

OBITUARY

Amit Sengupta, 1958-2018

MOHAN RAO

I would like to thank the organisers of this conference* for their truly inspiring need to be in touch with the ideas and ethics of Health For All, with a tribute to Dr Amit Sengupta.

I feel honoured to have been asked to be here. The storm of tributes to Amit from all over the world punctures one conceit of mine: that Amit was my special friend. I realise he was not just my special friend, but a special friend, mentor, hand-holder to many people, of all ages. He taught us all public health, but also organising, reaching out across political divides, across movements.

On the face of it, it seems strange for me to pay tribute to Amit and his vision of Health for All at a conference on bio-ethics. I say this because it seems — to an outsider — that bio ethics is individual-centered, clinic-centred, and bio-medicine centred. Above all, neo-imperial and a-historical with Platonic quiddities.

But Amit Sengupta's public health was population-based, rejected ideas of Methodological Individualism in favour of Methodological Holism, was sharply historical, and shaped by a politics that was inclusive and with an acute understanding of the economic and social. Sharply critical of moral relativism, this public health was grounded in a respect for facts and the politics of the gathering of facts and their interpretation. The politics was a relationship of the global with the local, never one-sided.

But bio-ethics, especially in countries like India, has moved far beyond the individual and the clinic, as I well know.

Actually, I do not remember when I first met Amit. I moved to Delhi in 1982, so it must have been 1983 or 1984 when I met him first, possibly at a meeting called by Vina Mazumdar, legendary feminist and author of the classic *Towards Equality* report, at the Constitution Club to discuss Sikh personal laws. I know that in 1989 he asked me to write



a piece on women's health for a journal called *Health Monitor*, he briefly edited. Amit was very active in the rational drug movement which later congealed into the All India Drug Action Network. His first publication, if I remember right, was the 1986 edited volume *The Drug Industry and the Indian People* with a foreword by Mr PN Haksar, who was the President then of the Delhi Science Forum.

I joined the faculty of the Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, JNU, as an

Assistant Professor in 1987, around which time my friendship with Amit also translated into my becoming an Executive Committee member of the Delhi Science Forum, perhaps in 1990.

During this period, he was writing regularly on drug policies, especially in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. This soon turned into a massive campaign against India joining the WTO. At the same time, he was also involved with campaigns that I was involved in, along with women's groups: against coercive population policies, against certain contraceptives, against the two-child norm.

Through his campaigns for All India Drug Action Network, Amit had also become a lay expert in law. It was partly at his urging that I got involved in a Supreme Court PIL, along with AIDWA, against quinacrine sterilisations. When the Supreme Court judgment banning quinacrine sterilisations came, I was shattered. We had sought compensation to and follow-up of all women who had been thus sterilised. We had also sought punitive action against the doctors and NGOs which had been wilfully carrying out illegal sterilisation of women with a dangerous method. We had also sought directions from the Supreme Court that the government establish and fund an autonomous organisation, along the lines of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in UK, that would monitor and regulate all public health technology in the country. The Supreme Court judgment addressed none of these issues.

Illustrating a fundamental difference between us, Amit was triumphant. He always looked at the silver lining, while I looked at the cloud.

When Vina Mazumdar brought together women's groups in the nineties and wanted some public health information,

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To cite: Rao M. Amit Sengupta, 1958 – 2018. *Indian J Med Ethics*. 2019 Jan-Mar;4(1) NS: 85-6. DOI: 10.20529/IJME.2018.101.

Published online on December 7, 2018.

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she would summon public health scholar and professor in our Centre, Imrana Qadeer, Amit Sengupta and myself. While Imrana and I saw ourselves as part of these women's groups, Amit did not necessarily belong. He would be there at farmers' movements, workers' movements, that we did not become part of.

We were there together in the founding of the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) and later in 2000, in Dhaka at the People's Health Movement's inauguration. What exaltation, what madness, what utopianism! I was on the committee that drafted the PHM Charter and met extraordinary people, from Nadine Gassman, to Sarah Sexton, to Rene Lowensen, to Claudio Schuftan, to Niklas Hallstrom and David Sanders, among others. All of them public health scholars, making moral and ethical the point for a more just world – if you wanted health for all.

We were both writing at this time about the maw of the second phase of globalisation and what it meant for health, sadly prescient essays. Amit contributed to my edited volume *Disinvesting in Health: The World Bank's Prescriptions for Health*. His essay here, in a sense, heralded the work that was later to come from Kaushik Sundararajan, Sarah Sexton and Catherine Waldby and others, on financialisation of health and the biotech boom.

Amit lectured in our Centre in JNU without fail every year. At this time, however, he was deeply influential in shaping the PhD research of my student Mr MR Santhosh entitled, "*An Enquiry Into the Implications of Liberalisation on the Indian Drugs and Pharmaceuticals Sector, 1991-2010.*"

Amit's public engagement, then, was deeply informed by research and his contribution to academics has been immense.

It seems to me, he really flowered at this time, taking on organisational responsibilities with JSA, and the PHM, while also participating in the *Global Health Watch* and other activities. He wrote extensively and was the editor of the alternative World Health Report, called the *Global Health Watch*, of which there are now four magnificent volumes, covering almost every aspect of the political economy of health, from health financing, to speculative finance in biotechnology, to health systems research and the health of the marginalised, in addition to his area of specialisation, globalisation, intellectual

property rights and the pharmaceutical industry.

He wanted me to get involved with the *Global Health Watch*, but somehow it did not work out.

Amit was extraordinary because he did not carry the burden of "Bongness," although he was not particularly pleased with my talk on Bengali masculinities. He would speak in English or Hindi to Jayati Ghosh, for example. I wondered if it was because they were both *probashis*. He told me it was because if he spoke in Bangla to her, he would be expected to say "Jayati-di", and he hated this affinal affliction.

I cannot remember the number of times we have marched together in demonstrations for public health issues, and against the ferocious Hindutva nationalism we confront. An incurable optimist, he assured me that the miasma that suffocates us today in places like JNU, would lift next year.

A second fundamental difference between us: he was, what I would call an ultra-rationalist. I believe in rationalism too, but have some very profound differences with some aspects of modernity and its certitudes. He was extremely skeptical when I took recourse to acupuncture, to give up smoking in 2008. I gave up smoking, and it was miraculous.

To my surprise, my blood pressure, as a side effect of acupuncture, came back to normal. My doctor had a fit when I asked him if it could be due to acupuncture. He said, what do I know of this unscientific system? But he took me off anti-hypertensive medication.

Amit did not believe in these miracles. I do. Because Amit himself was a miracle. The fact that there is this huge community of people across the world, grieving for his death, and working for a better tomorrow is a miracle. Comrade Amit Sengupta Zindabad! We will continue our battles for a more just world, Amit, inspired by you.

But right now, Amit, you have left us all bereft, desolate, unable to believe you are not there with us, exhorting us, taking us along with a smile, a slogan, and occasionally, a dance. You didn't quite change the world as you wanted to, but you did change our worlds, making them so much richer.

* Note: This tribute was read at the 14th World Congress of Bioethics and 7th National Bioethics Conference on December 5, 2018

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