

OBITUARY

VIJAY KANHERE, 1951-2006

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June 20, 2006 brought shocking news and it brought to an end a relationship of more than 20 years. Vijay Kanhere was a friend, philosopher and guide and I am incredibly fortunate to have had his affection for so many years.

Vijay was one of the greatest activists in the field of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and will be greatly missed by other activists. He was primarily a teacher and will be missed by his students, many of who were from economically deprived groups.

Vijay was born in 1951 in Tarapur and later moved to Dombivli. He passed his BSc from Mumbai University in 1971 and joined Baba Amte's project at Chandrapur. Later, he moved to Dhule to join a struggle for the land of the adivasis. He stayed for 10 years and helped form the Shramik Sanghatana, an organisation working for the rights of adivasis. He helped formulate many of the Sanghatana's strategies such as participatory negotiations, and brought a gender perspective to these strategies.

Many researchers visited the Sanghatana to write about its activities. In 1980 Vijay read a paper at a national workshop on participatory research. In 1981, he presented a paper at an international conference in Yugoslavia. He worked with the International Labour Organisation on a project during this period. He co-researched peoples' participation in the struggle in Dhule, with the Delhi-based Society For Participatory Research In Asia (PRIA).

In 1984, PRIA and he took up a study on OSH. Due to this initiative, PRIA started its national programme on OHS. In 1988, Vijay's painstaking efforts contributed to the opening of an OSH centre in Mumbai. He helped to design OSH training programmes for medical practitioners. On behalf of the centre, Vijay did research on the municipal dumping ground and sewer workers.

He was an active part of the centre's programme to diagnose textile mill workers. Workers were issued certificates if they were suffering from an occupational disease. The certificate was useful in claiming compensation from the Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC). Such efforts led to many unprecedented compensation claims, including the first successful claim for noise-induced hearing loss.

The OHS centre in Mumbai is Vijay's monument. The lung function tests and audiograms were a breakthrough in the

OSH field and benefited hundreds of workers. He fought some difficult struggles for compensation for workers—such as one for radiation injury and another for injury dues to acid fumes—and won.

In 1990, PRIA launched the National Campaign on Dust Related Diseases and Vijay travelled to Bihar and Punjab to meet workers. He also visited Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu to work with various organisations on OHS. He helped form a watchdog committee on ESIC in Aurangabad and examined workers in Pune and Thane. He gave lectures in China and Thailand. He visited the USA, UK, Australia, Japan, South Africa, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and other countries. He contributed immeasurably not only to the OHS movement in India, but also to the Asian movement through the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims (ANROAV).

He wrote for the lay reader as well as for specialists. He contributed to almost all of PRIA's publications on OHS. A booklet titled 'Mismanaging health and safety at work' is indispensable. He also wrote popular booklets in Marathi on OHS. He co-authored an invaluable book on disability assessment criteria, a barely explored field in India.

Vijay was a down-to-earth person. Even when visiting a country with a cold climate, he would wear rubber slippers. He could immediately sense the emotional need of others and would act accordingly. He always put emotions first, logic next. Although soft-spoken and friendly with everyone, he would not let anyone dominate or intimidate him.

Vijay demystified knowledge. His own knowledge was so profound that he could ask questions that made experts uncomfortable. They would begin by taking him lightly and then become serious once he got into a debate. He did not believe in long lectures. His own lectures were brief and sometimes he gave his time to other speakers.

Among the many things that Vijay taught me was to not to start any relationship with suspicion, but with trust. He would tell me, "What is revolution? Bringing about change. And we are doing that."

Vijay was planning to visit victims of occupational diseases like silicosis to convince them to form an organisation. Perhaps the best tribute to him would be to strengthen such organisations.