

Dr Ajay Khare: a personal tribute to a dear comrade



Ajay Khare was not a hero. He was just an ordinary person like most of us, with extraordinary qualities. That is how I will remember him.

I first got to know Ajay as a young and idealistic medical graduate, 30 years back, in a workshop on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. I had met him briefly earlier at a convention of medical students organised by the Students Federation of India in Gwalior. Ajay was involved in the students' movement during his college days in Gandhi Medical College in Bhopal and was instrumental in organising medical relief for the victims of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy.

Ajay, unlike many of us, did not allow the harsh reality of the real world to tinge his idealism. He remained starry eyed all his life, always the optimist who believed that things can change.

Ajay was to later qualify with a postgraduate diploma in ophthalmology, but his vision of a different world from the world we live in would take him beyond the confines of the practice of medicine. While he never left behind the discipline of medicine, his search for alternatives led him to explore broader pastures. He went on to be a part of the People's Science Movement and the All India People's Science Network that was formed after a huge nationwide *jatha* that culminated in Bhopal in 1987. Ajay was a natural recruit for the science movement which was formed in the backdrop of the industrial genocide by Union Carbide in Bhopal in 1984, impelling many young people to organise and question the misuse of science under capitalism.

At the same time Ajay was part of a new movement that also believed in the potential of science as a liberator of the most oppressed people. Towards this end he helped build the Madhya Pradesh Vigyan Sabha (MPVS) in the late 1980s. MPVS became a pioneer of sorts in MP, choosing to work with adivasi populations in one of its most backward regions of the state. The Tamia centre of MPVS (in Chindwara district) germinated ideas and interventions that addressed everyday issues of the adivasi community. Experiments in the field led to the introduction of a low-cost water purification system and social mobilisation led to the local utilisation of non-timber forest produce.

Throughout the 1990s we would meet often, as comrades in the people's science and literacy movements. Ajay could never stop smiling and he could not ever resist telling a joke that he had recently come across. He had the endearing quality, so rare

these days, of being able to laugh with his heart and not his brain. I do not remember Ajay ever laughing at anyone (except at the bankrupt system we all so loved to hate) but rather with everyone as a method of sharing camaraderie. His jokes were famous, and sometimes repetitive, but we always loved them!

Ajay was one of the key people involved in building Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, after it was formed in 2001. He shouldered the major burden of the National Health Assembly in Bhopal in 2007. He also coordinated the national secretariat of the JSA from Bhopal for three years after that. We still find it so difficult to think of the JSA without Ajay, without his infectious laughter and without his continuous and genuine effort to work across differences.

Ajay had a fault. He always had to speak out and speak exactly what he thought was right. In every meeting he would sit right at the front, and every time he felt something was amiss, he would be up on his feet. He spoke from the heart and he spoke too fast, but he would make sure he was understood. That got him into trouble many times. In MP he became a major force in invigorating the ASHA programme of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). After working almost round the clock in the NRHM, he was victimised for speaking out against corruption and fraud in the system. False charge-sheets pursued him till the end. Did Ajay stop smiling? Never.

His most recent calling was as leader of the MP Medical Officers' Association (MPMOA). Through his persistence the MPMOA became a thorn in the flesh for corrupt officers in the health department. Always self-effacing, Ajay never talked loudly about his achievements. He just laughed and carried on. Only those close to him realised that there was a core of steel behind that ever-smiling face. He took on the evil, rotten system but never became cynical. It was something he needed to do, because he never changed from the starry eyed boy of 30 years back.

They will not dedicate memorials for Ajay. For he was an ordinary person like all of us...but with extraordinary qualities. A part of him will live in all of us. Keep smiling my comrade, my friend, my younger brother. When this pall of sadness lifts, I promise I will smile with you. Perhaps also share a joke with you. I know you would like that.

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