

In Remembrance:
Professor Randhir Singh
(1922-2016)

Professor Randhir Singh (born on January 11th, 1922), an internationally renowned Marxist scholar of political science and one of the leading nationally known Punjabi intellectuals, died on January 31st, 2016 in Delhi, just a few weeks after celebrating his 94th birthday. When I was an undergraduate student of economics at Panjab University, Chandigarh, and was increasingly interested in Marxism and the Naxalite movement, a left-wing economist, Amit Bhaduri, visited the university. I and Harbhajan Halvarvi, an underground Naxalite activist who later became the editor of *Punjabi Tribune*, went to meet him. We wanted to find out if he could help us in establishing contacts with Marxist intellectuals in Calcutta who could help us in conducting study circles on Marxism in Punjab. He suggested to us that we should establish contact with Randhir Singh and Bipan Chandra of Delhi University. That was the first time I heard about Randhir Singh. Since that time we had a long history as friends and political-intellectual colleagues. When I used to look at the intellectual heritage of Punjabi communists, he was the one who inspired me the most.

After I joined Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in 1972, I was interested in Trotskyism and became part of a small but intellectually advanced group in the university. When this group thought of establishing contacts with independent Marxist intellectuals and activists who were not totally integrated into Stalinist parties, Randhir Singh appeared as the most attractive to us. I contacted him and he invited the whole group to meet him at his house. About ten of us went to his house, and we had several hours of fascinating discussions on the world communist movement and the Indian left. That meeting remained a memorable part of our mutual engagement.

Randhir Singh had a brief stint at JNU and spent his entire academic career otherwise at Delhi University. He was a kind of a legend as a teacher. His lectures were so popular for the sheer brilliance of their content and their delivery with passion and engagement that students from as diverse disciplines as Economics, Sociology, Law, Literature, Mathematics and even Physics and Chemistry

attended in large numbers. Unlike most academics these days, who pride themselves on their research publications, he was very proud of his teaching achievements. There are, of course, generations of successful academics with impressive research publications in India and abroad who attribute their fascination with the subject of political science to attending Randhir Singh's lectures.

As was characteristic of him, he was hesitant to write or talk about his "bio-data," and at the insistence of the journal *Mainstream*, which published a felicitation volume (1988) after his retirement in 1987, he wrote a short piece called "In Lieu of a Bio-Data" whose opening lines are very disarming: "A 'bio-data', now, has been a source of perennial embarrassment for me. For I simply don't have any—I have no credentials at all so far as scholarship in the academy goes. I have only a life to speak of, lived somewhat differently, and on a generous interpretation, may be a little more meaningfully too." It indeed was a brilliantly meaningful life.

He came from a cultured and educated family background. His father was a reputed physician and surgeon. Randhir Singh also toyed with idea of becoming a doctor but abandoned that aim to pursue his political activities. In his childhood, he was much influenced by the ideals of Bhagat Singh. He was a primary school kid when Bhagat Singh and his comrades were hanged, and he was briefly detained for shouting revolutionary slogans while passing in front of the Lahore Central Jail on his way to school. Many years later, he spent a few months in the "Terrorist Ward" of the same jail where he met some of the surviving comrades of Bhagat Singh such as Kishori Lal, and described those few months as "among the happiest in my life." While pursuing his college studies in Lahore, he not only actively participated in the student movement; he spent the vacations in organizing workers in factories and peasants in the villages. The Punjabi writer Balwant Gargi has written that Randhir Singh was intellectually the brightest of all young leftist in Lahore and was almost considered as the Marx of the group. He spent a year in imprisonment for opposing the British government's war policies, and after his jail term was over, he worked on the editorial staff of the Communist Party's Punjabi weekly *Jang-i-Azadi*. He also wrote a biography of the legendary Ghadar hero Baba Gurmukh Singh, which was published in 1945 as *Ghadar Heroes: A Forgotten Story of the Punjab Revolutionaries of 1914-1915*. For some time, he added "Josh" to his name and he published a book of Punjabi poems *Rahan Di Dhoor* ("Stormy dust of the paths") in 1950. He also managed to pass his M.A. in Political Science with first class first from the pre-Partition Panjab

University. After Partition, he took up teaching as a career because, in his view, “after ‘revolution-making’, teaching perhaps holds the maximum possibilities for a non-alienated life.”

