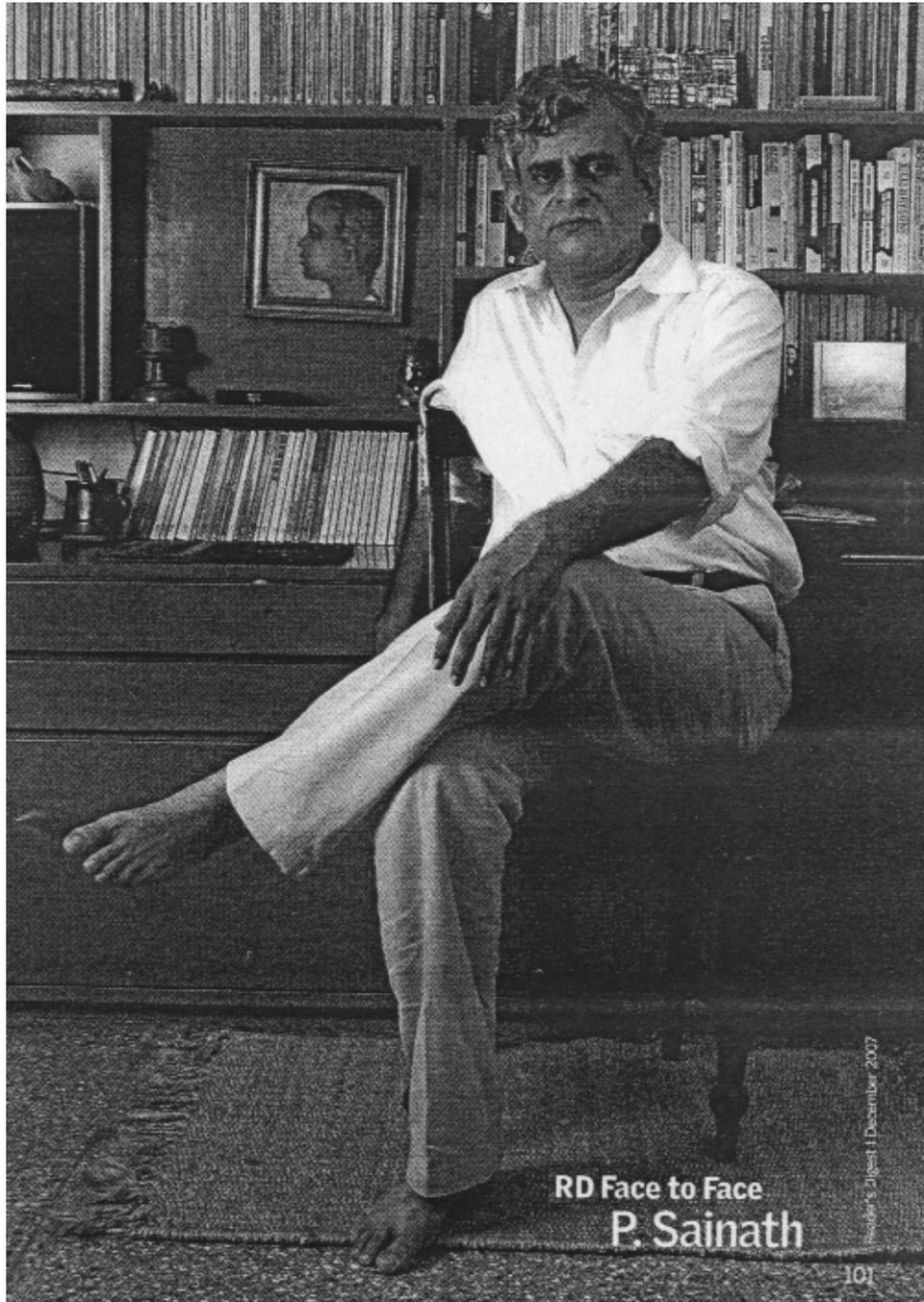


Platform for the Poor (Interview of P. Sainath)

By Ashok Mahadevan



FOR A NEWSPAPER reporter who normally keeps a low profile, Palagummi Sainath was unusually visible in the media just before he talked to Reader's Digest. A fortnight earlier,

he had received the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for journalism, literature and the creative communication arts. Then he sparked off a row after criticizing Union Textiles Minister Shanker Sinh Vaghela and Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh for disparaging Maharashtra's cotton farmers—a charge both politicians predictably denied.

In fact, we were lucky to find Sainath in his Mumbai home because he travels up to 10 months a year, chronicling the travails of India's poor. He's been doing this for nearly a decade and a half, and his reports reveal a country far different from the "India Shining" of the mainstream media. The economic reforms that began in 1991, Sainath says, while bringing unprecedented prosperity to the middle and upper classes have only deepened the misery of the poor. Sainath, 50, comes from a distinguished family—his grandfather, V. V. Giri, was the fourth President of India. After a master's in history from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Sainath became a journalist in 1980. In 1993, thanks to a fellowship from *The Times of India*, he investigated living conditions in the country's ten poorest districts. The articles he wrote during this period were collected in a best-selling book called *Everybody loves a Good Drought*. Sainath, now rural affairs editor of *The Hindu*, continues to specialize in writing about the poor because, as he puts it, "I felt that if the Indian press was covering the top five percent, I should cover the bottom five percent." Apart from the Magsaysay, Sainath has won many other awards for his work. The economics Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has described him as "one of the world's great experts on famine and hunger."

