



Satya Narayan Banerji – Idealism, Realism and Change

(1920 – 2003)
A TRIBUTE

I was just twenty and sitting opposite me at dinner at a conference was this effusive Trade Union Leader from Calcutta. He shared his experiences and his ideas fascinated me. He was able to both enjoy his meal and speak his mind. Those sitting at the adjoining tables also heard very clearly his passionate convictions. He had the uncanny gift of

leaving a vivid impression on people he met by his mannerisms, turn of phrase and informality. Since then, I have always been interested in his activities and outreach.

Satya Narayan Banerji was born in Allahabad, his maternal hometown, an important city in Uttar Pradesh in 1920. His maternal grandfather was working with the Railways under the British and held a senior position in Allahabad. He was known for his moral uprightness. His paternal grandfather was a lawyer in Calcutta while his father was involved in various small business activities. His mother following her early marriage was childless for several years. An aside that she shared with the family provides an interesting glimpse.

One day a Muslim Fakir visited the house. His advice was sought. He took out of his bag what looked like some roots and told his mother to consume it. He then indicated that she will conceive a baby boy in due course and that he should be named Satya Narayan. Shortly after this he was conceived. 'Satya Peer' is a revered Muslim saint of W. Bengal while 'Narayan' is another name for the Hindu deity 'Vishnu'. For the delivery of her child his mother went to Allahabad and returned with him within a month to Calcutta.

He had a colourful childhood and completed his school education. As he shared with me he only concentrated on the subjects that interested him. Once he got so carried away with his essay 'The story of a River' that he paid little attention to other aspects of the question paper. He, however, got the highest marks for his essay. His mother schooled him in 'slokas' and mythological stories. These came in handy in his latter years. Never particularly religious he respected culture and tradition. In these he found his rootedness. His deepest expressions were in Bengali. He would then translate these into English.

Caught between the orthodoxy of his deeply religious Vaishnavite mother, his personal difficulties with his father and the realities around him in the mid thirties, he left home aged fifteen and adopted a bohemian lifestyle. He threw away his 'brahmin' thread and searched for greater meaning in life. He cycled through what was then East Bengal with very little money on him. His adventurous spirit saw him being looked after by very ordinary people. This gave him a taste of ground reality and evoked a deep sense of social consciousness.

Back in Calcutta he got involved with the struggle for India's Independence and the Trade Union Movement. He was lathi charged and carries scars from that time. At the age of seventeen he was instrumental together with Rajani Mukherjee in founding the first Post & Telegraph Union in Calcutta. He soon became fascinated with Marxism and got involved with the workings of the Communist Party. However, the lifestyle and workings of the Party began thereafter to disillusion him.

He then secured a job with the Colonial Government knowing very well that he could lose the job should they come to know about his Police record covering anti-government activities. As feared, within six months he lost this job. Thereafter, in 1946 through the assistance of friends he applied and secured a job with Martin Light Railways.

He got married in 1947 and his wife Uma was a tower of strength. She stood by him through difficult economic circumstances and through her perseverance and hard work built a wonderful home for him something he cherished deeply in the latter part of his life. His deepest love was for Shantu, his grand-daughter who grew up with him. He was most sensitive to her love, care and respect for she more than anyone witnessed his personal struggles during the latter part of his life. Manoj whom she married was nurtured by his singular care, affection and attention through Ankur's youth camps, seminars and training programmes that they organized.

His sense of idealism attracted him to new realities. In the mid forties he heard about 'Radical Humanism'. He remembers with much pride the first meeting of friends associated with Radical Humanism and M N Roy. This was held at his home in Kalighat, Calcutta. He extended his hand and assisted fellow struggling comrades all of whom were attracted by Roy's ideas having some even staying with him.

Amongst them was Gour Kishore Gosh, noted journalist and Magsasay Award winner who lived for several months in the ground floor room of his home. Another of his friends was Salehuddin Ahmad then a student at Presidency College who later became Professor of History at Dacca University. Much to the consternation of his orthodox mother he extended protection in his home to muslim friends who fled during the Bangladesh war. A sense of heritage, history and struggle was thus part of his continuing romance with his house and the city of Calcutta.

As V.M Tarkunde renowned Indian jurist and fighter for Civil Liberties describes, "Radical Humanism is not a mere academic exercise. It is intended to be a philosophy in action, a philosophy to be practiced in daily life. It is a post-Marxian philosophy". He got actively involved with M.N.Roy's programmes participating in their regular education classes and discussions.

