

OBITUARY

Celebrating Dr Noshir H Antia

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I am deeply saddened that Dr Antia has passed away. I had an extremely warm and friendly relationship with him, for he was unique. He was difficult but accessible and, above all, lovable.

Dr Antia was on the selection committee to recruit me into Jawaharlal Nehru University. A few years ago he invited me to spend some time with the Foundation for Research in Community Health in Pune. What impressed me was the amount of kind time he gave his research assistants. He made me join these meetings and I learnt a lot from them, above all patience and empathy. It was also evident that he had no time for idiotic ideas of bureaucracy. He could be sharp tempered with those who wielded power, however small, unwisely.

During my visit to FRCH he organised a lecture in Pune University for me and invited me home for a drink and a wonderful dinner. I'll never forget the chicken with saag, and the two stories he told me. One was about how he convinced authorities of the hospital where he worked as a plastic surgeon that air-conditioning was spreading infection among his patients. The second was about how difficult a time he had with the same authorities to permit him to use papaya skin on burns patients. Apparently this was also hugely successful. He was telling me, I suppose, that it's worth talking to people to convince them, rather than dismissing them as enemies. He was also telling me to look towards our own traditions, although I was skeptical about the manner in which he romanticised "our" traditions. Whose traditions were these? Of the dalits or upper castes? He had no such questions and dismissed mine.

Dr Antia was on the committee that recommended the establishment of the Centre for Social Medicine and Community Health when JNU was being established. The reasoning was simple: departments of preventive and social medicine were wedded to hospitals and had therefore been crippled at birth: public health was about how a society decides to use its resources. He was also opposed to what has now fructified as the Public Health Foundation of India.

I shall grieve for this loss but also celebrate him, for he enriched me in so many ways. He was a teacher who also taught me how to teach.

Innovator in community health

RAVI DUGGAL

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In 1981 I went to the Foundation for Research in Community Health with an economist friend who had applied for a job as a researcher there. He came out of the interview impressed with Dr Antia and suggested that I see him. I walked in uninvited and in two minutes flat Dr Antia offered me a job to head a new research project to review what non-governmental organisations in Maharashtra were doing in the health sector. All I had told him was that during my post-graduate studies I had worked on a project enquiring into what the corporate sector was doing in rural development activities. This chance meeting became a career in research on health systems financing and economics in India.

While Dr Antia was a person with innovative ideas and vision, his most outstanding characteristic was the space that he gave researchers and activists to work independently and unquestioned. Everyone did not enjoy this privilege but he could judge who deserved it and he was rarely wrong.

He belonged to a profession which is largely in the business of making money and he was concerned about this. He despised the promotions of the pharmaceutical industry and the medical profession's malpractices. He could have had a lucrative practice as a plastic surgeon but he opted instead to do reconstructive surgeries in leprosy patients, especially of the hand. This did not earn him money but gave him satisfaction and his patients' appreciation because they regained lost livelihoods.

Dr Antia was a strong upholder of medical ethics and would not hesitate to rebuke friends in the profession who violated them. My colleague Manisha Gupte and I wrote in a newspaper about the abhorrent practice of hymenoplasties which gynaecologists were doing to reconstruct lost virginities. In the process we exposed some well-known doctors. One such gynaecologist and friend of Dr Antia complained to him. He must have been surprised when Dr Antia chastised him.

His contributions to community health have been remarkable, from the Mandwa and Uran community health projects and his work for leprosy patients to espousing an alternative health policy via the ICSSR-ICMR joint report on Health for All to his faith in the potential of panchayat raj institutions.

His greatest contribution to the health sector has been the human capital he mentored. FRCH graduates are making their own waves and contributing to India's health sector. This is a reward above all awards that a guru like him would cherish.