

Tribute to Our Dear Friend Latha

Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India

Latha, well known environmental activist and researcher from Kerala, is no more with us physically. Though many of us knew that she was battling with cancer for the last 3-4 years, closely following her ups and downs and also knowing



that over the last two weeks or so her health was steadily deteriorating, the question still comes up time and again, why was she taken away from us so early? She was just 51. She left us in the wee hours of Thursday, 16th November. Latha, we your friends in the Water Conflict Forum are going to miss you tremendously. Fond memories of you would always be with us. Our heartfelt condolences to all her near and dear ones – Unni her partner and our friend, her mother, all her relatives and friends especially her colleagues – Ravi, Rajneesh, Zabna, Rajasree, Manju, Meera and Sreevidya – and all those who are associated with Chalakudy Puzha Samraskshan Samiti and River Research Centre.

Latha was different right from her college days. Otherwise she would not have chosen agriculture as her subject of study. She chose agriculture extension, not a very glamorous area, as the area of her doctoral studies. Her first job was as an agriculture officer. All these were at a time when agricultural colleges and universities and agricultural departments were all male bastions.

Forests and rivers were her passions. In fact the imagery used for her in most of the tributes that have been pouring in has been that of a river, a river that flows. Probably that's why she left her job and devoted her life to work – as an activist and as a researcher – for the protection and revitalization of rivers and forests. She worked passionately for the protection of Chalakudy river basin and the Western Ghats. Chalakudy Puzha Samraskshan Samiti (Chalalkudy River Protection Committee) and River Research Centre became the institutional/organisational base for her activism and research. Her fight against the proposed Athirapally Hydro Electric Project along with her colleagues is historical. It was in recognition of her contribution to the protection of rivers that she was chosen for the first Bhagirath Sanman award by the India Rivers' Week.

Over the last 10-12 years water conflicts became a significant area of her engagement. She was one of the founding members of the Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India (Forum) and was a Steering Committee member right from its inception in 2005-06.

She did play a crucial role in making the Forum what it is today. She was very passionate about environmental flows and led Forum's work in this area as river revival was her dream. She used to constantly remind us that we need to go beyond theories and intellectual discussions, should get into the field and make a difference on the ground. She always described herself as a "field person". With her around the Steering Committee meetings used to be fun and energising. All of us used to look forward to the post meeting "sessions" in the late evenings and nights of singing and comradery in which Latha used to be in full flow with her singing, much like the rivers she sought to defend.

She had a transformative influence on all those who came in contact with her. Her enthusiasm was infectious, so was her smile. Even when she was battling with cancer she was ever optimistic and fought valiantly till the last moment. All through the ups and downs of her health over the last 3-4 years she remained positive and enthusiastic telling herself and her friends that she would come out of it one day. Even when she could not travel or do field work she contributed through her writing and through providing intellectual inputs. In the last couple of months, when writing became difficult, she provided inputs through long Skype and telephone conversations to the shaping of the next phase of Forum's work especially to take the environmental flow work forward. In fact when a few of us visited her on 8th November, and by then she was already in a rather bad shape as she could barely sit and talk, she mostly talked about the 3-4 pending tasks that she has to complete. That's the type of commitment and passion she brought to her work and to the Forum.

Latha, we are going to miss all that you brought to this world, to the Forum and to all of us – your commitment, enthusiasm, ideas, love, affection, frankness, integrity, and of course your singing. Miss you.

On behalf of all your friends in the Forum.

(Joy, Ravi, Janakarajan, Veena, Shripad, Himanshu, Murali, Nafisa, Philippe, Soma, Manoj, Eklavya, Chicu, Partha, Gorky, Abraham, Amrtha, Neha, Pratima, Sarita, Shruti, Craig and Siddharth)