

## Satpal Dang – a personal memoir

In the early 1990s when this journal was in its infancy and struggling to establish itself, I used to enthusiastically show it to all those who I thought would be even remotely interested. I always carried copies and passed them on to colleagues, friends and family members. I then requested them to read it, spread the word among their doctor contacts and of course, solicit subscriptions. Many of them would look at the journal and say the usual nice things, and it often ended there.

Satpal Dang was my wife's maternal uncle. I had heard of him as he was a prominent political activist of the Communist Party of India in Amritsar, Punjab. During one of our earliest interactions, I presented him with a copy of the journal. He promised he would read it and get back to me. Within a week, I received a three-page-long handwritten letter containing his views on the journal. It dwelt mainly on the importance of the subject and how he could help spread the word. There was also a cheque for his personal subscription. Within the next few weeks, we started receiving subscriptions from doctors in Punjab, some collected by him and others directly. He soon requested more copies of the journal and I promptly arranged to have them sent to him. I discovered later that he had personally written to more than 100 doctors from all over India, urging them to subscribe.

Later on, he was to write for the journal. He also sent us newspaper clippings about various scams involving the medical fraternity in Punjab. He wrote articles on the deterioration in ethics among doctors for the newspapers of Punjab, especially *The Tribune*. In the late 1990s, he led a campaign to punish those involved in a kidney transplant racket in Amritsar. Ironically, he got a lot of flak from the local medical professionals for being "anti-doctor". When I visited him and his wife, Vimla, in 2002, he spoke about the campaign and how very few doctors supported his stance. He also expressed his happiness with the fact that the journal had grown in its sweep and reach.

The Dangs were a family which, like many others in that tragic juncture in history, had fled from Lahore to India in the aftermath of the Partition. Satpal had been playing an active role in the student movement in Lahore. He met Vimla Bakaya, who belonged to a Kashmiri family and was also a student activist, in Bombay and the two got married. After a stint in Bombay as secretary of the Students Federation, Satpal became a full-time activist of the Communist Party of India, as did Vimla. They volunteered to go to Cheharta, a suburb of Amritsar, to organise trade unions in this new industrial belt. Due to his commitment to the cause, which entailed living and working among the working class and the poor of Cheharta, Satpal (and later Vimla) was elected

a member of the Punjab Assembly on three consecutive occasions, and even became a minister for a brief period. During the period of Khalistani terror, the Dangs were in the forefront of those organising ground-level resistance, as well as helping innocent victims of terrorism. In fact, it was well known that Cheharta was one of the few areas where the Khalistanis were unable to make any inroads and Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale had announced a reward for killing the Dangs (many activists of the communist parties were killed by the Khalistanis during this time). While at this point, the communists fought for the victims of terrorism, they later also fought for the victims of police excesses and fake encounters. When he received the Padma Shri, Satpal returned it, saying that he had no interest in such titles. Later in his life, Satpal became a prolific writer, dealing especially with issues related to terrorism. He has three books, two of them focused on terrorism in Punjab, and numerous articles to his credit.

Since his death, a lot has been written about the amazingly simple life of the Dangs. Although I was well aware of this aspect of his life, I was still surprised and felt humbled when during my only visit to him in Cheharta, I saw that he and Vimla were staying in an anteroom of the party office. They had almost no possessions, except two cupboards full of books. When they took us sightseeing, almost everyone in the city seemed to know them.

Satpal Dang continued to be interested in this journal till very recently. When I met him in 2007, he enquired in detail about the progress of the journal and was keen to know whether the subscribers he had got us from Punjab had renewed their subscriptions. For the last two years of his life, he developed severe dementia, and a party worker and his family looked after him. Vimla passed away in 2010 and Satpal in June 2013. They bore no children, which was apparently a conscious decision since they felt that given their lifestyle, they would not be able to look after them. They did not leave behind any property or money, but left behind the huge legacy of lives spent with ordinary working people, lives spent fighting for these people's right to a decent existence.

Satpal Dang was no doctor, ethicist, academic or scientist, but he enthusiastically supported this journal's struggle for existence in its early days. More importantly, he led an exemplary life marked by high ethical standards as a grassroots political activist. I suspect that like many others of that time whose thinking was similar, he knew no other way.

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