

A lifetime of anti-apartheid struggle

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



Enuga Reddy was a stalwart deeply committed to the idea of social justice and freedom

“What have we not done for our country? Some of us died; Some of us gave speeches” - Orhavan Veli, Turkish poet and activist: Enuga Sreenivasulu Reddy, who died at 96, on November 1, quoted those lines in an article in *Mainstream’s* annual number in 1991. In so doing, the former Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations (1983-1985) and long-serving Director of its Anti-Apartheid Centre, was of course laughing at himself. He could laugh at himself. But no one who knew him could miss the importance of his speeches and writings, his lobbying and campaigning on the subject of South Africa’s struggle, that of other southern African nations, and the Palestinian cause as well. Many a leader — Indian, South African, European — have delivered speeches written by Enuga Reddy, to great effect and applause.

Unparalleled humility

E.S., as I knew and called him over the last four decades and more, took the world body’s responsibilities and its stirring Charter seriously. But never his own contributions to their mandates. In fact, he under-stated his work to the point of obscuring it. “You must write your memoirs, E.S.,” I would urge him, as did many of his friends in India, South Africa and elsewhere. “There are better ways of spending time,” he would always say, “even for a person who has retired.” Not that he had time to spare in his retirement. His wife of over seven decades, Niloufer, knew that well. His apartment overflowed with reams and reams of documents and books. He would donate trolley-full of them to universities and archives. But they would keep piling up.

And if asked, which those “better ways of spending time” were, he would say “Researching and documenting the work of un-acknowledged freedom fighters in India and of those who gave their best years to the liberation struggle in South Africa, many dying in the course of their work.” I told him, “There are others who can do that ... but no one other than you can tell the story of how a student in Madras way back in the 1940s got interested in the South African struggle, and how, as a scholar freshly arrived in the U.S., met, at a New York reception, Dr. A.B. Xuma, President-General of the African National Congress, who had come to lobby the United Nations Organisation (UNO), thus beginning a life-long association with anti-apartheid work at the UNO and beyond.”

“This self-effacing method of yours,” I ventured, “ may be a good addition to the chronicles of humility, they are not good for our curiosity about the India-South Africa connect”. “Oh...humility! That is a virtue reserved for giants,” E.S. said, reminding me of the famous instance of Golda Meir ticking off a minister in her cabinet: “Don’t be so humble-humble, you are not that great.” So, if you could not remonstrate with E.S. about his humility, you were not allowed to flag it either. If, therefore, the news of his death, or, in fact, his name does not send bells ringing today, there is one person utterly unaffected — E.S. himself.

He excelled in working beyond human scales of stamina, perseverance and meticulousness. The books he authored on South Africa and on personalities who interested him are numerous. The books he helped others to author, giving them almost complete, ready-to-print drafts, are even more numerous. To him also goes the credit of strengthening the genre of co-authored books, in which the co-author was that but in name, with E.S. having done most of the work — I being one among those lucky ‘co’s. E.S. helped scholars like no one I knew. No one I know helped E.S. He was entirely self-made.

His help to researchers, biographers, writers of papers for journals has not been paralleled by anyone I know. Venu Madhav Govindu, biographer with Deepak Malghan, of J.C. Kumarappa, has this to say: “Fifteen years ago, when he learnt that I was working on a biography of J.C. Kumarappa, he promptly went off to the New York Public Library and painstakingly downloaded every article on J.C. and Bharatan Kumarappa from the New York Times and Washington Post archives. He did this at the age of eighty, for someone he barely knew.”

Intimately connected

India, South Africa and the UN were the tripod of his political mind. Joining the United Nations Secretariat as a Political Affairs Officer in the Section for Africa and the Middle East as a 25-year-old in 1949, he made it his business to come to know the American Committee on Africa and other organisations supporting freedom for Africa.

And by the time he was appointed Principal Secretary of the United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid in 1963, he had come to know and be valued by Oliver Tambo. “Not Mandela,” E.S. told me more than once, “but Tambo is the South African Gandhi. For Tambo the liberation of South Africa was a call that came from his inner voice. Mandela is more a Nehru-like figure, guided by the force of his intellectual conviction and the strength of reason to do all that he did.” Small wonder that Adelaide Tambo, the great leader's wife, looked upon E.S. as her ‘brother’.

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This I can say with complete conviction — No Indian I know was acquainted as intimately with Africans from all walks of life as E.S. was. And this broad-sweep statement of mine includes Indians settled in Africa. How and why is that? E.S. had no agenda, either of his own or for India's diplomacy. He was a product of the Indian freedom struggle's ethos, and that made him relate instinctively to that of Africa. He was twinned to the idea of human freedom, social justice, and the ending of man's exploitation of man.

This made him "family" to many famous people, like Olof Palme, for instance, and Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, and also to many who may not have that level of fame, but had what E.S. would call "the weight of contribution" — like the Naidoos of South Africa, descendants of Gandhi's South Africa colleague, Thambi Naidoo. At E.S.'s instance, Thambi Naidoo's daughter-in-law, Ama Naidoo, and her daughter, Shanthie, were invited to India by then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and introduced to India's political leadership. Ama Naidoo speaking to a small gathering on the South African struggle and being heard with rapt attention by two Indian women revolutionaries — Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Aruna Asaf Ali — was a long-distance achievement of E.S. Enuga Reddy was India's un-official High Commissioner in South Africa, and more respected for being un-accredited. But beyond that, he was Asia's envoy to Africa, and equally, Africa's Asian delegate to the United Nations. He was the *de facto* rapporteur in the universe of the non-aligned.

Ninety-six is a long enough span to have lived, and yet I cannot but mourn with countless others the passing of a man whose death impoverishes modern political historiography. It breaks the only link of its kind between India, Africa, the U.S., and the world's political 'south', at a time when virulent nationalisms need countering. How one wishes he could have had the pleasure of seeing voters in the United States of America give the democratic world great good news.

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