

The Commissioner for Lost Causes

Utpal Kumar*

For most millennials, Arun Shourie would come across as a gentle, soft-spoken author who particularly loves delving into issues of religion, spirituality and death (his last book was *Preparing for Death*), with occasional writings on politics, judiciary and economy. As they read his recent books, they look askance at why Shourie is so admired and abhorred at the same time. His near-complete isolation and calm demeanour make them wonder if he was the same person who, as the legend goes, would create an avalanche-like situation each time he took to his pen. If he was the one Rajiv Gandhi was pointing at when the latter famously said at the height of the Bofors scandal in the late 1980s: 'There is no Opposition. There is just one newspaper!' Shourie was then editing *The Indian Express*, run with great passion and immense authority by Ramnath Goenka.

Shourie's latest book, *The Commissioner for Lost Causes*¹, which takes off when he relocates to India from his World Bank job in the US due to his son Adit's illness, and ends with him joining politics, is a throwback at that vintage Arun Shourie era when his exploits as an 'activist' editor made *The Indian Express* a middle class household name. 'The book is an account of some of the work that my colleagues and I did at *The Indian Express*. The popes of the time frowned on much of it. Others cheered it on as the new journalism,' Shourie writes. The Shourie-Goenka *jodi* broke several media rules, rewrote quite a few of them, and by the time they parted ways, the very nature of Indian journalism had changed. It was a demure Fourth Estate no longer!

The author's personal equation with Goenka is the soul of the book. Much of Shourie's success as an editor was primarily because of the backing he received from the old man who, besides being a fierce defender of press freedom, when cornered, 'would look for a toehold, and from that tiny perch, launch his fight back.' In fact,

the author got the name of the book from a signboard Goenka wanted to put outside Shourie's cabin, 'The Commissioner for Lost Causes.'

Among the 'lost causes,' foremost was the story on the plight of 85,000 undertrials, including women and children, rotting for years in jails across India. 'The situation was particularly bad in the Northeast, and also where everything seemed to be, and it has continued to be "particularly bad," i.e., in UP and Bihar. In Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura, about two-thirds of the detenus were undertrials. In UP and Bihar, the figure was 80 per cent — eight out of every ten persons who were in the jails in Bihar and UP were there,' writes Shourie.

This pursuit, however, was not a 'lost cause,' and, as Shourie writes, 'what with his contacts in high legal circles, he knew it better than most of us. The orders of the Supreme Court led to the release of thousands of persons who had been rotting in jails for years and years — not because they had been convicted of any crime but because their cases had not come up. By one estimate, 40,000 prisoners had been released, 27,000 in Bihar alone.'

The Bhagalpur blinding saga, on which a film *Gangajal* starring Ajay Devgn was later made, became a sensation when Shourie and his team of reporters exposed it first. But even more sensational—and a classic case of proactive journalism—was the 1981 story of Kamla, a young tribal woman who was 'purchased' by an Express reporter for Rs 2,300 to expose the flourishing slave trade in Madhya Pradesh. Such was the outrage after the expose that noted playwright Vijay Tendulkar wrote a play named *Kamla*, highlighting the tragic saga.

The Commissioner for Lost Causes eloquently brings out other battles fought by Shourie and his team—from his much successful campaign against then Maharashtra chief minister AR Antulay's corrupt practices that torpedoed his otherwise promising political career, to the sustained challenge he put up against the draconian anti-press defamation bills floated by the Congress government in Bihar, obviously at the behest of the Central leadership.

* The writer is Senior Editor, *Firstpost*. He can be reached at Utpal.kumar1@gmail.com

He also fought the Bofors battle heroically, though it couldn't reach its logical conclusion.

Shourie could fight these 'lost causes' so brilliantly because he changed the rules of the game in journalism. If Indian journalism has to be divided into two parts, for good or bad reasons, it can easily be 'Before Shourie' (BS) and 'After Shourie' (AS). He democratised the highly stratified newsroom. He encouraged young, enterprising reporters, gave them big breaks, much to the fury of the old, entrenched section in journalism who accused him of being a 'pamphleteer,' and 'a stormy petrel, a maverick' who terrorised 'reporters and sub-editors.' The rise of Shourie marked, as *India Today* wrote way back on 30 June 1986, the exit of 'the thinker-editor,' and entry of 'the hands-on editor.'

The book has plenty of fascinating anecdotes—my personal favourite being his portrayal of Giani Zail Singh and Devi Lal, while the most revealing being Justice PN Bhagwati's letter to Indira Gandhi, comparing her return to power as 'the reddish glow of the rising sun.' But what stands out through the book is his larger-than-life portrayal of Goenka, who 'could abuse fluently in thirteen languages,' who fought valiantly for press freedom in public life but could be autocratic and egoistical in the personal sphere, who went out of his way for the justice

of undertrials and other victims of injustice but won't mind pushing a poor teacher to sell his property in distress! Goenka loved Shourie but he loved his paper more. So much so that he didn't mind dismissing Shourie as editor on more than one occasion—and one time he could escape pink slip because he had just received the Magsaysay! S Gurumurthy, a close associate of Goenka, is quoted as saying in the book: 'We love Ramnathji for traits which, if we had them, we would hate ourselves for.'

With *The Commissioner for Lost Causes*, Shourie has chronicled the most eventful phase of his life as a journalist, giving an obituary to the man who made it happen from behind—Ramnath Goenka. Will his next be on his life as a politician, peeping especially into his personalised equations with Atal Bihari Vajpayee? Vajpayee, after all, was for Shourie the Politician what Goenka was for Shourie the Journalist. One hopes that's the case. For, as and when that happens, our understanding of history will only get richer and deeper.

Note

1. Arun Shourie, Penguin Viking India, 2022, pp. 616, Rs 999.