

In Remembrance

Dr. Amrik Singh (1920-2010)

Dr Amrik Singh, a very distinguished Indian educationist with deep interest in Punjab, died at the age of 89 in Delhi on March 22, 2010.

He was born on September 20, 1920 at Abbotabad, now in Pakistan. He studied at Khalsa College, Amritsar and Government College, Lahore before going to University College, London where he obtained his doctorate in English. He taught at Delhi University and Punjabi University, Patiala and spent a year as a Visiting Professor of Educational Policy at University of Wisconsin in 1969-70. He edited two journals, *Journal of University Education* and the *Indian Book Chronicler: News and Reviews*, for many years. He was also active in the Delhi University Teachers Association and became the Secretary of the Association of Indian Universities, a position he held for 17 years. In 1977, he took up the Vice Chancellorship of Punjabi University, Patiala and tried to radicalise teaching, research and administration and, therefore, faced fierce resistance from entrenched interests there. He summed up that experience in a book *Asking for Trouble: What it Means to be a Vice-Chancellor Today*. The book generated a lot of controversy and has almost become a classic as a critical commentary on the state of university education and administration in India. What was most interesting about Dr Amrik Singh's stint as a Vice-Chancellor was that he left the post before completing the tenure when he realised that he could not accomplish the changes he wanted to. This was in sharp contrast with most Vice-Chancellors in India who try to hang on to the position as long as they can because of the perks and power the office provides them. Dr Amrik Singh rated his academic achievements more highly than the attractions of that or any other administrative office.

An anecdote is worth telling here. Dr Mahip Singh told me that he was once on the national committee that decides Indian awards such as Padma Bhushan etc. and that he suggested to Dr Amrik Singh that he (Dr Amrik Singh) deserved that honour. Dr Mahip Singh further suggested that in order to follow the procedure he could get some one to nominate him, as it was certain that the committee would select him for one of the awards. Dr Amrik Singh flatly refused to do that and said that he was not interested in any of those awards. For him, what mattered was the respect he received from his academic profession and not state awards.

Dr Amrik Singh viewed himself as an acute observer of the education system in India as a whole and did not have any particularly strong interest in Punjab Studies until 1984. The Operation Blue Star and the November 1984 anti-Sikh carnage changed that. Although he was rooted in his cultural and religious identity as a Sikh, his outlook on political matters was broadly secular

and left-wing. 1984 provoked him to examine Punjab and Sikh issues from that progressive outlook. Up until then, we did not know each other and until one day, in late 1984, I received a letter from him that he had read and liked my articles in the *Economic and Political Weekly* on the government media's coverage of Operation Blue Star and that he would be thankful if I could contribute an article on the coverage of the entire Punjab crisis by both the government and non-government media for a book he was editing on the Punjab crisis. A few days after that, he landed at my house in Chandigarh. I was a bit overwhelmed. I was at the start of my academic career and he was already an educationist of international repute. But I was relieved to find very quickly that for Dr Amrik Singh, these academic hierarchies did not matter. What he valued was the relationship of ideas. We nearly became friends transcending age and status hierarchies. I gladly accepted the invitation to write the article he had requested, but I took time to complete it. One day, another letter came with just two sentences: 'The book is being withheld from publishing because your contribution has not arrived. That is unfair'. I replied to him only by posting the completed article. The book *Punjab in Indian Politics: Issues and Trends* (1985) in my view will remain to be one of the best edited collections on many dimensions of the Punjab crisis.

I spent nearly a year as a Visiting Professor at JNU in 2009 and when I met Dr Amrik Singh, he said that it was not good enough to write books sitting in Oxford and asked me that I should contribute articles for newspapers in India and finally got me to contribute to *The Tribune*. He was a teacher and public intellectual who believed that those who have had the privilege of good education have a moral duty to share their learning with the wider public. He was weak in health but was still contributing articles to *The Tribune* and *The Hindustan Times* on a regular basis on a very wide range of issues concerning teaching methods, curriculum development, assessment methods, research and administration in Indian education. His views and observations on all aspects of the education system were taken note of by policy makers. He became the most well known observer of Indian education. One indicator of the esteem he enjoyed was that his cremation on March 24 was personally attended by the Vice-President of India Hamid Ansari and the Chief Minister of Delhi Sheila Dixit. The President of India and the Prime Minister sent messages of condolences to the family.

Dr Amrik Singh played a leading role in setting up the National Institute of Punjab Studies in New Delhi. Through that, he has left a rich legacy to Punjab Studies.

He is survived by his wife Harsharan Kaur, son Pradeep Singh, a retired IAS officer, and daughter Rachna, a pottery artist.

Pritam Singh
March, 2011