

OBITUARY

A Fine doctor

SANJAY NAGRAL

I met Jonathan Fine for the first time in 2011. He was to travel back to Boston through Mumbai after a stint in Chattisgarh, where he had volunteered with Jan Swasthya Sahayog, the well-known rural hospital near Bilaspur. A friend suggested that since he was a doctor who had done pioneering work by setting up the renowned organisation Physicians for Human Rights, we should arrange a talk by him for medical students. A lecture was thus organised at my alma mater, the GS Medical College & KEM Hospital, where Jonathan spoke on "Why should doctors engage with human rights? In his characteristic blunt style, rather than talk about his past, he exhorted the audience to visit Chattisgarh and see the severe inequities he had witnessed.

From there began my acquaintance with this rather unique personality. Unique for many reasons, amongst which was his indefatigable energy at his age of close to 80. Jonathan's was also the antithesis of the polite, measured manner that is a common trait of Westerners. He was direct and spoke his mind, almost curt but forceful. After he went back to the US, we kept in touch through emails where he would always enquire about the goings on in the Binayak Sen case. The next year I had a chance to visit Boston and wrote to Jonathan. In what I guess is very un-American, he invited me and my wife to stay with him. We spent a very interesting three days at his Boston home. On long walks around his Cambridge home, he spoke of his relationship to the city, his accidental involvement in human rights, and his distaste of what he called "armchair American academia". He took us to a meeting of AID Boston, a group of Indian students on American campuses, with whom he had a close association. We also visited the office of the Physicians for Human Rights where I spoke on the way doctors perceive human rights in India. On my last day with him, on hearing that I was hiring a car to drive to Vermont he chided me, handing me his car key, and said "Take it along". We had a lovely three days, driving through New England in Jonathan's old Datsun.

Jonathan Fine, born in 1931, completed his undergraduate medical studies at the Yale School of Medicine, then did a Master's in public health from the Johns Hopkins School of

Public Health. Jonathan's connection with India is rather old. After his graduation he was awarded a Fulbright grant to study health needs in India. He has been quoted as saying "That was a seminal event for me. I became interested in poverty overseas and in injustice. It led to a lifelong concern with international health and development."

He later became director of the North End Community Health Center in Boston. In 1981, he received a phone call that he said changed his life. The secret police had kidnapped three physicians in Chile during the Pinochet regime and there was a request for American physicians to help. Jonathan travelled to Chile and, through a public campaign, helped secure the release of the doctors. A year later, while on a trip to Guatemala, Jonathan brazenly called a press conference on the steps of the Presidential Palace in Guatemala City to protest the disappearance of Dr Juan José Hurtado. The Guatemalan doctor was released five days later. Encouraged by this experience he went on to co-found Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) and was its first executive director. PHR soon grew into a worldwide advocacy organisation. Jonathan sold his house to help finance his early human rights endeavours. After founding PHR, he led numerous investigations – including those into the massive use of tear gas in South Korea and the deployment of chemical weapons against the Kurds in Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and the Philippines – some of which resulted in the prompt release of political prisoners.

Over the past three decades, PHR has investigated and documented the medical effects of war crimes and mass atrocities in more than 60 nations around the world. PHR has worked with other organisations to lobby governments and courts worldwide to address and stop torture and killing. Sometimes interviewing victims one-on-one, and at other times exhuming and examining bodies in mass graves, it has documented abuses including the use of chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds, the prevalence of sexual violence in war zones, and all manner of torture. PHR shared the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize with the other organisations that participated in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

I kept in touch with Jonathan through e-mails though his responses grew briefer, and towards 2016, he stopped responding. I kept enquiring through friends in Boston and was told that he was rather unwell after a fall. In May 2017, I had an opportunity to visit Boston. I was informed that he was ailing, admitted to a convalescent facility and not very keen to meet visitors. However, I persuaded a friend from AID Boston to take me along. Jonathan was on a bed, immobile, hooked onto

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oxygen, a drip on with a catheter in place. This is something I see daily at work, but somehow, seeing Jonathan like this was disturbing. On asking whether he recognised me, he looked into my eyes and hollered "Of course I remember you. What's happening in India? Chattisgarh? How is Binayak?" And when I tried to make polite conversation about his health and recovery he growled "Here is the American healthcare system for you. And now we have Trump. They are not going to allow me to live for long." On enquiring about his other activities, I was told that he had again sold his Cambridge house, this time to fund a group working with Afro-American prisoners in American jails. Jonathan passed away on January the 17th.

Medicine is a profession where it is difficult not to be moved by inequities and injustice. There is hence an old tradition of physicians going beyond their work to take up humanitarian causes, advocacy and even direct action. There are several examples of such individuals across the world and in India.

However, even amongst those who do so, very few dare to take on an area like human rights which is potentially fraught with confrontation with the state, law enforcement and the armed forces. It involves personal risk and severe reprisals.

Even among those with strong belief, not many at the age of 80 will spend six months in the sweltering heat of Chattisgarh in Central India, spending time with the tribals to document their problems. In that sense, Jonathan was an outlier with enormous personal courage perhaps emanating from a stubborn conviction about one's life's purpose. He is quoted as saying in a 2014 interview. "Unfortunately, the field of advocacy and investigation is going to be absolutely essential as long as humanity and all its mischiefs are possible," "We're never going to be deprived of an opportunity to combat injustice"

After Jonathan's 2011 talk at GS Medical College, Dr Manu Kothari who chaired the meeting exclaimed "You are indeed a Fine doctor". As usual he was being witty, but also very accurate.

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