Much of his understanding about philosophy, economics and the struggle he attributes to these opportunities. He was fascinated by the Radical Democratic Party that Roy founded but was disillusioned when the party was dissolved in 1948. Roy advocated the view that party politics was not congenial to the stabilization and functioning of a genuine democracy. Nevertheless, the Radical Humanist movement continued and he retained his links with several close friends.

Then in 1953 he recounts how he met the ideas of Moral Re-Armament (MRA) which was to have an abiding influence on his life till the very end. "One afternoon I was working in my

office. Two Europeans walked in and enquired about me. One of my colleagues pointed me out to them. They introduced themselves as persons from MRA. I had not heard of MRA before. One of these men was a veteran Communist miner from the Ruhr valley in Germany while the other Mr Geoffrey Daukes, the son of a British Diplomat”

“They invited me to come to one of their plays, “The Forgotton Factor”, which was being put up in one of our famous Calcutta theatres. The play gripped me. I saw myself in one of the tough characters on stage. It was the part of the labour leader. The realities of the drama and the passion in the hearts of the men on stage to put right what was wrong in the world impressed me. Above all I was moved by the rock bottom honesty and sincerity of the men I talked to that night after the show”

“This was my first contact with MRA. Ever since that evening these men have been my firm friends. They always thought of and remembered me and took an interest in my work and plans. I experienced a new type of relationship between myself and these men. It was free from any selfish motive, because it was based on absolute moral standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love”

“To an ordinary man like me, MRA squarely threw the challenge to fight to put an end to every bit of wrong in my own life and in the life of the country. It changed me as it was a more revolutionary concept than I had known before. I decided to be honest with my union colleagues, and expressed my sincere apology for using one section of my union members against the other to keep the balance of power in my favour. I apologized to them for using a certain amount of union funds for my personal benefit as this was not one hundred percent honest.”

“It was not easy in the beginning to do so because I was afraid of loosing the post of Secretary of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, the All-India Socialist Trade Union body. He maintained close friendships with his Trade Union colleagues the late Shibnath Banerjee and Bimal Banerjee. But the challenge from MRA and the idea that “you cannot build a greed-free, hate free, fear free society by men who do not accept the absolute moral standards in their own lives”, gave me the strength and courage to stand up as a man and say sorry to those whom I had wronged and clear up the mess in my own life”.

“My family, who I treated callously in the past and did not take full responsibility for, got interested because they noticed the change in me. My wife, to whom I was a tyrant in the past, now became a co-partner. The more I look at my own life and think of the thousands of ordinary men and women like us in India who are eagerly awaiting for an answer to disunity, hatred, jealousy, corruption and callousness, the more I feel the urge to commit myself to the cause of a strong, clean and united India.”

His change in attitude was also recognized by Shri C.S. Mehta then General Manager of Martin Light Railways. He encouraged and supported Banerji's new found vision and financially supported his visit to Caux, Switzerland in 1953. There he again met Dr Frank Buchman the initiator of MRA. He also visited Europe and the United Kingdom where he met with Trade Union officials and labour leaders.

His next visit was in 1969 where he reminded European brothers of what some of the Communist Chinese leader's then said, “The next phase of the class struggle will not be

between the 'have' and the 'have not' classes within a country, but between the 'have' and 'have not' nations. Perhaps, Cancun and the recently failed Trade talks underline this reality.

He continued with his Trade Union activities and was the General Secretary of the Light Railways Staff Association of West Bengal and also President of the Hindustan Drivers' Union of West Bengal. He has been through many violent struggles. He helped to organize strikes and occasions that turned into violent demonstrations, a scene so much associated with West Bengal. He was even at the receiving end being 'ghearaed' by a mob of 500 during the course of his work in the railways. This was led by militant students and Naxalite elements from the district.

When it was evident that the Martin Burn Light Railways was going to be closed down in early 1971, the prospect of unemployment loomed. This made him very bitter. He had worked there for twenty five years. It was a time of political and economic anarchy. Hundreds of industries closed down and thousands like him faced unemployment. Though the company then offered him a position in another division he declined and decided to share his lot with the retrenched workers.

Together with a group of them he decided to take up their cause. With pooled meager resources they prepared for a protracted struggle meeting political leaders, union leaders, and the then Railway Minister G.L. Nanda and Members of the Railway Board. "Not a word of hate, not a cry of anger but compassion and co-operation", became their motto.

