

In Remembrance

Ram Narayan Kumar (1955-2009)

Ram Narayan Kumar, one of the finest human rights researchers, activists and campaigners in South Asia, the focus of whose work for many years had been on Punjab, passed away on June 28, 2009 at his house in Kathmandu (Nepal). His death at a relatively young age of 54 sent shock waves among all those struggling for justice and fairness in South Asia.

His first major confrontation with state power was in 1975 when he opposed the authoritarian Emergency regime in India and was imprisoned for many months for his political act of defiance to defend democracy. He came from the Indian socialist tradition influenced by Jaya Prakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia but had the courage to oppose the overemphasis on the caste dimension in somewhat opportunistic politics of some of the followers of JP and Lohia. It was, perhaps, this disenchantment with his erstwhile comrades, which attracted him to the more universalist appeal of human rights work.

By family background, he came from a distinguished religious family of India. His father was the head of a *math/peeth* in Ayodhya with a very large following. Ram was groomed until his teenage years to succeed his father as the head of the *math* but Ram revolted and joined the secular world of socialist politics. However, the large following of the *math* in Austria resulted later on in Ram marrying an Austrian doctor Gertie.

Although he worked on almost all regions of India where human rights violations took place such as Kashmir, North East, Gujarat and Eastern India, and even in the Middle East against US interventions and Israeli aggression, his most remarkable contribution to human rights practice and documentation was in Punjab. Coming from a South Indian Brahmin family, he had no personal link with Punjab. However the massacre of the Sikh minority in Delhi in 1984 pushed him into the study of Punjab and its troubles. He never abandoned Punjab after this in spite of his many time demanding pre-occupations elsewhere. It is a reflection of his deep humanity that he spent about 15 years of his life studying and documenting human rights abuses in Punjab, a state with which he had no other relation except the bonds of humanity. He traveled to remote villages of Punjab to hear the painful stories of victims of human rights violations, expressing solidarity with them and bringing their plight to the attention of concerned Indians and international human rights organisations.

I met him for the first time in 1988 when during one of his visits to the UK, I invited him to speak in Oxford on the crisis in Punjab from a human rights perspective. Our friendship grew and since 2008, we were involved in a joint project to write a book on Punjab. His death means the death of that project also.

He had phenomenal knowledge of Punjab's history, politics, geography, culture, civil and police administration and Punjab's troubled relationships with the federal Centre in Delhi. He was meticulous in his research to the point of obsession, never compromising on the empirical evidence of his claims. His work on disappearances in Punjab *Reduced to Ashes* is destined to become a classic in the literature on disappearances and the brutality of state power. He published a pioneering paper on the institutional flaws in human rights law and practice with reference to Punjab in the *International Journal of Punjab Studies*. On the invitation of the Punjab Research Group/Association of Punjab Studies (UK), he presented a paper on the constitutional and institutional rigidities in defending human rights in Punjab at the Association's bi-annual conference in Oxford in 2003 where he received standing ovation from the conference participants for the rigour of his analysis and his towering moral integrity.

His last book on Punjab was *Terror in Punjab: Narratives, Knowledge and Truth* (2008) and it is some solace to me that my review of this book was published in the June 2009 issue of *Himal South Asia* magazine (Kathmandu) and Ram was able to see this review (http://www.himalmag.com/The-third-Sikh-ghallughara-Terror-in-Punjab-by-Ram-Narayan-Kumar_nw2960.html) a few days before his death.

He wrote several books on the genesis of the Punjab crisis which led to the violation of human rights at a level that had no precedent in Punjab's history for about 200 years. Ram made a unique contribution to the understanding of the troubled nature of the Sikh relationship to the majority Hindu community and Indian nationalism, and through that, to the tragic nature of the human rights condition in Punjab.

My association with Ram was shaped by this shared understanding of the approach towards the Punjab tragedy. We came from two different political and cultural backgrounds but felt that there existed a complementarity between our differences. He entered the Punjab scene as an outsider and immersed himself in understanding Punjab history, politics and culture. I viewed myself as an insider who was attempting to relate the inside view to a larger perspective in a national and global context, while Ram, as an outsider to Punjab, brought with him a depth and wealth of a larger perspective on human rights. We decided a couple of years back to combine our respective outside/inside strengths to write a joint book to grapple with the placing of the Sikhs and Punjab in India. We had started on this project and his death means the project remains unfinished. To me, this is a personal and political loss that is irretrievable.

