

Calcutta Notebook

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Dr Sujit Kumar Das, one of the pioneers of people's health movement in India died on 20th April 2011. With him, a significant chapter of the history of people's health movement had ended. Born in a poor family in the undivided rural Bengal in 1937, Dr Das witnessed the momentum events of the sub-continent starting from the INA to Tebhaga movements. He was a minor participant of the last days of violent activities of the freedom fighters.

During his student days, he was an active organiser of the student movement and played a leading role in championing the demands for nationalisation of the Medical Colleges in the state. His role towards organising the professional physicians serving in the state hospitals was outstanding and the present-day Health Services Association (HSA), to say the least, was his brain-child. During the hoodlum years of 1972-1977, he, alongwith others in the HSA successfully organised a statewide strike against the tyranny of the then Congress government on the health front. His role in organising the engineers in support for the common demands of the professionals was so threatening to the then Congress government that his service as a serving physician was terminated in 1974. After the internal emergency was withdrawn, his service was restored.

He founded the Drug Action Forum, West Bengal which was an endeavour of a unique kind. He campaigned against irrational drug and authored several booklets, both in Bengali and English, which had been translated into at least 10 Indian languages. Under his leadership, Drug Action Forum, West Bengal issued a boycott call for irrational drugs manufactured by multinational companies. The boycott slogan was so successful that the multinational companies were forced to withdraw those irrational and unscientific drugs from the Indian market. Dr Das, alongwith other professionals, spearheaded the movement against questionable female contraceptive drugs and the campaign gained such a momentum nation-wide that the government of India was forced to discontinue the use of such contraceptives and banned their use in the government-owned hospitals throughout the country.

Drug Action Forum and several NGOs joined hand to campaign for the right of patient to be treated by any health-care giving institute in case of medical emergency. Hasim Sekh, a daily wage-earner was admitted in the emergency department of a hospital with fetal injury and he was refused care because the hospital was not sure as to who would bear the expense of the treatment. Dr Das himself drafted a brilliant petition which was finally filed in the Supreme Court invoking a citizen's inherent right to life and a land-mark judgment was delivered by the Supreme Court defending the right of the patient to be treated in case of medical emergency.

During the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, Dr Das founded the 'No More Bhopal Committee' and campaigned for NaTS injection for Cyanide detoxification. He had been made a member of the Supreme Court appointed committee to oversee the mode of treatment of the suffering millions of Bhopal. He, alongwith Dr Anil Sadgopal, the other non-governmental member of the said committee came out with a 'minority report' which is till date the best available documentation and a manual for an alternative course of action and of course the betrayal by the government in the early days of Bhopal tragedy.

Dr Das was associated with a brilliant professional journal, *Drug, Disease and Doctor*, meant for educating the physicians about the rational therapy. He was an active member of the civil society, always eager to lend his support for the disadvantaged. He was a Marxist thinker and contributed regularly to *Frontier* and *EPW*. With his demise *Frontier* lost a friend, and the movement for rational medicine a man of integrity. □□□