His fame as a teacher was recounted at the memorial meeting held in Delhi shortly after his death. My friend Harsh Kapoor described it in a personal message to me: “The first speaker was the old CPI member and prominent figure from NFIW [National Federation of Indian Women] from Delhi Premila Loomba. She fondly recalled her comrade and friend Randhir. She recounted that in 1946 there was strike at Punjab University that had lasted three months... exams were announced for June, there was panic among many students who said they could not appear for the exams as they had had no preparations for certain papers and most notably the one on Political Theory. They approached one of the professors who suggested and recommended that they should get help from Randhir (who was a favorite and bright student). Randhir was underground in those days but word was sent to him, he agreed and taught them for two months; every night around 8 pm or so he would appear in a disguise and would come to this safe space, a cellar in some house. He taught and prepared these 8 students so thoroughly that they did well and would not have done so under normal circumstances.” That Randhir was gifted enough in his communication skills to engage even with non-university audiences was also recalled at this meeting by Dr. Harbans Mukhia, a retired professor of history from JNU. In the words of Harsh Kapoor: “Harbans Mukhia was young and he very fondly recalled his association with Randhir Singh and Bipan Chandra at Delhi University. It was 1967, there was big time crisis in the air and it is difficult to put into words that experience, that time when revolution seemed in the air and around the corner, how all three had joined the CPI (M) then. He went on to tell the story of a week-long trip that the three of them made to rural Punjab village areas meeting peasants, landless workers, and how Randhir Singh would speak to this rural audience with incredible fluency in Punjabi just as he held sway in English at the university. He would speak and then was available for discussions after his intervention.”

Prof. Randhir Singh attracted critical acclaim in the world of political science with the publication of his book *Reason, Revolution and Political Theory* (1967), which is a powerful and widely reviewed Marxist critique of the work of the conservative political theorist Michael Oakeshott. The late Mohit Sen, a CPI theorist, reviewing the book in *Economic and Political Weekly* had remarked that

with this book, Indian political scientists could claim an equal status in the world of international scholarship on political theory.

He wrote a very influential article on Punjab entitled “Marxists and the Sikh Extremist Movement in Punjab” (1987) in *EPW* in which he displayed his exemplary intellectual integrity, and overcame personal considerations in criticizing very sharply his lifelong friend, the historian Bipan Chandra. He criticized what he called “the Ribeiro—Giri Lal Jain—Bipan Chandra line” for its advocacy of resolving the Punjab crisis by using the repressive apparatus of the state in liquidating the Sikh extremists. He also ridiculed the CPI and CPM for indirectly endorsing this line by joining the BJP in “united all party rallies” against Sikh extremism under the name of “unity and integrity of the country.” He argued that this line not only reinforced the class rule of the Indian state, it also fed the aggressive Hindu chauvinist nationalism. The robustness of his criticism of this line has been proven by the subsequent events that have shown that the main beneficiary of this line has been the BJP-led political tendencies and forces.

Apart from being one of the founders, along with Bipan Chandra, of the Delhi University Teachers Association, Randhir Singh was an active supporter of the trade unions, *Kisan Sabhas*, human rights groups, and student movements as well as campaigning organizations for women, Dalits, tribal communities and minority nationalities in the country. Gautam Navlakha, a human rights activist, spoke on this aspect of Randhir Singh’s life at the memorial meeting in Delhi. In Harsh Kapoor’s words, “Gautam Navlakha described how he was in constant touch with Randhir Singh after he had accepted to be the special advisor to PUDR [People’s Union for Democratic Rights). For Gautam the big thing about this man of the left was his manner of being able to open door for conversation even with people he disagreed with—his was a language within which and with which people from various stands of the left could converse. He, his ways and interactions typified ‘communist ethics.’” Randhir Singh and Gursharan Singh, the radical Punjabi theatre activist whose sister is married to him, were a source of enormous moral and intellectual support, and political guidance to many left wing activists and organizations in Punjab. In recognition of his intellectual and political contributions, Chandigarh’s Institute for Development and Communications has named its library after him.

He was constantly refreshing his ideas and perspectives. In his magnum opus *Crisis of Socialism* (2006) of 1100 pages, he displayed a remarkable understanding of the emerging vision of eco-socialism, presenting its critique of both capitalism’s environmentally destructive character as well as that of the old Soviet-style

socialism. He was one of the very few left-wing intellectuals in India who not only grasped the historical significance of the perspective of eco-socialism but also contributed to further articulating and developing it. This is what brought me closest to him intellectually and politically.

In terms of the combination of moral and intellectual qualities, Randhir Singh was one of the tallest public intellectuals India has produced in the last few decades, and the Punjabis can be genuinely proud of him for contributing to weakening if not breaking altogether the national stereotype in India of Punjabis especially the Sikhs as only farmers and soldiers.

His was the well-lived life of a committed Marxist intellectual, and his legacy will continue.

He is survived by his wife, Mohinder Kaur; two daughters: Shimareet, a doctor in the U.S. and Priyaleen, a professor of architecture in Delhi; and two grandchildren, Nishant and Anant.

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