I wish to highlight his contribution to Punjab studies in five areas:

One, he tried to substantiate that the 1984 tragedy in Punjab was both a continuation and reinforcement of upper caste Hindu-centric bias in the Indian elites' thinking and political practice in dealing with the Sikhs of Punjab. This contribution is substantial and empirically grounded.

Two, he hinted at several places in his books and papers that the upper caste Punjabi Hindus should not be viewed merely as a religious minority in Punjab in understanding their role in Punjab's and India's political economy. The upper caste Punjabi Hindu elite, in his view, occupied strategic places in the ideological and repressive apparatus of state power in India, and in that position, had played mainly a destructive role in shaping the Indian state's policy design towards Punjab. His work on this issue had reached a middle stage. He had collected some very interesting data and had done some preliminary work but he needed further development and critical appraisal of his own work especially in terms of making a differentiation between urban upper caste Hindu elites and the rural based Hindus. The importance of his contribution in this area is that most studies on Punjab, in attempting to capture the religious dimension of politics, focus on the Sikhs. Ram, in contrast with this, made an attempt to examine also the upper caste Punjabi Hindu location in Punjabi and Indian politics.

Three, Ram was of the view that Punjabi Sikh leadership had shown good qualities of political resistance against the Indian elite on specific issues but had not displayed, barring a few exceptions, qualities of imagination and foresight in developing a long-term political perspective.

Four, in his work on human rights in Punjab, Ram took the question of methodology of collecting and analyzing data very seriously, and in this, he attained a status that is unmatched by anyone else so far in the studies on human rights conditions in Punjab.

Five, his insights and empirical evidence on the politics of anti-Sikh jokes showed a degree of political sensitivity I have not seen in anyone else so far. He did not consider that anti-Sikh jokes were a benign matter and felt pained to observe that many of his own friends indulged in participating in what he called obnoxious sardarji jokes. His view was that the jokes' portrayal of the Sikhs as a "community of brainless people" was a serious political issue that needed to be examined and combated. He told me at one point that he had once had a long interview with two young Sikhs sympathetic to militancy about their experiences of sardarji jokes. He said that they started crying after some time, remembering their experiences of having been ridiculed and traumatized through sardarji jokes when they were in school in Hindu-majority urban areas of Punjab. This was a typical Ram characteristic – that he would read meanings into the experiences of the vulnerable that many others would ignore as irrelevant and insignificant.

The loss of this man to Punjab is truly irreplaceable.

Ram Narayan Kumar was directing a major project on studying the culture and practice of immunity that the state officials involved in human rights abuse enjoy in India. The project covering four critical regions of India- J & K, North East, Gujarat and Punjab- and involving joint collaboration between Kathmandu-based South Asia Forum for Human Rights and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has the promise of path

breaking output in bringing transparency, accountability and justice to human rights practice in India and South Asia.

Ram, as he was affectionately called, was an inspiration to human rights activists not only in India but also in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Some of the key dons of Harvard Law School recognised from an international perspective Ram's contribution to furthering the cause of defending the vulnerable and the weak in India and South Asia.

He worked too hard, was too pure in his heart and was too demanding of himself. That took its toll on his health. Though he has gone, his insights and dedication will forever remain a source of inspiration to those who want to unearth truth and bring the powerful to accountability.

He is survived by his wife Gertie, daughter Cristina, sister Sita and brother Gopal, all living in Austria. He was cremated in Kathmandu as per the wishes of his family. A remembrance meeting was held to commemorate Ram and his work at the India International Centre, Delhi on August 31, 2009 where I was able to acknowledge the contribution of Ram both to raising our understanding of the human rights violations in Punjab as well to the legal and institutional struggle against these violations. The memory of Ram Narayan Kumar will live on in the continuing causes and struggles for human rights in Punjab, South Asia and beyond.

