

Requiem for one of a rare breed

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The death of Sudesh Vaid was a non-event even for many people who regard themselves as knowledgeable about human rights affairs. Yet she is one of those who shaped the contours of the civil rights movement as we know it in this country today.

We live these days in a climate where people are not content to quietly influence the course of history. It is more important to be loud as an individual than to be effective as a group, a collective, an idea. Some times, people seem to even value the personal noise they make over the welfare of their proclaimed cause. Sudesh was markedly different. The movement and the organization were always more important, and so long as they progressed it did not matter that one did not 'make one's mark' as an individual.

That is of course an old virtue among communists. Along with what is bad about the communists, this virtue of self-denial too has been thrown over board by the self-proclaimed new movements. Assertive self-aggrandisement is the mark of movements these days. There are many seemingly reasonable excuses for the self-indulgence. Criticism of it can even be given quite a few bad names. Yet the excuses are but excuses.

One that comes immediately to mind is the fact that with the communists this self-denial never touched the top leadership, around whom in fact a personality cult frequently developed. Self-denial in practice often meant suppression of individual identities, denial of individual nuances of thought, and destruction of individual talents at the lower level of the organisation, in the name of a dominant identity called 'the Party', which seemingly abstract entity was but the name by which the handful of leaders imposed their will and their views on all. A characteristically patriarchal state of affairs, in other words. And a state of affairs that offends the human rights spirit.

Yet, people like Sudesh Vaid who possess strong individualities have shown that this is not an inevitable consequence of the idea that the movement and the organization are bigger than the individual. That it is possible to be part of a larger whole and find contentment in its weal, and yet be a distinct individual, a free individual. If it turned out otherwise within the communist movement, the fault lies not with this idea but with the obsession with power that is a characteristic of the communist project.

Sudesh Vaid taught English literature at I.P.College, Delhi University. She was a founder-member of the Peoples Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) a small but influential civil rights

group. She was among those instrumental in developing a view that has strongly influenced PUDR's activity, which is again uncharacteristic of today's fast crowd among what are being called 'civil society groups': that the concern of the human rights movement is with causes which are 'unpopular' not only with the establishment but also the mainstream of democratic protest. Unpopular because they are the concerns of a small or marginal or illegitimate segment of society. Or because they do not merge with any alternative macro-view of development, democracy or equity. Such concerns don't make much news, and don't make their proponents cult figures, but nevertheless – or perhaps for that very reason – they are the proper concerns of the human rights movement.

There is much to be said for this view, though perhaps not all of us felt very comfortable with it since it can be taken to extremes, as it some times has been, in which case it leaves out the possibility of what is marginal growing and becoming central, or what is central standing for a principle that helps the marginal. Also, some times, democratic principles need the strength of big collective assertion, and cannot be content with being small for ever.

However that may be, a culture of searching out what nobody – even the dissidents of civil society –wishes to see or cares to articulate is a culture that values the effort that bores into the wall of societal indifference and builds something tangible in the long run, well after those who have drilled inch by inch are no longer around to reap the cult. Not a very attractive proposition for the effect-maximising model of social concern that has grown around democratic activism in the last decade or so. But nevertheless a valuable point of view.

While acknowledging that generalizations can be dangerous, and that no single attitude can possess all the virtues, it can perhaps yet be safely said that the true human rights attitude is an attitude that shuns power. In traditional human rights circles one has too often been confronted with activists who love the power of revolutions, and in today's new generation one equally often comes across activists who are at home with the power-packed culture of capitalism. It is not that these categories of activists are incapable of making any contributions to the cause of rights, but the distinctive emphasis that belongs exclusively to the human rights movement would elude them and their achievements.

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