

A TRIBUTE

ISAAC SEQUEIRA (5 JAN 1930 – 7 SEPT 2006)

"His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, 'This was a man!'"

He could rub shoulders with the highest of the high. He could sympathize with the lowest of the low. He could share a throaty laugh with scholars recently embarked on the professional trail but he was also at ease with veterans in the game. On Sunday mornings he was part of the church choir; in the afternoon he would visit the Widows Home to spread the sunshine of his bonhomie. He could swim like a champ. He could sing, he could whistle. He had a sense of humor few could beat. And an appetite for the good things of life – good friends, good food, good wine, music, popular culture, drama, cinema, and – yes, of course – cricket! That was Isaac Sequeira.

How, and in what terms, does one measure the worth of a man? Mark Antony had once lamented that the good is oft interr'd with the bones. Not so in this case. The good that Isaac did is all around us. Monuments of his selfless service to education, to American Studies, to society at large, are scattered everywhere. Take for instance, any university department in the country, and one may easily find several senior professors whose lives have been touched, whose careers have been shaped, in one way or another, by Isaac Sequeira. Take his undeniable dedication to the American Studies. When the discipline was totally abandoned by the powers that be, it was he who held the fort, not for any personal gain but for a deep conviction that institutions are to be nurtured; they cannot and should not be abandoned callously. ASRC would have perished many years ago, had Isaac Sequeira not been at the helm to keep it going. There are many other milestones, many landmarks associated with Isaac, scattered across the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. DCH, for instance, the amateur theatre group of Hyderabad with which he was associated. Or the Poetry Society or the Music Club of Hyderabad which he founded with like-minded people. Or Nizam Club, where he entertained visiting friends and scholars every so often. Can Hyderabad ever be the same? Can the world ever be the same for those who knew him and loved him?

Isaac's departure marks the end of an era. The end of the golden age of American Studies in India. Associated with the discipline right from its inception, he saw it through its difficult days to the very last. ASRC as an institution came to be linked inseparably with him. With his departure yet another chapter of American Studies in India is closed for ever. But his contribution to American Studies will never be forgotten.

There were other achievements too. About a decade ago, when some of us wanted to float a new academic organization, he was equally enthusiastic and MELUS-India was born – a society dedicated to the study of multi-ethnic literatures of the U.S. He was a Patron and attended ALL of our conferences. When we later proposed that we float a parallel organization for world literatures, he again supported the move and MELOW came into being. The two organizations, under his guidance, have been thriving and now have an established international network.

That was a man who once told me that Isaac means "smiling face". I did not bother to check it out for he could never be wrong. In any case, the name suited him to the T as he was always smiling. Did he ever have any worries? Any personal problems? No one could know -- because his generosity, his magnanimity, his greatness transcended them all. There was nothing small or mean or petty about him. Through close to three decades he was a friend, philosopher and guide to me, although I playfully continued to call him Unc. Sometimes he was Unca Scrooge. He took it all in his genial stride. If I wanted professional advice, he was there. If I ever needed a shoulder to weep on, his were large and broad, and always available. He was a person one could count on, a solid pillar the empty spaces could lean on. Where will the spaces go now, Unc?

How does one thank you, Unc, for all that you did? For making the world a better place, for your generosity, love and affection. I had got accustomed to basking in the warmth and affection that you radiated. Thank you for all those rich, shared moments that I will hold close to my heart. For being a super human being, a 'dharmatma', a role-model that I, for one, can only try to emulate. Let your light continue to guide me – and scores like me – from wherever you are.

Somewhere up there.

And smiling!

MANJU JAIDKA