Ashok Mahadevan: Given your background, you could have had a very conventional and comfortable career. What prompted you to become a student activist when you were young and then a journalist covering the poor?

PS: I come from a very political family. We didn't grow up with this middle class notion of politics bad, politicians bad. Because of my grandfather, we met people across the political spectrum.

Many other members of my family were also involved in the freedom struggle. Our approach to society was interventionist—you did not wait for things to happen, you participated in them.

In India the press is the child of the freedom struggle. All the nationalist leaders also doubled up as journalists. Mahatma Gandhi founded journal after journal and wrote for them every day. Nehru founded newspapers. Bhagat Singh bombarded newspapers with letters to the editor. Ambedkar's journalism has enduring appeal.

Ashok Mahadevan: So you see yourself in that tradition?

PS: I am very rooted in the Indian tradition of journalism. It's a very humane tradition in which the illiterate masses create the space for journalistic freedom, not the elite.

Whether in 1857 or now.

In 1857, the great merchants of Kolkata and Mumbai held public prayers for British troops to prevail over their countrymen. When Tilak was arrested for sedition in 1908 it was not the great household names of Mumbai who protested. The textile workers of Mumbai came out, and 22 of them were left dead in the streets when the police opened fire.

During the Emergency the people of this country brought back freedom. There has always been an organic link between Indian writers and the Indian masses. But it is a link that has been very severely eroded in the last 15 to 20 years.

Ashok Mahadevan: What are the main areas in which the Indian state has failed its people?

PS: Who are the Indian poor? About 40 percent of them are landless agricultural labourers. About 45 percent are small and marginal farmers, mostly people with less than one hectare, many with less than half a hectare at that.

The problem of 85 percent of the poor is connected to land. But barring Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, we never addressed the issue of land reform. Which government in the Centre for the last 20 years has had land on its agenda?

We have not addressed the issues of water and lack of forest rights.

These will create hell in the coming years. We have not tackled basic structural inequalities in ownership of resources.

In addition, there are disparities of gender—women are poorer in every category—caste and region. The middle class has simply closed their minds on the issue of caste. It is not that there are no poor Brahmins or no poor upper-castes, but the poor are predominantly at the lower end of the caste spectrum.

There are twelve regions in the country where 80 percent of the poor are concentrated and the gap between those regions and the rest of the country keeps growing with the solitary exception of Kerala, which has bridged its development gaps.

We also never set a fair national minimum wage which was a living family wage. That is one of the spurs to child labour. We severely disadvantaged agricultural labourers by classifying agriculture as unskilled labour. There is no more skilled and more important activity of the human race than the production of food. It's more risky than manufacturing software.

Ashok Mahadevan: What are some of our successes?

PS: We are an extremely innovative, vigorous electoral democracy. A live democracy where people are searching for answers. It is not the chattering classes who vote in India. The poor value their vote as the one weapon they have to discipline their leaders and they use it. A vigilant public of that kind is a treasure.

Ashok Mahadevan: What do we need to do to be not just a political democracy but an economic and social democracy too?

PS: Follow your constitution—you have been in serious violation of it for the last 15 years. Nobody ever talks about the Directive Principles in the Indian Constitution because they are not enforceable legally. The Directive Principles are the vision of your society.

Ashok Mahadevan: A vision no one seems to be interested in following?

PS: It is not in the interest of the ruling elite to follow it. But thousands of people daily address the issues in the directive principles—for example when they say, "Don't throw me off my land." Incidentally, I never claim to speak for the poor; I think the poor are

fully capable of speaking for themselves. My role as a journalist is to report what they are saying. It is in the interest of us all to listen to them.

Ashok Mahadevan: What do you think of the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme that the government started last year?

PS: There are only three things that this government has done that are of value. The first is that it significantly lowered the communal temperature prevailing in this country in the late '90s and early 2000s. Another is the Right to Information Act. And the third thing is the Rural Employment Scheme itself.

Ashok Mahadevan: Do you think the RTI has been used sufficiently?

PS: No. But it has opened up spaces. It will work differently in Kerala than in Kalahandi [Orissa]—the societies are different, the circumstances are different, the quality of governance is different.

Ashok Mahadevan: What about the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme—the third thing of value?

PS: That was something the government fulfilled kicking and screaming and now they will kill it by underfunding. One way of killing the scheme is by not publicizing or popularizing it amongst the people. In Andhra in 2004, within the first seven days of the announcement of the scheme, 27 lakh people stood in queues and applied for it. The Maharashtra government did not popularize the scheme, yet lakhs of people applied, showing the desperation of the rural poor. I found people with six and seven acres of land standing in the queues because they wanted work. Unlike a chief minister who thinks his farmers are lazy, people are demanding work; they are not demanding pity, they are not demanding a dole.

