

# Obituary

## Jasbir Singh Bajaj

(26 September 1936–8 January 2019)



Dr Jasbir Singh Bajaj, an eminent Indian physician, diabetologist, medical educationist, orator par excellence, a visionary and health policy planner, passed away at his residence in Gurgaon (now Gurugram) on 8 January 2019. He was cremated with State honours on 12 January 2019.

Dr Bajaj was born on 26 September 1936 at Lahore in undivided India as the younger of the two children of Sardar Makhan Singh Bajaj, a Homeopath of repute, and Mrs Jaswant Kaur. Mrs Ajeet Cour, author of several books, founder of the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award and Padma Shri, is his elder sister.

Dr JS Bajaj completed his undergraduate medical education from Amritsar Medical College, Punjab in 1958 and postgraduation (MD) from Punjab University in 1962. After completing his MD (Medicine), he proceeded to do postdoctoral research in Endocrinology and Metabolic Medicine in the UK as a Commonwealth Scholar.

His brilliant academic record led to his selection as Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi in 1966. He became Associate Professor in 1972. He was designated the first Sub-Dean of the Academic Section, AIIMS from April 1972 to May 1973. He was again designated the Sub-Dean from January 1974 to December 1974. He became Professor in 1979 and served as Head of the Department of Medicine from 1 February 1990 to 31 August 1991. Professor Bajaj formally retired from services at AIIMS in September 1996. He was Chairman, Academic Committee, and a Member of the Governing Body, AIIMS. He also served with distinction as Member (Health), Planning Commission, Government of India from 21 August 1991 to 15 May 1998.

His professional life is an example of unparalleled achievements. Professor Bajaj has been a recipient of many national and international academic distinctions and awards and the list is long and awe-inspiring.

He was a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London as well as of Edinburgh. He was conferred Honorary Doctorate in Medicine from Karolinska Institute, Stockholm in 1985. Professor Bajaj was the first scientist from outside Europe and the USA to be elected as the President of International Diabetes Federation (1985–88) and on completion of his 3-year term as President, he was elected as Honorary President (for life) of the Federation in 1988. He received Honorary Doctorates in Science from Tamil Nadu Dr MGR University of Health Sciences; Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar; Andhra Pradesh University of Health Sciences; Banaras Hindu University; and the University of Mumbai.

For his distinguished achievements as a medical educationist, he was conferred the Dr BC Roy National Award for the year 1992 by the President of India. He was elected President of the National Academy of Medical Sciences (1992–94) and the National Board of Examinations (1994–97).

Dr Bajaj was involved in planning and implementation of the *Rehbar-e-Sehat* healthcare delivery model in Jammu and Kashmir almost 50 years ago. The Ministry of Health, Government of India set up an Expert Committee for Health Manpower Planning and Development in May 1986 with Professor Bajaj as its Chairman and the report of this Committee is popularly known as the Bajaj Committee Report. He was the leader of the Indian delegation to the World Health Assembly, Geneva in 1993. The Planning Commission constituted a High Power Committee on Urban Solid Waste Management in October 1994 under the Chairmanship of Professor Bajaj. He also served as the Vice-Chairman, Punjab State Planning Board (April 2007–March 2010) in the rank of a Cabinet Minister. A Working Group on Tertiary Care Institutions for the formulation of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012–2017) was set up under the Chairmanship of Professor Bajaj. He also served as a Member of the Steering Committee on Health for the Twelfth Five-Year Plan.

In recognition of his outstanding contributions, Professor Bajaj was conferred the Padma Shri in 1981, Padma Bhushan in 1982, and Padma Vibhushan in 2009—a rare honour for an Indian physician!

For a generation of AIIMS undergraduates, Professor Bajaj was a legend, an icon. He taught with absolute authority over a variety of medical topics, including diabetes mellitus, rheumatic heart disease, coronary artery disease and myocardial infarction. His admission day evening ward rounds were keenly awaited and attended by interns and resident doctors from across different units and departments. He set very high standards for history taking and physical examination. He was very fond of Sir William Osler and his famous quotations and method of bedside teachings. Professor Bajaj used to say, ‘Every medical college library should have the two-volume set of the *Biography of the life of Sir William Osler* written by the great neurosurgeon, Harvey Cushing, which won him the Pulitzer Prize, and every postgraduate student pursuing MD (Medicine) should read it.’

Professor Bajaj was very passionate about reading, teaching and medical education. He was President of the Indian Association for Advancement of Medical Education (IAAME) and the South-East Asian Regional Association for Medical Education (SEARAME). He wrote extensively on medical education. One of his favourite quotes by Henry Adams used to be, ‘A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops!’

Professor Bajaj, because of his clinical acumen and unique communication skills, was much sought after by many VVIPs and he had close association with several eminent leaders from different political parties.

His qualities of head and heart, immaculate dress sense, and engaging personality made him stand out as a star at all the gatherings where he was present. For over three decades, he played a pivotal role in almost all the affairs of the National Academy of Medical Sciences (NAMS). He was not only an

elected Fellow of the NAMS (India), but also an Emeritus Professor, chairman of various important committees, editor of *Annals of NAMS*, as well as Emeritus President of NAMS (India). He was a devout Sikh, a strict disciplinarian and hard task master. He was a man with strong likes and dislikes, and the force of his personality meant that everyone who met him had an opinion but no one could ever ignore him!

He was a brilliant orator, and his talks in his inimitable style invariably included references to the works of Nobel Laureates and inspiring quotations appropriate to the topic of his lecture. He often used to narrate the stories related to the discovery of insulin or *Helicobacter pylori*!

Professor Bajaj was often invited as the chief guest or guest of honour at several academic events, including convocations. One of his favourite quotations used to inspire the youngsters was by Allama Iqbal:

*Tundi-e-Baad-E-Mukhalif se na ghabra, ae Uqaab;  
Yeh to chalti hai tujhe uncha udane ke liye.*

Don't get daunted by the fury of opposing winds, Oh Eagle!  
These blow only to make you soar higher.

His wife Mrs Avninder Bajaj passed away on 16 May 2018. He is survived by his son Dr Mandeep Bajaj, a Diabetologist and daughter Dr Punam Bajaj, a Radiologist.

I had the privilege of having known him better by observing him from very close quarters for more than three decades, in various capacities, and at various places. It is difficult to sum up all the attributes, achievements, contributions, and impact of a towering and multi-faceted person as Professor JS Bajaj. He will always be remembered as an astute clinician, a unique medical teacher, an exceptional orator, and an extraordinary health planner. In the passing away of Professor Jasbir Singh Bajaj on 8 January 2019, India has lost an outstanding medical man. In a way, it is an 'End of an Era'.

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### *Obituaries*

Many doctors in India practise medicine in difficult areas under trying circumstances and resist the attraction of better prospects in western countries and elsewhere. They die without their contributions to our country being acknowledged.

*The National Medical Journal of India* wishes to recognize the efforts of these doctors. We invite short accounts of the life and work of a recently deceased colleague by a friend, student or relative. The account in about 500 to 1000 words should describe his or her education and training and highlight the achievements as well as disappointments. A photograph should accompany the obituary.

—*Editor*