

# Ram Narayan Kumar: An Obituary

**Pritam Singh Ph.D**



Ram Narayan Kumar, one of the finest human rights researcher, activist and campaigner in South Asia, passed away on June 28 at his house in Kathmandu (Nepal). His death at a relatively young age of 54 has sent shock waves among all those struggling for justice and fairness in South Asia.

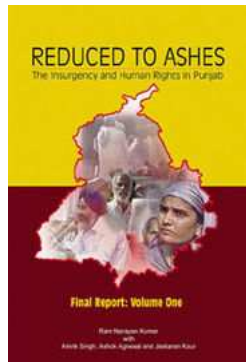
His first major confrontation with state power was in 1975 when he opposed the authoritarian Emergency regime in India and was imprisoned for 19 months for his political act of defiance to defend democracy. He came from the Indian socialist tradition influenced by JP Narayan and R M Lohia but had the courage to oppose the overemphasis on the caste dimension in somewhat opportunistic politics of some of the followers of JP and Lohia. It was, perhaps, this disenchantment with his erstwhile comrades, which attracted him to the more universalist appeal of human rights work.

By family background, he came from a distinguished religious family of India. His father was the head of a *math/peeth* in Ayodhya with a very large following. Ram was groomed until his teenage years to succeed his father as the head of the *math* but Ram revolted and joined the secular world of socialist politics. However, the large following of the *math* in Austria resulted later on in Ram marrying an Austrian doctor.

Although he worked on almost all regions of India where human rights violations took place such as Kashmir, North East, Gujarat and Eastern India, and even in the Middle East against US interventions and Israeli aggression, his most remarkable contribution to human rights practice and documentation was in Punjab. Coming from a South Indian Brahmin family, he had no personal link with Punjab. However the massacre of the Sikh minority in Delhi in 1984 pushed him into the study of Punjab and its troubles. He never abandoned Punjab after this in spite of his many time demanding pre-occupations elsewhere. It is a reflection of his deep humanity that he spent about 15 years of his life studying and documenting human rights abuses in Punjab, a state with which he had no other relation except the bond of humanity. He traveled to remote villages of Punjab to hear the painful stories of victims of human rights violations, expressing solidarity with them and bringing their plight to the attention of concerned Indians.

I met him for the first time in 1988 when during one of his visits to the UK; I invited him to speak in Oxford on the crisis in Punjab from a human rights perspective. Our friendship grew and since 2008, we were involved in a joint project to write a book on Punjab. His death means the death of that project also.

He had phenomenal knowledge of Punjab's history, politics, geography, culture, civil and police administration and Punjab's troubled relationships with the federal Centre in Delhi. He was meticulous in his research to the point of obsession, never



compromising on the empirical evidence of his claims. His work on disappearances in Punjab *Reduced to Ashes* is destined to become a classic in the literature on disappearances and the brutality of state power. He published a pioneering paper on the institutional flaws in human rights law and practice with reference to Punjab in the *International Journal of Punjab Studies*. On the invitation of the Association of Punjab Studies (UK), he presented a paper on the constitutional and institutional rigidities in defending human rights in Punjab at the Association's bi-annual conference in Oxford in 2003 where he received standing ovation from the conference participants for the rigour of his analysis and his towering moral integrity.

His last book on Punjab was *Terror in Punjab: Narratives, Knowledge and Truth* (2008) and it is some solace to me that my review of this book was published in the June 2009 issue of *Himal South Asia* magazine (Kathmandu) and Ram was able to see this review.

Ram Narayan Kumar was directing a major project on studying the culture and practice of immunity that the state officials involved in human rights abuse enjoy in India. The project covering four critical regions of India- J & K, North East, Gujarat and Punjab- and involving joint collaboration between Kathmandu-based South Asia Forum for Human Rights and Canada's International Council for Development Research (ICDR) has the promise of path breaking output in bringing transparency, accountability and justice to human rights practice in India and South Asia.

Ram, as he was affectionately called, was an inspiration to human rights activists not only in India but also in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Some of the key dons of Harvard Law School recognised from an international perspective Ram's contribution to furthering the cause of defending the vulnerable and the weak in India and South Asia.

He worked too hard, was too pure in his heart and was too demanding of himself. That took its toll on his health. Though he has gone, his insights and dedication will forever remain a source of inspiration to those who want to unearth truth and bring the powerful to accountability.

He is survived by his wife Gertie, daughter Cristina, sister Sita and brother Gopal, all living in Austria. He will be cremated in Kathmandu as per the wishes of his family.

### **About the author**

*Dr Pritam Singh took his BA and MA degrees from Punjab University, Chandigarh, MPhil from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi and DPhil from University of Oxford. He teaches development and environmental economics at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK where he is the Director of the Postgraduate Programme in International Management and International Relations. He is currently a Visiting Professor at JNU and is writing a book on Economic Interests and Human Rights. His most recent book is Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab*

*economy (Routledge, London/New York, 2009). Dr Singh is a Research Associate of the Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford and is on the editorial boards of a number of journals including Journal of Punjab Studies.*