After several meetings over months all three thousand retrenched employees of the closed light railways were absorbed by Indian Railways. It was a challenge for the authorities to give employment to all these men from different categories. This led to several meetings in Delhi beginning in 1972. "Railway carriages became my home during this period of two years. Free Railway passes enabled us to undertake these journeys and negotiations. Eventually by the end of 1972 all secured employment". He was the last to be given a posting in New Delhi. This engagement remains the 'crowning experience' of his life as an active Trade Unionist. After much reflection he turned down this posting to work full time with the programme of Moral Re-Armament in India.

He continued to articulate his vision for Trade Unions, "Originally trade unions were a defensive movement, developed in response to capitalist excesses. Now that labour has made so many advances and acquired such powers in society, we ought to go on the offensive. Trade Unions should be a spur to management and government to see that industry meets the needs of millions the world over. A new teamwork will follow if we challenged management to join us in the higher fight – that of putting the welfare of mankind before pay and profits".

His friendships extended across the spectrum of West Bengal society. During the visit of the MRA musical "Song of Asia" to Calcutta in 1973 he met Mother Theresa as he walked across a square in Calcutta. He arranged for the group to meet her and many in the cast including me had this rare privilege. On several occasions he took visitors to both meet her and the homes she was running in Calcutta.

Other close friends include Dr P.C. Chunder, noted Advocate & Solicitor who later was India's Education Minister in the late seventies. The Mantosh family who loved him and his vision for Paul Mantosh who later was a Member of the Rajya Sabha. He held in high esteem Yoginiben Patel and her family and Jyotiben and her late husband Mr Bhaleria who gave

unfailing support and worked with him in all that he did with MRA in Calcutta. Others include Norman and Noreen Elijah the Indian-Jewish family in whose home our multi-faith engagement ceremony was held in June, 1982. He was very keen for me to meet Shri Shitangsu Chatterjee whom he regarded as amongst his closest friend and an intellectual whose views and ideas he regarded with much respect.

He had great friends in the Catholic Church. Father Ferlon from France and Father Pillette from Belgium. They both spent decades in W. Bengal and were fluent in the Bengali language. He assisted Father Pillette with his St. Xavier's College Leadership Training and Service Programmes (LTS). Some of these students then attended the MRA training programmes often held at Dhyana Ashram in Jokha, Calcutta. He often turned to Father Pillette for both advice and counsel on both personal and social issues. Tia and I remember Father Pillette's special care and thought for us upon our engagement.

Together with his grand-daughter Shantu he founded 'Ankur' which mainly comprised young people who had attended the MRA training programmes. They assisted him with music and sharing as they did programmes in Eastern India. This group gave him much satisfaction as they reached out to men in Industry, to families and to other young people. He also raised money and built a community centre that provided educational and health support to the poorest people in the 'basti' (slum) nearest to his home.

Even after his retirement he kept his personal links with Shri C.S. Mehta his former boss. He also became close to his sons. He made several visits to Udaipur to meet Shri C.S. Mehta and attended the weddings of his sons. Often he took this opportunity also to do a pilgrimage to Ajmer where he paid respects at the tomb of Mu 'in ad-Din Chishti (1142-1236) the great Sufi spiritual leader of the most renowned Sufi order to originate in India. This is regarded as one of the greatest shrines in the sub-continent. He has also taken family members to this shrine. He confided to me that this place holds a very special meaning for him.

Upon retirement he became very involved and helped with the Industrial Training Programmes that were launched from the International MRA Centre in Panchgani, Western India. These programmes, "Creative Leadership for Industry and National Development", sought to develop a motivation born of conscience and a leadership of integrity for both employees and management. They aimed to go beyond industrial relations techniques to the fundamentals of changing the attitudes and motivation of people whose prejudices are often industry's costliest overhead.

He traveled frequently several times a year to participate in these programmes. On my return to India in 1978, I met him again during these programmes. He later invited me to Eastern India. I remember the journey and the meetings we had in Jamshedpur, Durgapur and Calcutta. He had done extensive work in this region and the coal belt. I returned again later to participate in an Industrial Conference in Durgapur. He will be fondly remembered by many ordinary families in all these cities.

He was a passionate man and his convictions were fashioned by personal experience and a deeply reasoned mind that believed that man is moral to the extent he is rational. Yet, at times, he was frustrated by his own shortcomings. The disciplines of silence, reflection and personal change that he learnt through MRA provided his reasoned mind with deeper insights. An awakened conscience he realized was critical for a rational mind. He cared little for his personal comforts and was careless about his health and safety. As a result of participating in

a campaign during a hot summer he lost sight in his left eye due to carelessness on his part. This was to frustrate him, an avid reader.

