

A Remarkable Intellectual Activist

...by Mr. Sacchidananda Sinha

I came in contact with S.Venkatram in Bombay in 1950. At that time a group called the 'Militant Socialists' was in the process of formation in the Socialist Party, largely in opposition to the politics of Ashok Mehta, who was trying to take the powerful trade movement of Bombay towards a policy of compromise with the employers. At least that was the perception of young socialists who at that time took the Marxism of the Socialist Party seriously. It was not a homogeneous group. It comprised some former communists who had left the communist party disgusted with its role during the 1942 movement. There were among them some powerful trade union leaders. Some belonged to the former Bolohevik Leminiol Party, a Troiskyst organization which had merged itself with the Socialist party. Others were young socialists who thought that the Marxist ideology of the party was being diluted. It was a period of intense theoretical debate in the Social Party, and it was during this period that Ashok Mehta delivered a series of lectures before the party activists on the development of the socialist movement which, with some modifications was published in the form of his book 'Democratic Socialism.' But the debate was taking place also in small study circles. S.Venkatram played a key role in making these debates more serious. He would try to bring in latest ideas and books to enliven those debates. Extracts from the books would be read out and their ideas intensely debated. Among those read and discussed were Rosa Luxemburg, Plekhanor, Lomin, Kropotkin, Arthur Koestler, George Orwell, Lgnazio Silone, Bertrain D.Wodfe, Isaak Dentscher, Max Satchman, Trotsky and other Marxists and ex-Marxists. Even though ideologically the group comprised a mostly crowd with widely divergent views on many issues, with his persuasiveness and patience he remained friendly with everyone.

At that time he was in an engineering job with some government department. Many of us on the other hand were activists who were often down and out. He would be always at hand to offer his hospitality and help to comrades like us in need. He used to say that "in order to become a good socialist one must also become a good human being." It is a difficult precept to follow. Even so, if we had made this precept a personal goal to be approached, the socialist movement would not have come to its present sorry state.

In Bombay he had a comfortable job and as a part time trade union activist he could have carried on. But he was too deeply committed to social change to remain comfortable with his position. So, even though he had a family to support – his wife and his eldest son Suresh were there – he decided to quit his job and quit Bombay to take full time trade union work in Karnataka. So he left Bombay for Bangalore without caring for what would be in store for him there. His life in Bangalore was full of deprivations. But he bore it all with patience, and was able eventually to make an impact on the trade union and socialist movement in Karnataka.

Even though he left Bombay, we remained in touch and from our correspondence I found that in the midst of all the activists connected with labour organisation he kept on thinking and writing about the various aspects of the socialist movement. During this period, he wrote about caste, language, the peasant problem and several aspects of organisation with remarkable insight. With the publication of his unpublished writings people will get a fresh perspective on the various issues that plague us and may also trace the genesis of some of them.

He also influenced many leading socialists who came in touch with him. I feel that at least one of the main figures of the socialist movement, who has landed himself in the fascist camp, should surely have remained within the socialists orbit if S.Venkatram had been alive, as the said leader had been at one time a close associate. Venkatram's loss has been irreparable in many ways.