

# **REMEMBERING P A SEBASTIAN: THE DOYEN OF CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN INDIA**

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Our friend and comrade, P. A. Sebastian, who was the face of Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR) for decades, has passed away on July 23 morning around 10 AM. He was staying in an old aged home in Goa for the past six months, after shifting from Kerala. Due to a prolonged illness he was given medicine and breakfast through nasal pipe as scheduled. Around 10 AM when they wanted to take him for bath he just went cold. The home called the nurse and then the doctor, who declared him dead upon his arrival.

Sebastian, Sabby for his friends, was an integral part of the radical movement in Maharashtra. Despite his polio afflicted disability, he left his home in Kerala all alone after his matriculation and made Bombay his home. He was a lawyer by profession and practiced in the High Court of Bombay. In his early life he was part of the radical students' movement. Sebastian remained in the forefront of civil rights movement in Maharashtra. He was one of the founders of Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR) after the Emergency and remained its General Secretary until his health rendered him immobile. He fought many valiant battles, inside and outside the courts. He participated in numerous fact finding missions all over the country. He was elected Chairperson of the International Association of People's Lawyers and Vice President of the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners. Despite being physically challenged, he travelled all over the country and abroad.

Sebastian was one of the pioneers of the idea of people's tribunals. He had contributed immensely taking cudgel for the hapless victims of Mumbai riots in December 1992 and January 1993, in which around 900 people (275 Hindus and 575 Muslims) lost their lives. Sebastian worked tirelessly in presenting their cases before Shrikrishna Commission.

His indomitable spirit came alive in protest against the draconian laws and anti-peoples' legislations. He strongly fought against anti-people laws like AFSPA, UAPA, TADA and argued for the release of political prisoners. He referred to them as undemocratic laws. He

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was very critical about the *SalwaJudum*, which according to him was not only government funded but that the *Judum* members would go to the tribal communities, burn their houses, kill their men and rape their women. His fights ranged from battles against Dalit atrocities, to support for communal riot-victims, challenging draconian laws, taking sides with working classes and a strong stand on Human Rights. Thus Sabby, the lawyer became a champion of civil liberties and human rights cause. He was involved and engaged with an array of issues and organisations and movements in the quest of protection of socio-political rights and civil liberties throughout his life.

Two years ago, in one of the public meeting, he dared the government to arrest him on the charges of sedition. He thundered that criticising the government was actually a democratic duty of a citizen and hence to charge people with sedition for doing that is the most unlawful act by the State. He was a firm believer of freedom of speech and regarded critiquing the government as a democratic right of a citizen. I had a good fortune to have his acquaintance for many years. For quite a few incidents in and around Mumbai, such as Ramabainagar Dalit murder, Kalyan riots, Mubra riots, we two just formed an impromptu fact-finding team and rushed off to the sites. Sebastian inspired many people to work for civil rights. CPDR mourns the loss of its senior comrade. I lost a long term friend and a comrade.