From a mentor and leader our relationship changed when the thought of becoming his son in law emerged. In December 1982 I married his daughter Indira (Tia). Our friendship flowered as it preceded the marriage. Nevertheless, we became closer and confided in one another. As the only son of his parents and having two daughters he was conscious of his small family unit. He humbly acknowledges his wife's singular contributions in creating a home and inspiring the family and often reminisced about his deep regrets in this area. The passing away of his wife Uma six years ago was another turning point in his life. His eldest daughter Papiya and son in law Sudhir Chatterjee together with his grand-daughter Ruby continued to care for him. Much of his work in Durgapur was centered in their home.

Tia and I relocated to Malaysia in 1984. He visited us in 1985 following a most meaningful trip to Australia where he thanked fellow trade unionist whose financial contributions helped him sustain himself through the very difficult early seventies. On his return to India he suffered his first and second heart attacks. He recovered well enough and within six months was back to full involvement. Thereafter, he made 5 other visits, his latest being in June this year. He was keen to see our new home.

At the end of last year Tia and the children spent two months in Calcutta. I had three weeks with him. He was keen to divest himself of all material possessions. We abided by his wishes. This gave him a new sense of freedom. With his sharp mind and acute memory he would recite Rabindranath Tagore's poems to stress a point, share analogies and stories both from the scriptures and tradition. He greatly enjoyed sharing these which were listened to with rapt attention. Till the end he remained an avid reader and his last comments to me on that fateful Saturday afternoon were about the significant role that Sardar Vallabhai Patel played in getting the princely states to be part of India. "This, cannot be underestimated in the context of what is happening in Kashmir today", he stressed.

Since his arrival here in June this year we have had wonderful days with him. He had a six months visa and we were looking forward to extending this for another six months. He loved the home and his particular room and had meaningful times with his three grand-daughters. He also related with other friends here whom he had known from previous visits. Over the last week he had individual times with all his three granddaughters and he shared with me his evaluation of each of them.

On Saturday, 13 September 2003 I returned late from office. He joined me for lunch. We had an hours talk before I left at 4.00 pm. At about 5.30 pm he went for his evening walk. On his way out Tia met him as she was returning and asked him if he wanted a lift back. He insisted on going for his walk. She came back home and prepared Tea for him.

He returned home and lounged on the settee at the front verandah of the house and called out for her. He was sweating and had breathing difficulties. My daughter immediately telephoned me. I was at a clinic. They wanted an ambulance. I then arranged for the doctor to go immediately to the house. I followed thereafter. Meanwhile, he asked for his medicines which he took. He then asked for some water. Unfortunately, by the time the doctor arrived he had breathed his last breadth cradled in the arms of daughter. The doctor then confirmed our worst fears to me. He died after drinking water given by his daughter, three grand-daughters

and cared for also by Fifi, from Indonesia, who helps at home. He was just under 84 years of age.

To us this was a shock. We contacted the family in Calcutta as we had to decide whether it was appropriate to send his body home or to do the needful here in Malaysia. As a foreigner here we also had to consider other rules and regulations. As we decided this in consultation with Tia's sister and husband together with Manoj and Shantu we had to move ahead with formalities. Their shock and concern was felt and it was agreed that we proceed with his last rites in Malaysia. As we took stock there was much to be done to honour him, his life and contribution. Siti Horiyah from Indonesia and her husband Sabar came with their children immediately upon hearing the news.

My family assisted greatly through all the formalities. My mother, brother, sisters and their families filled in many details. They had only seen him a week before when we celebrated 'Onam' with a lunch at my mother's home. He was to be cremated by mid day on Sunday. Early that morning we informed several friends. By 11.00am Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Parsees paid their respects. Datuk Paduka Dr Hajjah Saleha Md Ali, Chairman of MRA Malaysia not only attended the last rites at home but also accompanied the body to the cremation site.

Toh Puan Uma Sambanthan, Swami Tanmayananda from the Sri Ramakrishna Sarada, Mr and Mrs Noshir Pundole and Dr and Mrs Chandra Muzaffar were amongst family, relatives and friends who paid their last respects. Apsara and Ram Gopal for whom he had deep affection were with us through the time. Raenukadevi Basu, Roselyn Lim, Patrick Sta Maria and Mrs N. Mukherjee by their presence and initiatives helped us in very sensitive and meaningful ways.

