

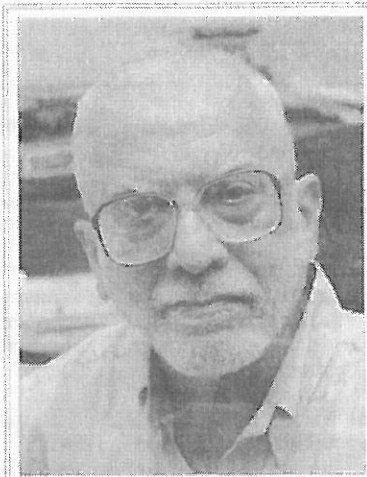
Green champion

Shyam Chainani's demise is a big loss to the heritage and environmental protection cause

IFIRST GOT to know Shyam after he and I had returned to Mumbai in 1967 from our studies abroad. By some strange alchemy, a small group of us earnest discontents found ourselves drawn into the office of Kisan Mehta, a corporator and a Gandhian, every Wednesday evening to brainstorm about the deteriorating conditions of life in our city. We were a strange group of bedfellows, comprising Shyam; Ashok Advani (then a budding lawyer); Dr. Rusi Dastur; Rusi Karanjia, editor of *Blitz*; Mulk Raj Anand; Mani Aiyar, a chartered accountant; and myself.

Each of us came at the problems of (then) Bombay from a different perspective. While I was outraged by a scam-ridden project to reclaim land from the sea in front of my home at Cuffe Parade, Shyam said (perhaps tongue in cheek) that he was provoked by the fact that since his return to his flat in South Bombay, he had not enjoyed a shower bath, as he had to wake up at 5 am to fill his bathtub before the water supply was cut off. Something must be amiss if there was such an acute water shortage, while just down the road, the government was encouraging reclamation of a new business district which would attract half a million new workers every day.

The Save Bombay Committee was born out of these early amateur investigations, but it was here that Shyam began his lifelong pursuit of better ways to plan a city's infrastructure to improve its residents' quality of life. With his razor-sharp intellect, he developed a deep understanding of town planning legislation and development control regulations, unravelling the layers of opacity that concealed illegal building approvals, eating away at the built and natural heritage. Moving on to set up the BEAG (Bombay Environmental Action Group), he launched a series



♦ SHYAM CHAINANI ♦
1942 — 2010

of public interest litigations that, for many years, put the brakes on mala-fide building approvals in Mumbai.

Meanwhile, a few successes – the relocation of a giant fertiliser project from a beachfront location opposite the Gateway of India to a more distant location and saving the Elephanta and Nhava islands from destructive port-related projects – propelled him further afield to fight for causes across India, in an environmental career spanning four decades.

After an education at Cathedral School, IIT Kharagpur, Cambridge and MIT, he could have risen to the very top with the Tatas. But he chose to sacrifice his career to work on environmental issues. And while he continued to be nominally on

the Tata payroll, he devoted most of his time to environmental conservation and heritage.

His significant achievements were based on four extraordinary qualities:

A **clarity of thinking** that allowed him to cut through the morass of town planning regulations to the core principles underlying city and town planning – where his constant concern was to promote urban development that improved the quality of life of the ordinary citizen. He was thus able to hold his own against town planning bureaucrats, municipal commissioners and politicians; frequently contributing toward framing policy and regulation.

A truly **steadfast adherence to the idea of justice** and the principled application of the law. With his complete disregard for the status or eminence of his antagonists, he was unhesitating in crossing swords with the defence establishment, captains of industry and one Union ministry after another.

A **high sense of integrity** and consistency in moral purpose. Many efforts were made to corrupt or humiliate him, or

"Shyam was often seen as being unreasonable and adamant. But he always used to say that it was his job to argue for the environment. Others could put forth different points of view. And then the decision makers could take an honest decision."

discourage him from pushing a legal petition to its logical end. He knew that he stood in public to disprove the dictum that "every man has his price". Shyam, whose battles in Court and outside, pitted him against the rich and powerful and around projects worth thousands of crores, could not be purchased. His simple lifestyle and his conscious effort to curtail his needs, sacrificing his family life and his health, were his major defence. His reputation as an eccentric was undeserved: it is often the case that in a corrupt society, a person who continuously does right is regarded as a freak.

Finally, his **tenacity**. Fuelled by his sense of mission, which became ever more deeply held as the years passed, Shyam brought to the pursuit of his causes (whether to introduce local heritage regulations or country-wide legislation for eco-sensitive zones) a persistence undeterred by failure. And failures there were: losses of one heritage building after another, of tree cover and pristine coastlines. But he had no qualms about making a thorough nuisance of himself when he knew the cause was greater than the comfort of any individual.

Yet, one remarkable facet of Shyam's personality was the enduring relationship he built with those very few persons he had stood against. Admirals and generals, ministers and bureaucrats by the dozen engaged with him, not only out of respect, but also with grudging affection.

His fine intellect, his belief in the rule of the law, his integrity and his tenacity over the past 40 years, took him from the micro issues of Mumbai and city infrastructure, to the successful implementation of the city's heritage regulations; and thereafter to introduce heritage regulations in cities and states across the country (including Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala and Goa), to planning regulations as far away as Lutyens' Delhi, Vijayawada and Kolkata's waterfront; to a battle for defence cantonments



*Young Chaimani:
at Nhava*

against predatory builders; to protecting hill stations, not only in Mahabaleshwar and Panchgani, but also Matheran, Panchmarhi and Munnar.

His passion for sailing and the sea made him even more zealously protective about our maritime and coastal environment and heritage.

HIS BIG REGRET was that in India, we do not document events adequately. And his passion for accuracy and detail was evident in his whole approach to the environment too. Promises, statements or concessions were duly recorded by him and followed up with letters to the concerned decision makers, so that there could then be less room for going back.

But there were other facets to Shyam too. He was deeply committed to education, serving for over 30 years on the Hyderabad Sind National Collegiate Board, as also Jai Hind College in Mumbai. As in the case of the environment, he was always ready to argue for high standards and protection of the independence of institutions.

And above all this, Shyam valued his family. This is a side of him few saw, but endeared him to his whole family, irrespective of what they initially thought when he gave up his career for his commitment to the environment.

But his journey remains unfinished; he had many ongoing projects: five books in the writing and an archive of environmental documentation waiting at home.

The best tribute that we can pay to someone who has so transformed the landscape of environmental legislation and public awareness is to carry on his work of making our cities and our country a better place to live in.

* CYRUS GUZDER

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