Pritam Singh

September 2009

Patwant Singh (1925-2009)

Patwant Singh died after a cardiac arrest in Delhi on August 8, 2009 at the age of 84. He lived an illustrious life, and his death is the death of a unique voice on Indian, Sikh and global affairs. His was a voice of a man who was fearless, sharp, erudite, sophisticated and commanded attention. In terms of his literary output, his life can be divided into two phases: before 1984 and after 1984. There was, however, continuity in terms of vision and perspective between the two phases. Before 1984, his major interests were in architecture and design, as well as global affairs with relevance for Asia and India. After Operation Blue Star and the massacre of the Sikhs in 1984 in Delhi, his focus was almost entirely on Punjab and the Sikhs.

In this pre-1984 work, his approach towards architecture and urban planning was one of an aesthete and creative conservationist against ugly and commercial interests of construction industry, and in his work on international affairs, he defended the emerging post-colonial nations against the big global powers. That vision in a transformed manner was clearly visible in his post-1984 work. There was, however, one vital difference. Before 1984, his Sikh upbringing was mainly a matter of personal belief and was reflected only indirectly through his

professional work as a designer and commentator on international affairs. The trauma of 1984 shook him to the core about the secular and democratic credentials of the Indian state. He was a part of the top Indian elite and had access to information at the highest level. He was absolutely convinced that both Operation Blue Star and the November 1984 carnage were avoidable but the decision makers at the highest level in the Indian state deliberately pushed events to the tragic collision. It was during this time that he became acutely aware of his Sikh identity. He had always been proud of his Sikh upbringing and valued very highly the influence of the Sikh gurus' humanistic and egalitarian teachings on the shaping of his intellectual vision and world view. He did not see any conflict between being embedded in his Sikh identity heritage and still having an internationalist outlook. He was very critical of narrow minded aspects of some Sikh political tendencies and at the same time had contempt for those Sikhs who felt apologetic about asserting their distinctive identity in order to appear secular and flow with the Indian mainstream.

I first met Patwant in 1988 in London, and we immediately clicked. He would visit London every summer, and we would plan to meet while he would be in India. I would visit Delhi almost every winter, and having a dinner at his beautiful house at Amrita Shergill Marg used to be the highlight of the visit. He lived the life style of a prince. The whisky and the cuisine were of the highest order and the food was served in style. He was a great conversationalist and had many stories to share. I want to narrate just one here. When the killing of the Sikhs was going on in Delhi in November 1984, Patwant along with Lt Gen Jagjit Singh Arora, I.K. Gujral and a few other eminent Punjabis went to see Giani Zail Singh, the President of India to press upon him the need to use his official power as the Supreme Commander of the India military to call the army to control the killings in Delhi. The President met them without wasting any time and while they were talking, tea was served with special burfi and kaju. Patwant Singh told the President speaking directly to him, "While members of our community are being slaughtered and burnt alive, we have not come here to have burfi and kaju". The President was stunned and Patwant's companions were embarrassed and General Arora tried to calm him down but he stood his ground. The tea was removed. I can not imagine anyone else in India having such moral courage to almost reprimand the President of the country. I came to know another story about Patwant snubbing Indira Gandhi also once.

In the post-1984 period, his first major book (co-edited with Harji Malik) was *Punjab: The Fatal Miscalculation* (1985). This was a sharp critique of the Indian media's representation of Punjab and the Sikhs and of the Indian establishment's flawed policy design on Punjab. In 1989, his wonderfully produced book *Golden Temple* came out which is dedicated "To those of noble thought and deed who have helped to sustain the dignity, the grace and the spiritual authority of this most holy shrine". One aspect of this book deserves special mention by way of highlighting Patwant's qualities. Two A3 size pages of the book (pp 86-87) have a rare photograph of the January 26, 1986 Sarbat Khalsa called by the Sikh militant groups at the Golden Temple. It shows a massive gathering of Sikh youth who were enraged by the destruction caused to

