Pakistan Zindabad- the Absolute Patriot- Professor Anita Ghulam Ali 1938-2014

So I missed her last rites which I should have performed preparing Anita Apa for the next life — I wanted that last breeze to blow on my face blessing me with her provocation and sensitivity as she had done for millions in her life. That was not to be. Yes she was a true blue blood citizen of this country – the few who can claim blue blood in citizenship – she was one of the tops. Her values were self-crafted and self-imposed; she stood against all opposition to create and follow them and no one could convince her otherwise. Yes she walked the talk; yes she embraced innovation and humanity and her mind kept buzzing with ideas until the very end – her brains never gave up even for a second.

My memories of her are since 1974 when I visited her at the Sindh Muslim College where she was energizing her students and the institution in the midst of some controversy and then some years later at her apartment trying to understand her role as the President of the Pakistan College Teachers’ Association for my research. At that point I had decided that if ever I wanted to serve an apprenticeship it would be with her.

As luck would have it in 1997 I was asked to support her as an adviser to the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) on community innovations under the Sindh Primary Education Development Program (SPEDP). Obviously the gods had responded to my desires- only the truth was that she was the adviser – mentor and I was the talib-e-ilm (the learner).

SEF had only two and a half people working in 1997 and I became the 3rd full time person. I told my team leader that there was no way I could sit in the ‘project office’ with gora sahibs to change institutions from a distance, I had to be in the government offices that is how I worked on institutional strengthening and innovations! Obviously they had to give in saying “fine but do not complain of public sector facilities and never let us know that you could not get things done because you did not have an efficient place!”. I got my wish to be close to Anita Apa and never looked back- the question of complaints did not arise of course.

I had decided that whatever we shall do to enlarge the scope and capacity of SEF, it must be organic and must have Anita Apa’s seal of belief, culture and value systems; she knew the government systems inside out – the boundaries and the possibilities of puncturing them legitimately. She worked in her own signature style a unique management method, seriously hysterical and with a complete method that worked each time. I remember when I joined her at SEF – when she would walk into the building in the morning she would not go to her office but veer on the right to go to the Men’s Bathrooms to see if all was in order and if it was not – there was hell to pay. She insisted that this was where we check the temperature on society if it was going to change – if it was ready to upgrade its sense of aesthetics and cleanliness and if the men were to embrace civilization! How odd I thought! And how gutsy and true that was. All men in
her organization had to be initiated in a rapid course on humanity- sensitivity and cleanliness as she would inspect their place of work ensuring that they were in an enabling environment. Whenever her office was upgraded she wanted this to be done for her entire teams; she would never want-upgradation of anything for herself alone – it had to be ALL or none! She was the first to start a crèche in her office and love all the babies as they grew up ensuring that young mothers could be encouraged to work and yet be close to feed and care for their young in safe workplaces. Yes she was way ahead of her times.

Anita apa was inclusive to the core – if she could have her way she would have had all provinces and religions represented and actually did do that as Karachi is so conducive to this inclusion – this was her pride and joy! She loved to see her support staff (some highly educated) rise to become program managers. She spared no effort in ensuring professional development of her teams so that they could be invested in. Often you would find in her room at the end of the day the entire teams sitting with her – cracking jokes and sharing new ideas and each one being given time to be heard and there was no pecking order – each one was a unique entity. She said openly I always believe that it is easier to get to the top then to remain there. I enjoy my work. “I think the reason I learn something new every day is I am interested in people. People come to talk to me and I always find it refreshing to hear what the youth has to say. I feel that we all have the capability of a sponge, to observe and absorb whatever good can be learnt and observed”.

She loved them all - at SEF that was an extended family that doted on her just as she did on them. She was not a micro manager – once she understood the approach and gave her inputs each one was given the space to perform and be acknowledged.

Anita apa was so contemporary and defied all norms of ageing even though she was gradually learning to starve herself with energy oozing out – with her mobility compromised she did not want to eat or drink too much and yet her brains buzzed her work energy kept multiplying. She did not want to make much of her multiplying illnesses and arthritis as she never gave up on her writing and her pen inspite of the ever fragile fingers and hands. Her doors were open to all – even when her ‘guards’ tried to regulate her daily crowds – she was adamant that they be allowed to meet her as she may be of help. She knew the suffering of the citizen in this country- whether it was the first girls cricket team that sought recognition; or the child of a minority seeking admission in a good school; or a gardener wanting a sarkari job or women/men wanting to do something innovative in the teeth of opposition Anita apa was there to solve their problems – have them acknowledged meticulously so that hope and goodness may multiply in Pakistan. She belonged to millions and they belonged to her. She took their photographs and chronicled them in her album of each person who visited her and also ensured that they got their photographs too reminding them of their visit at SEF! She was unique, impeccable and detail oriented.

These days we hear about the adopt a school program controversies – some have now classified and defined it as ‘privatization’ in serious research and advocacy pieces; well it was farthest from that for Anita Apa, the original inventor of the Adopt a School idea. This was the first innovative scheme supported by the UK government grant at SEF in 1997. Anita Apa and myself co-authored
and operationalized this scheme to be then followed across Pakistan. She wrote up the idea for a UNICEF report in early ‘90s that this was the way that citizens must rise to the occasion to restore the pride in government schools. They must do what is needed to ensure that public sector is contemporary, equitable and high in quality – the citizens must be encouraged to share the responsibility of this total restoration with the government so that the ordinary citizens may have access to the best schools for free. The question of privatization did not even cross her mind as she crafted this scheme indigenously for Pakistan.

My letters and writings for Anita Ghulam Ali must continue as there is so much to write about her. This 14th August 2014, as the country continues to burn and democracy muddle through, we must find time to salute this amazing citizen who needs to be multiplied through her phenomenal followers for her leadership, deeds, thoughts and values.

In 2008 we at Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) decided to honor a living legend that she is with the Anita Ghulam Ali World Teachers’ Day Award and that continues each year in all its glory seeking teachers who deserve to be honored for their struggle and excellence (www.itacec.org). She felt embarrassed and asked why we have done so in her lifetime – we responded that must we wait until you turn your back on us? Each year 10 teachers are awarded with distinguished prizes comprising handsome cash (Rs. 100,000- Rs.15000), shields and citation across Pakistan representing all school systems. To date 50 teachers have been awarded and we shall expand the award with many more supporters of Professor Anita Ghulam Ali.

On Independence Day and for rendition of the National Anthem she stood with such reverence singing each word with absolute belief, rearing to serve her country and people as I have never seen anyone do so in my lifetime. Today I shall cover her grave with the National Flag paying tribute to her and the nation that we must strive to be- Pakistan Zindabad!

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