The last rites were conducted in a simple, dignified and graceful manner in accordance with Malayali tradition thus according him a Banerji-Nair status before his body was taken to the crematorium at Fairy Park some 50 km away. On arrival, we were struck by the wonder of the place, its Buddhist ambiance, serenity and sense of peace. Paradoxically, throughout his life he had great reverence for Buddha and his realizations. There, after a small ceremony, his body was cremated.

The following day, Monday, at three in the afternoon following a simple prayer ceremony, Tia, the children and I collected his ashes and proceeded to the seaside town of Morib. Gopi Pillai, my brother in law and AVG Menon, a very close family friend again very sensitively assisted us through these ceremonies. There as I waded into the sea, I was conscious of the Straits of Malacca and its merging into the Bay of Bengal. His ashes were immersed into the Straits thus fulfilling with honour his final journey. We returned home with a deep sense of peace and gratitude for him, our families and for the World family of which he was a dignified member.

He often shared about his cherished friendships with so many across the World. Geoffrey Daukes was dear to him. He remembered Miles Paine and his days with him in Calcutta. He shared about his meeting with Peter Howard in Calcutta and how they proceeded to a meeting of the Chambers' of Commerce. He revered Duncan Corcoran and along with family photographs he always had a picture of Duncan. He remembered Douglas and Betty Cook, David and Margot Young, Gordon and Beryl Brown, Gordon Wise and David Hind as friends who had helped and inspired him. Stan and Aileen to whom he entrusted his daughter when

she decided to work with MRA and others like Jim and Tui Beggs for whom he had great affection. David Channer, whom he remembers capturing him on film in "Asia's Destiny". There are many more but suffice to say these were friends about whom he spoke with great affection and gratitude.

Rajmohan Gandhi who at critical moments in his life gave him valuable advice relating to his home and family and even typed important letters for him! The Mathurs and their care and love for him. Russi Lala was his soul mate and Niketu Iralu his Naga brother both of whom he would have liked me to contact personally. His old friends Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi and Dara Gandhi. He remembers the entire Bagaria clan who had a special part in his life and how OPji always called on him when in Calcutta. The Reges from Pune, the Khattris from Fiji and their years in Calcutta, the Kales, the Anands and Kiran and Neeru Gandhi and their three daughters who showered much love on him.

His friendship with Dr PC Luther and the Iyangers who had him in Hyderabad continuing the links from Calcutta. He also had many very special friends in Jamshedpur, Ukhra and Asansol. His admiration for the selfless work of Chandrasekar Banerjee in Ukhra and his deep links with his family. The many fine individuals amongst whom are Vijaylakshmi, Jyothi, Komalam, Asheesh Basu and Louis Gomes who cared for him during his many visits to Asia Plateau, the MRA Centre at Panchgani for conferences and programmes. As a Trustee of Friends of MRA, India he served its cause until age and travel made it difficult. There are many more friends of recent years whose names are not familiar to me. I shall risk mentioning these names for they came up frequently in our conversations.

Charles and Sano Ooi travelled from Penang arriving later in the day. He was looking forward to meeting them in October. Many would have come but for the constraints of time. As we grapple through the next days and weeks recognizing his absence we are comforted by those who came and gave us meaningful support and care. He was honoured and we were privileged to have your presence.

Many inquire and remember him with much affection. He asked his grand-daughter Eshana a few days ago if she will ever forget him. "Dadu", she replied, "you are unforgettable". We who were close to him and are aware of both his strengths and frailties know that he struggled till the very end on his feet and left us a good man, a refined soul who was so generous in his kindness and patient with us. "Love when liquid", he stressed, "naturally flows downward". He exemplified this by his humility. His reason was nourished by idealism, his life challenged by realism and through an awakened conscience and a change in attitude, motivation and perspective he found that balanced synthesis that gave meaning to his life.

It is only befitting to end with a quote from Rabindranath Tagore, his favourite poet. "Only a lamp that is lit can light another lamp." During moments of deep sharing he was never cosmetic about himself. His daughter, Tia, and his grand-daughter, Shantu, have lit their lamps from him and are continuing in his tradition. His other four grand-daughters and his only great grand-daughter Madhura who was much on his mind stand amidst a great legacy - to catch the light from the lamps that are already lit. These are his unheralded achievements and they best describe the measure of the man.

Papia and Sudhir, Rama and Manoj, Madhura, Ruby and Debu, Haridas and Tia, Sukanya, Eshana & Trishna.