

From Editor's Desk

Sanjoy Ghose: The Cost of Being an Activist

The death of social activist Sanjoy Ghose, who was carrying on voluntary work in North East India, has raised important issues, which deserve immediate attention of human rights activists and spirited citizens who are working voluntarily for the welfare of poor and downtrodden. Ghose, an agriculture graduate from Oxford University, who was the Secretary General of Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development in North East (AVARDNE), was not only carrying on the voluntary work in the remote areas of Assam, but had also launched a campaign to educate the people about their rights and acquainting them with procedures to enforce these rights. He was kidnapped by the militant group ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) on the grounds which are not clear. In view of the sharp reaction from human rights groups at the national as well as International level, ULFA came out with the statement that the activist died in a fall from a cliff in a bid to escape from the custody of the militant outfit. The explanation carries no weight because earlier it had claimed that he died in an encounter when the army made an attempt to carry out a raid on the hideout of the militant outfit. That the activist died in the custody of militants should make the matter clear. Moreover, there is no evidence of army having conducted any raid in those areas during that period.

This is not the first time that an activist had to be at the receiving end of the militants. It is ironical that the activists, who have to face the ire of governments invariably in the course of their activism, should be targeted by the militant groups whose cause of human rights they champion. This is not the first case. The human rights activists and voluntary groups have faced the wrath of militant groups in Punjab and Kashmir, earlier. Many prominent activists, who were pursuing human rights activism with dedication, were gunned down in Kashmir. Only a couple of months back a leading student activist from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Chandra Sekhar, fell a prey to the assassin's bullets, while addressing a meeting in Bihar and some people having close nexus with the state government were allegedly involved in the act. It is high time that human rights activists and groups take cognisance of this challenge to activism and voluntarism. There is an urgent need to devise mechanisms to make the militant groups accountable for such acts. It is equally appropriate that militant groups should adhere to some kind of a human and civilised code of conduct.

United Nations Commission on Human Rights needs to respond to this new challenge to human rights activism and social voluntarism. The Commission has already passed resolutions on the use of mercenaries and is trying to define terrorism. However, that is not enough. The Commission has to define and codify the norms binding the non-state armed groups. The human rights regimes should enlarge the scope of their agenda in order to see that the very concept of human rights do not evoke negative images in the minds of the people.

Sanjoy Ghose was very well qualified to earn his living in a better way and through more comfortable means. That he chose a hazardous course of social activism provides ample evidence of his passion and dedication towards voluntary work. His voluntarism would ensure that the funds

for development and flood relief in remote areas of Assam should be spent towards these very objectives. This might have posed a direct challenge to the vested interest in these areas and Ghose had to pay the price of his life in this process. However, it has raised more vital issue of the scope of Human Rights regime. After all, Sanjoy, had been declared a “Prisoner of Conscience” by the Amnesty International. Will Amnesty International wake up to this new challenge?

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