

In Memoriam

Darryl D'Monte



Image: Twitter

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Darryl D'Monte, veteran journalist passed away on March 16, 2019 in Mumbai. He was 75.

The environmentalists claimed Darryl D'Monte on Friday (March 22) evening as was expected at a condolence meet organised by the Forum of Environmental Journalists in India (FEJI), founded by Darryl himself (then called the Forum of Environmental Journalists of India). There were other voices too, people who remembered him as a leader, a friend and a great human being. The Mumbai Press Club co-hosted the meet held in its premises.

The theme that ran through the speakers from FEJI was that Darryl taught them to write on environmental issues for the mainstream press when no one had heard of issues such as ecosystems, water crises, etc. These concepts were introduced by Darryl not only in India but also to journalists in the West, they said.

“Manual scavenging featured on Page One, that’s what Darryl achieved,” said Keya Acharya, Joydeep Gupta and S Gopikrishna Warriar. This was also a time when liberalisation was being introduced and the mainstream media was singing its praises. “No one would have given you a rupee to write about the harmful effects of

development on the environment. But that's the time Darryl went all out to encourage us to do so.''

Darryl's great quality of encouraging young journalists was mentioned by many. Gurbir Singh, secretary, Press Club, remembered how Darryl sent him to Dahanu on his very first assignment. Ravi Duggal, whom we all know as a health activist, recalled his days as an intern with the Indian Express when Darryl was resident editor. Darryl encouraged him to do stories on slum demolitions and the builder mafia, and would take all the nasty calls that would come from the builders. Meena Menon recalled how, having read her reportage on the Narmada agitation in *Mid-Day*, Darryl called her to ask if she would like a job in *The Times of India*. She could hardly believe that a Resident Editor of the *Times* was offering a young reporter a job in a paper not easy to get into. Despite her relative inexperience, he sent her to a UN conference on the environment. Patralekha Chatterjee recalled her nervousness at a UN conference. She saw Darryl - already a celebrity in the field - at the breakfast buffet, and introduced herself hesitantly. "You look lost," he said. Patralekha admitted to feeling clueless on how to go about covering the conference. "Darryl sat me down and spent an hour explaining the key issues and what I should focus on, and at the end, asked me to have a great time in the evening exploring the city.'"

One aspect largely ignored in the tributes to Darryl since his death last Saturday was the way he encouraged journalists from other languages. "If environment is today written about in the mainstream Marathi press, it is only and only due to Darryl," said an emotional Atul Deulgaonkar, journalist and environmentalist from Latur.

Arun Arora, former CEO of Bennet Coleman and Co, said environmentalists alone could not claim Darryl. Arora recalled him as a great human being, who would always find a way to help whenever he was in a dilemma. Interestingly, Arora admitted he was taken aback when Darryl was chosen to be Resident Editor of the *Times*. He couldn't think of a more unsuitable person to head a political paper!

Academic Indira Munshi recalled the many evenings she had spent in Darryl's home. "Darryl was always so happy to be with friends," she recalled. Commending the academic rigour of his books, Indira said that Darryl taught sociologists like her to introduce nature into their teaching. "We talked about society as if nature did not matter. I looked on him as a pioneer in bringing environmental issues into the social sciences. He gave credit to Anil Agarwal for that. Academics would be proud to claim him.'"

Darryl's wife Zarine and son Samir and daughter in law Rinka graced the meet. Samir recalled that Darryl had hitchhiked from London to Mumbai when he finished at Cambridge.

An incident recounted by Joydeep Gupta showed how far Darryl could go once he was committed to a cause. He and a dozen other environmental journalists received a letter from a Chinese journalist in Beijing in 1980 recounting her research on a polluted river in China, and her fear of being arrested after her report had come out. Darryl actually set up the Asian Forum of Environmental Journalists, held its meeting in Beijing, and on its letterhead, got a number of journalists to write to the Chinese government in support of that Beijing journalist.

This episode showed Darryl's commitment to freedom of the press and to people. As veteran journalist Kumar Ketkar, recounting his adventurous trips with Darryl to the North East and Goa, put it: "I often wondered, what drove Darryl? What made him so committed? The answer was: love of the people. His concern for the environment came from his concern for the people. He was with the people till the end. He was with the Good and fought against the Evil. He was a true Catholic, though not in the religious sense of the word."