

A Tribute to Shri. Keshav N. Desiraju from the Shanti Ashram Family

Shri. Keshav N. Desiraju was driven by a deep belief that it was our duty to work for the most vulnerable amongst us. And in realising this duty, he gave of himself freely, entirely, and with deep joy. Shanti Ashram had the privilege of his counsel for over two decades and of his formal leadership as a Trustee for over 5 years. In 2017, at the inauguration of the International Center for Child and Public Health, Shri. Keshav planted a tree in our courtyard, which to this day continues to grow and offer refuge to those who would seek its shade. Much like this tree, the memory of Shri. Keshav's life will continue to be a source of comfort, strength and direction to those who would look to him as an inspiration. For his personal presence, wisdom, and loving guidance we will remain ever grateful. We therefore observe this moment together with an Anjali, and a reflection on Shri. Keshav N. Desiraju's contribution to India and her people.

Shri. Keshav Desiraju was a distinguished bureaucrat and member of the Indian Administrative Service from the 1978 Uttarakhand cadre. As Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Health, he made notable contributions to the campaign to eradicate polio and for the rights of people with disabilities. Shri Keshav was then appointed Union Health Secretary of the Government of India, and during his tenure, advanced the Mental Healthcare Bill, 2012, that later went on to become the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017. Shri. Keshav was also instrumental in the creation of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI), the policy making group on immunisation that decides on which vaccines should go into the national immunisation programme. Shri. Keshav also advanced efforts that resulted in the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuroscience (NIMHANS) being designated as an institute of national importance, and strengthened the governance systems in the National Health Mission.

After his retirement from the administrative services, Shri. Keshav was appointed the chairperson of the governing board of the Population Foundation of India. He served on the boards of many organisations, including The Banyan, Latika Roy Foundation, Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics and Policy in Washington DC, the Auroville Foundation, and our very own Shanti Ashram.

In addition to being a bureaucrat, Shri. Keshav was a lover of the arts and in the words of Mr. Ramachandra Guha, "a scholar-civil servant who had a sense of mischief and fun". Shri. Keshav had a deep knowledge of classical music and wrote the definitive biography of MS Subbulakshmi titled "Of Gifted Voice: The Life and Art of MS Subbulakshmi." To borrow from the words of Mr. Guha again, Shri. Keshav was "an exemplary Indian – exemplary as a public servant, scholar, teacher, family man, and friend.

We would like to end this tribute by reading out a passage from a reflection that Shri. Keshav delivered to the Shanti Ashram team on 24th May 2021 to mark the memorial day of our founder, Dr. M. Aram. These lines so beautifully capture the man that he was, and continued to be through his decades of service to those around him.

"I am particularly impressed by the fact that Shanti Ashram, despite the pandemic, despite the lockdown, has continued with its work. Someone said on this programme that "social service is always a matter of compassion, but at this time, at the time of the pandemic, it is also a matter of courage". That is very, very true. But could I add that it is not only a matter of compassion or a matter of courage, I believe it is also a matter of duty. And every one of us who are on this programme are fortunate enough to talk to each other and to exchange ideas and to understand each other's worlds. We are already so much more fortunate than so many millions of people in our country, which is why I say that it becomes a duty, more than anything else, to address ourselves to these problems in whatever way we can look at them. It is something I believe we should do."



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