Ashok Mahadevan: Are they getting work?

PS: First of all it is restricted to 100 days for one person per family. In the 2007 budget the number of districts covered went up 40 percent but the money allocated went up only six percent.

It is a despicable lie to say that there is no money for it. It would cost about Rs25,000 crores each year to run your minimum modest rural employment guarantee program. See the defaulters' list of the central board of direct taxes (CBDT). With the dues of the giants on the defaulters list you could run the program for a very, very long time. Just two of the defaulters according to the CBDT owed them Rs31,000 crores. Shake then- pockets loose!

(Since this interview was recorded, the scheme was extended to all districts in India, but funding has not been proportionately increased.)

Ashok Mahadevan: Are the people who enrolled in the scheme getting their salaries on time? Are they getting the Rs60 a day they are supposed to?

PS: No. They might be getting Rs45. But before that they were getting nothing, many of them. Please note that the purchase of grain went up massively when this program came into being because people have just that little bit more purchasing power. In 2000-01 the government was boasting of a 63 million tonnes surplus of food grains. But there was a surplus of hunger, not of food. Purchasing power had collapsed. The moment people got some purchasing power, the government had to import wheat. The availability of food grains has plummeted in the last 15 years. In 1991, when the economic reforms began, per capita availability of food grains was 510 grams per Indian. By 2003 it was down to 437 grams. This has incredible implications.

Ashok Mahadevan: Wouldn't it imply that far more people are starving?

PS: It implies that the hunger of far more people has become far more intense. By 2001 the average poor family of four was eating one hundred kilos less of food grains than it used to ten years earlier.

Ashok Mahadevan: People are a lot hungrier than before?

PS: We will never understand the deprivation of Indians if we do not understand the prosperity of other Indians. If you belong to the top 15 to 20 percent of urban India or the top 10 to 12 percent of rural India, you are experiencing standards of living that you never dreamed of in your lifetime. If you belong to the bottom 40 percent you are experiencing levels of deprivation that you never dreamed of in your lifetime. Thousands of people in urban centres are rushing to weight loss centres. Millions of other Indians are trying desperately not to lose any more weight.

Ashok Mahadevan: You are not a great proponent of non-government organizations. You think they give the government an excuse to duck its responsibilities to the poor. But in your book, you wrote favourably of one NGO, the Arivoli lyakkam [Light of knowledge] Movement in Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu. Can you talk a little about it?

PS: When the government launched the National Literacy Mission in 1988, there already was a vigorous activist movement in Pudukkottai. The government offered people who were working for the state or for public sector organizations to go on deputation to the movement without loss of seniority or salary. So a lot of very progressive people volunteered.

They used extremely creative methods. They found, for instance, women teachers were needed to approach conservative women. To go to the villages, the women teachers learnt cycling. And they found that the women in the villages were far more interested in cycling than in literacy. So cycling was incorporated as a component of the literacy movement, and a hundred thousand women in that district alone learnt cycling.

There were two implications to all that cycling. The human implication was one of liberation and freedom. The cycle has been a very revolutionary vehicle for human beings. It is a far better indicator of human well-being than an automobile. Poor women said cycling is like flying an aeroplane, it's like being yourself. You are in control.

The economic gains were very real too. Most of the women in Pudukottai were small producers, dependent on their fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons to get their produce to the market. So their arc of coverage was very limited. But once they had cycles, they could put the vegetables at the back on the carrier, and put the baby in a basket on the front. They could leave any time and come back any time. The markets they could cover increased.

But the women assured me that their major consideration was a sense of freedom. In Pudukottai, I saw a lot of women from very conservative Muslim families cycling, fully clad in burkhas. It was quite something!

Ashok Mahadevan: Whenever you write about women, you portray them as strong and capable.

PS: Society functions because of them.

Ashok Mahadevan: You see women as the hope of this country?

PS: Most agricultural work in this country is done by women. Have you ever seen a guy doing paddy transplantation? It is a horrible job. You stand shin deep in muddy water that has disease and insects and God knows what other stuff. You strain your back—the highest number of birth miscarriages occurs in the paddy transplantation season.

But women are banned by custom from ploughing. That allows the male to keep control. We have to move beyond the old slogan of "Land to the tiller," to "Land to those who work on it."

Ashok Mahadevan: When well-meaning middle class people think about India's poverty, they often feel despair. What do you feel?

PS: Anger. Despair produces nothing but despair. The character, quality, and resilience of the Indian people ought to be a source of optimism. They have done incredible things. They brought an empire to its knees. Bhagat Singh said they will make the deaf hear and the blind see. I am very optimistic.

Ashok Mahadevan: Win things get better?

PS: Yes, but they will get a lot worse first, because of the track we are on now.