the Akal Takhat during the Operation Blue Star. Patwant Singh had the courage to include this photograph and the historian's instinct to recognise and record the historical significance of the gathering. Patwant requested me to review the book for any Punjabi language publication in the UK. The *Punjabi Guardian* published the review. In the review, I had mentioned that despite differences in our ideological background, I felt very close to Patwant Singh. At a dinner at his house, he asked me in front of his partner Meher to explain what I meant by my differences with him. I said that I was Marxist in terms of my ideological background. Patwant smiled and said that if the essence of Marxism was a vision of an equitable world; his Sikh world view was not different from that vision. That one line said a lot about Patwant's interpretation of the Sikh vision. It might be worth mentioning here that Meher who comes from a mixed Parsi-Christian family background got baptised as a Sikh a few years ago out of her own choice because of the deep respect for the egalitarian vision of Sikhism which Patwant's life conveyed to her.

He followed the book on the Golden Temple by *Gurdwaras in India and Around the World* (1992) which is a rare and the only book of its kind reflecting not only the artistic skills of Patwant's professional background of pre-1984 period but also his deep devotion to these places of worship. His next book *Of Dreams and Demons: An Indian Memoir* (1994) is an attempt at integration of his life story and the different phases of India's history from the 1930s to the 1990s. It is a devastating critique of the depravity of Indian politics and politicians. I had reviewed it in this journal (Vol 3, No 1, 1996).

In 1999, he came out with his major work *The Sikhs* on which he had been working for many years. This book is an important contribution to Sikh historiography. In 2001, he wrote (with Harinder Kaur Sekhon) *Garland Around My Neck* which tells the remarkable story of Bhagat Puran Singh of Pingalwara. In writing this book, Patwant wanted to bring to the world's attention the importance of *sewa* (service to humanity) dimension in Sikh conception of good life that influenced Patwant's own world view also. In 2005, he returned to one of his pre-1984 interests by publishing *The World According to Washington: An Asian View*. He followed this with *The Second Partition, Fault-Lines in India's Democracy* (2007) which is a powerful indictment of India's uneven pattern of development that has generated a class of super-rich Indians dreaming about India as a super power and oblivious of the millions of their country men and women who are living more impoverished lives than even some of the poorest in sub-Saharan Africa. His last book (written with Jyoti M. Rai) is *Empire of the Sikhs- the Life and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*. It came out in 2008 in India and the UK but its US edition was launched just a few months before his death. In some of the passages while describing Ranjit Singh, it is clear that Patwant's own world view is getting reflected. For example he writes that Ranjit Singh's "consummate humanity was unique among empire-builders. He gave employment to defeated foes, honored faiths other than his own, and included Hindus and Muslims among his ministers. Inspired by the principles of peaceful coexistence uniquely articulated by the Sikh Gurus and firm in upholding the rights of others, he was unabashed in exercising his own".

Patwant Singh was deeply involved in supporting the work of H.S. Phoolka, the Supreme Court lawyer, who has been fighting for over 25 years to get justice for the victims of 1984 anti-Sikh violence. Patwant Singh also actively supported the work of Baba Sewa Singh Khadoor Sahib, who is creating an environmental heaven in the Khadoor Sahib area of Amritsar district and is also playing a pioneering role in promoting education, especially of girls, in the rural areas around Khadoor Sahib. Way back in 1978, Patwant Singh was also responsible for establishing the Kabliji Hospital and the Rural Health Centre, near Gurgaon in Haryana. During the organised violence against the Sikhs in 1984, Patwant's and his sister's farm houses near the hospital were deliberately targeted and burnt but this hospital was not touched because, it seems, that even the lumpens organised for the violence knew that this hospital was the only one in the area providing much needed services for the poor and under-privileged.

Patwant Singh was deeply concerned with the environmental and social degradation caused by the pattern of agricultural development in Punjab. In his memory, his sister Rasil Basu has produced a film on farmers' suicides in Punjab which was shown at his house on March 28, 2010 by way of celebrating his first birth day after his death. The international character of the gathering at this thoughtful celebration of his life reflected the wonderful integration of the local and the global in Patwant's life and work.

Patwant Singh is survived by his wife Meher, sister Rasil Basu, nieces Amrita and Rekha, and his adopted son Satjiv Singh Chahil.

Pritam Singh

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