

# HE RECOGNISED THE VALUE OF DISSENT

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Codes of Ethics and Codes of Conduct

P.S. Appu. Photo: Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy of Administration

The year was 1980. I joined a band of nervous new recruits to the Indian Administrative Service to train in the L.B.S. National Academy of Administration in Mussoorie. Our first day we were privileged to encounter a man who would in many ways define for us, not so much by his words but his actions, the highest standards of public service. His name was P.S. Appu.

Erudite and brilliant, Appu was extraordinarily understated. He spoke to us with steely conviction, but little embellishment. He was fiercely intolerant of what he found dishonest or mediocre, but was remarkably friendly and accessible. I recall days when I stormed into his open office, to brashly protest a lecture which I felt glorified police firing against democratic protest, or a senior officer who instructed us on ways to hide and deny starvation deaths, or the Academy requirements that we wear suits for formal dinners. He would smile delightedly at my youthful, immature protests, clearly enjoying and welcoming dissent. He was non-hierarchical, and had an unshakeable moral core — qualities I was to learn in later years were extremely rare in the senior civil services.

Appu introduced us to land reforms and rural development. He spoke of the paramount values of political neutrality and independence of civil servants, and the duty to offer fearless and honest advice, even if it angers one's political leaders. We had heard many legends about his administrative career in Bihar. When appointed as Chief Secretary, he wrote to the Chief Minister the many reasons why the CM should reconsider his decision. When the CM still insisted, he laid down several conditions, including that he should have a free hand in restructuring administration, making appointments, with no interference in delegated spheres. Ruthless action should be taken against corrupt and incompetent officials. He explained that "I did not lay down the above conditions because of my arrogance or any feeling that I was indispensable. I did so because I felt that the situation in Bihar was so bad that there was no hope of effecting the necessary improvement unless those conditions were fulfilled." Seven months later, when he felt that the CM had failed to stand by his commitments, he refused to continue as Chief Secretary.

## The turning point

The most important lesson that Appu taught us was one that I would repeat, to myself and my younger colleagues many times in the two decades that I spent in the civil service. It was that no one can force an officer to do what she or he believes to be wrong. If any officer tells you that you can be forced in government to act according to the dictates of your conscience, that person is lying. Of course there will be costs; but if there were no costs, everyone would do the right thing.

We did not realise how quickly Appu would teach us the truth of this counsel, once again with actions and not just words. We were deeply dismayed to return after a year's district training to find that he no longer headed the Academy. But his absence taught us more than his words ever could.

In the batch which followed ours, during the mandatory trek in the Himalayas, one male officer whipped out a loaded revolver and threatened two women trainees by pointing the weapon at their heads. He also threatened some men trainees by brandishing the same revolver. This

young man had been asked earlier to leave the National Defence Academy for indiscipline. Appu was convinced that such a person would be dangerous to retain in public office, and recommended his discharge from service. But allegedly because of his closeness to the then Home Minister, he was let off lightly, with only a reprimand. Appu put in his papers in protest. He explained his decision in a letter to Indira Gandhi, who was Prime Minister at the time: "The only conclusion the probationers will draw is that with influence in the right quarters one can commit even heinous crimes with impunity." The matter rocked Parliament, and his decision was ultimately upheld. But the country lost one of its most upright civil servants.

In his years of quiet retirement with his son in Bangalore, he remained a moral compass, right up to when he lost his last battle with cancer. When Gujarat burned in 2002, he wrote to the President of India. "Today I hang my head in shame as an Indian, a Hindu and a former member of the Indian Administrative Service. In the short span of eight weeks the evil men who rule Gujarat, shielded by their patrons in Delhi, have succeeded in besmirching beyond repair India's reputation as the classic land of tolerance and moderation .... To the eternal shame of the permanent services, the majority of IAS and IPS officers collaborated with their political masters." He recommended President's rule, advice which was once again ignored.

Thirteen years after I first met Appu, I returned to the Academy in Mussoorie, this time to join its faculty. My first lecture to every batch of young trainees would be titled: "The right and duty of a civil servant to dissent." It was my own small tribute to my great teacher and mentor.

*( Harsh Mander is a social worker and writer. A former officer of the Indian Administrative Service, he is currently a member of the National Advisory Council .)*

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