

Remembering Ajit

In August 1965, newly married and barely 30, I became Deputy Commissioner of the old British District of Ambala, which stretched from Bhakra to the Yamuna, below the hills. There was no Haryana till November, 1966. The Indo-Pak war started on the 6th September. Those were exciting times; we were bombed twice, by Pak Air. The Ambala Sessions Judge, near retirement, proudly told me, that his son Ajit Singh was teaching economics in Cambridge University. In November, 1966, at the creation of Haryana and the division of Punjab, I was sent to Jalandhar as Deputy Commissioner. In September, 1967, I was nominated by the GOI, to spend one year at Cambridge doing a Master's in Development Studies. In October, I went West, for the first time and was starry eyed in the great University. I was placed in Queen's College, where Ajit taught, and we met soon after.

He was a remarkable sight. Slim almost reed like, he sported an aggressive bushy black beard, thrust forward in Castro style, in defiance of all and everything. He was a rare Sikh sight in Cambridge in those days. He was everywhere, marching down, King's Parade in long loping steps, outside the senate hall, having just bothered age and tradition, in that noble place, and caused a few elders to splutter in their tea cups with his unseemly criticisms, and demands for change. 1967 – 68 were the years of aggressive student revolts in Germany, France and the U.K. Danny Bendit – Cohn and others were causing upheavals across the English Channel, against icons like De Gaulle. In England Tariq Ali from a Lahore feudal family, more handsome than anyone in Hollywood, and the heartthrob of the likes of Vanessa Redgrave, was causing weekly trouble with his demonstrations, against the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. It was all in protest against the Vietnam War.

Ajit had to be a part of it. As two Punjabis Ajit and Tariq Ali were friends. Every weekend religiously Ajit took his brigade of protesters and joined Tariq in London. They caused plenty of trouble to the London Police. Monday morning Ajit was marching up Sidgwick Avenue, to the economics faculty, to indulge in the serious business of economics. He naturally followed Joan Robinson and other progressives. The Cambridge protests centered around Ajit. I remember Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister coming to talk in the city hall. His wife drove him down in a Minnie – British democracy. At the townhall, his car was surrounded and rocked by students shouting, "Go home you bastard". Another time Denis Healy, the Defence Minister came down to lecture in Cambridge. Ajit and his brigade caused him immense trouble, and he barely managed to run to the Station in a taxi and exit Cambridge. Headlines the next day. In Queens College too, Ajit invariably disturbed the calm waters, by always arguing the students point of view and needs.

Once Tariq Ali came down to Cambridge after a historic visit to North Vietnam – the first by a western citizen in the middle of the Vietnam war. He was projected as someone who had just landed from Mars. Ajit organized a meeting for him to address. I too went along, to hear him. After the meeting we three adjourned to the Curry Queen, the famous Punjabi - Pakistani restaurant, where Ajit had an account. Sweating from the chillies which Ajit loved, we came back to his room, in Queen's for coffee. While Ajit made coffee, Tariq sat like Mao, with starry eyed, acolytes at his feet. I listened quietly, after all as a civil servant from India, I was a very lowly fish in their eyes. Then I

addressed Tariq in Punjabi, so we could speak freely. I said to him, "I too have read a bit of Maoism. The revolution has to be made by the people of the land. These white kids have to do it here. In fact, they are likely to join the City, after a bit of fun. You have to do it in Pakistan, which needs you more. You really can't do it here". Tariq reposted in frank honest Punjabi, "Jee, jey main othey eh kawan, tey oh mainu band kar denge". I replied "well that is your hazard. After all only one Mao emerges out of millions". Ajit came in with the coffee and we moved on.

Ajit was the strong bond in those days, and all his life between Indian and Pakistani students. He was the man to go to, whenever a sub-continental student had academic or personal problems. How many he helped to get good degrees, guiding them like a mother hen. His passing will be remembered as much in Lahore and beyond, as in India. Once my wife and I had dinner in his flat, and were introduced to Dr. Rashid Amjad and his wife Bubbles. Rashid was doing a Ph.D, he went on to a distinguished career in the UN, as Vice Chancellor of Islamabad University, and the founder of the Lahore School of Economics. Ajit has placed loads of such men and women across the sub-continent. Like Noor Jahan, he knew no boundaries, he only recognised human beings.

Sadly, Ajit was struck with serious illness, when in his early 40s. I think he showed his steely will thereafter. Lesser men would have faltered, withdrawn into themselves, and perhaps gone to an early end. Not Ajit. He was determined to travel the World, to lecture everywhere, and to write more and more worthwhile papers. In later decades, we often went to Cambridge. His flat in West Berry, was always open to us. How many curry dinners, we had in Cambridge and in East London. He used to come often to Delhi, go on to Chandigarh, and on to Malaysia, and even to South Korea. The man was indefatigable. He refused to accept, the limitations imposed by fate. This was his finest hour. I am a mountaineer trained by Tenzing Norgay. Major Ahluwalia trained with me and went on to climb Everest, in May, 1965, in the first Indian success. I hosted Alu and others, in Ambala district. A month later on the last day of the Indo Pak war, beyond Gulmarg, Major Ahluwalia took a bullet in the neck. He has been a wheel chair case, ever since. But as the World knows. He has lived a rich life, making a Spinal Injury Hospital, in Delhi and doing numerous other public services. I wrote once on him entitled "Higher than Everest". Everest has been climbed by a thousand people, but Alu's spiritual success of belief and will is much greater than his climb. I say the same of Ajit. He has undoubtedly contributed valuable research in Industrial and Development Economics, but in my eyes his battle with the demons for three decades or more is something to salute. I will go to Cambridge again sometime, but sadly, I will not see a Sikh Castro striding down King's Parade, on his way to some fight for some cause.

Dr. Manohar Singh Gill, MP