of financial aid and trade relations to human rights performance, but also because such a process denies the legitimacy of movements within the country and imposes its own agendas from above. The hype of human rights and global networks has given rise to careerist trends which pose an emerging threat to the hard won credibility of the civil rights movement in our country and attempts to erase its history. But even in these times, the resources of hope in the life and living of ordinary people, the belief and commitment to democratic values, continue to inspire.

On the occasion of Subba Rao's death, we in PUDR would like to affirm this history and remember him by celebrating life, and the struggles that brought us together.

Angina Pectoris

If half my heart is here, doctor
the other half is in China
with the army flowing
toward the Yellow River.
And every morning, doctor,
every morning at sunrise my heart
is shot in Greece.
And every night, doctor,
when prisoners are asleep and the infirmary is deserted,
my heart stops at a rundown old house in Istanbul.
And then after ten years
all I have to offer my poor people
is this apple in my hand, doctor,
one red apple:
my heart.
And that, doctor, that is the reason
for this angina pectoris -
not nicotine, prison or arteriosclerosis.
I look at the night through the bars,
and despite the weight on my chest
my heart still beats with the most distant stars.

Nazim Hikmet

हमें लड़ना नहीं
किसी प्रतीक के लिए
किसी नाम के लिए
किसी बड़े प्रोग्राम के लिए
हमें लड़नी है एक छोटी सी लड़ाई
छोटे लोगों के लिए
छोटी बातों के लिए

कुमार विकल

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