

IN MEMORY OF MR. GOBINDA MUKHOTY

He was arguing in court to protect the lives of people living close to an army firing range in Hoshangabad. He was preparing arguments in another case to protect people's right to public interest litigation, a right he was instrumental in giving meaning to. He was still expectantly waiting for a case challenging the constitutional validity of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act to be heard by court, a case which he had filed as President of PUDR in 1982. All this while a nagging pain in the back was bothering him. And this had been so for over four years. In May this year it was discovered that this was no ordinary backache. It turned out to be a cancer. In a brief four months the cancer took its toll. After a week in coma, he died on 19 September 1995.

Thus ended a life which began in Faridpur district of undivided Bengal in 1927. Gobinda Mukhoty completed graduation from Presidency College, Calcutta in 1948. In 1957 he went to UK to study law. After completing his bar-at-law in 1964 he returned to India and started teaching at St. Xavier's College, Calcutta. He started practice as a lawyer at the Supreme Court in 1971 and was designated senior advocate in 1984.

In 1976, during the Emergency he was actively associated with the newly formed People's Union for Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights. The next year he was elected President of the Delhi Unit. He was founder member of PUDR and its President till 1990. From then on he had been Advisor to the organisation.

Mr. Mukhoty's legal acumen and professional expertise were lent time and again to the cause of the civil rights movement. In fact it was his clear understanding of the role of law in people's struggles that enabled him to create a space whereby those who had no access to the courts of law could assert basic constitutional rights. He played a pivotal role in establishing public interest

litigation as an instrument on behalf of struggling people. Quietly and surely he consolidated these gains over the past 14 years. Taking up innumerable such cases, arguing them passionately, and personally hearing the cost of many of them. For PUDR alone he handled over 40 cases covering a wide range of issues, large and small. Whether it was to challenge the validity of the Disturbed Areas Act in Andhra Pradesh, to demand justice for a custody death victim in Delhi, to fight for the right to information of activists in Bhopal, or for freedom of bonded labourers in Haryana, Mr. Mukhoty gave of his energy and time without a thought to the cost to himself. Even as he made his brilliant legal mind available to those most in need of it, he carried the struggles and dreams of the civil rights movement into his everyday work, achieving a cohesion that in these cynical times has become near impossible.

We mourn, for what is gone is part of the best in our bedevilled country. Best, because he gave to the struggles of the people his intellectual and professional skills unstintingly.

We remember him, for he was an active maker of the civil rights movement for the past two decades. Through efforts such as his, the movement though small, has today become a distinctive presence.

His ever welcoming smile, his deep concern for the organisation and professional morality that he represented will remain a cherished memory for his "boys and girls" in PUDR.

People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR)

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