

# Professor Harkishan Singh- A Man with a Mission

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In 1967-68 I was studying in the final year (1967-68) of the B. Pharmacy course in the Government College of Pharmacy, Bangalore (now Bengaluru) in Karnataka. There was so much of *halla gulla* about Medicinal Chemistry practical examination that our teacher told us read Morrison and Boyd's Organic Chemistry book. We had only one copy of the book in the library and we used to get it issued turn by turn for overnight home reading. There was a sigh of relief on the day of the examination when we came to know that the examiner who was to come from North India could not make it. The examiner was none other than Professor Harkishan Singh!

It took some years before I would have a close encounter with Professor Harkishan Singh. As destiny would have it I ended up serving Panjab University under his stewardship. When I joined Panjab University in January 1979, Professor Harkishan Singh was the Head of the Department. He was responsible for my joining the University as a teacher.

## The man with a mission

### Developing Pharmacology Research at PU

Professor Harkishan Singh had taken a calculated risk in importing me from America. An unknown entity, South Indian- not sure how long he would stick in an unknown territory and always in the lookout for an opportunity to move back to USA or to some other place (I was appointed to a senior position by the University without an interview, which was constantly questioned by political academics on the campus!). I could see this anxiety playing on his (Professor Singh's) mind. But he had a mission to accomplish, i.e. to establish 'Pharmacology research' in the department. Within months of my joining the department I

proposed to start a master's course (M. Pharm) in the subject. Knowing full well the bottlenecks; approval by the board of postgraduate studies (the Faculty of Pharmacy was not yet formed then), curriculum, facilities, timelines and other administrative hurdles, he agreed to the idea and gave me a green signal to prepare for the start of the course from the following academic admission in July (1979). Now, half a century later, if one wants to repeat the exercise, it would just be impossible! He perhaps anticipated that if I got involved in organizing the course, I would be fully occupied in day-to-day teaching, conducting practical classes and more importantly working towards establishing postgraduate research activities, creating infrastructure and writing research schemes, presentations, seminars and whole lot of things. The idea of looking for another job would be out of one's (my) mind! That's what happened; I spent next more than three decades in establishing a world class, nationally and internationally recognized school of doctoral and postgraduate research facilities in pharmacology. In the subsequent years UGC recognized our efforts in more than one way.

Over the years hundreds of students have come from all over the country to pursue M. Pharm and PhD degrees in pharmacology at Panjab University. It has become a premier choice in pursuit of higher learning in pharmacology. Looking back, it was a win-win situation for all concerned; me as beginner, Professor Harkishan Singh (to disprove his critics) and for the University! But most importantly, the vision and the foresight of the *man* triumphed above all.

### Pursuit of National Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences

At the New Delhi IPC in 1985 which was presided over by Dr. Parvinder Singh, CMD

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of Ranbaxy Laboratories and inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, a decision was taken to establish a National Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences. The profession was aspiring to have a premier institute like IITs, IIMs or IISc for decades and it had come as a welcome decision of the government. Soon after we returned from the IPC, one day Professor Singh (by then he had relinquished the headship due to the introduction of a rotation-based headship policy) called me for a discussion. He spelled out his idea of a national institute having world class status and stature. He wanted my inputs in preparing a working paper to submit to the Government. Over the next few months, we discussed thread-by-thread on the evolution of the institute; from its mission to its location; from its infrastructure to its operating requirement- budget, faculty, courses, governing council, autonomy and most importantly requirement of land. He wanted the institute to be declared as an institute of national importance by the government. It was a tall order, but he had a conviction that nothing short would be acceptable to the profession. The document was ready to be presented to the government. Because of the political instability the document went in to cold storage for a while. Even then, Professor Singh was actively pursuing the cause without would ever disclosing the status to anyone including to me who had spent quality time in the preparation of the document.

The roller-coaster journey is not unusual in the life of an academic. One fine morning Professor Harkishan Singh decided to carry out his academic pursuits from home. I was a bigger loser; my meetings with him on daily basis became less frequent. Sometimes in early 1990s, a messenger came to my office in the University to deliver a

letter and also told that he would pick me up from my home next day for site visit. I met Professor Singh and some representatives of the Ministry of Petroleum and Petrochemicals. The new government in New Delhi had tagged the creation of new National Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences with the Punjab accord (in other words the institute would be located in the state of Punjab). Professor Harkishan Singh was on yet another mission mode. Next two years we almost met every day in the evening discussing the architecture of the upcoming institute and its construction. The meetings were held in Chandigarh, New Delhi and other places. The OSD of the project was a dynamic officer (retired from Finance Ministry) who meant business. He realized that if Professor Harkishan Singh could be convinced, half the work would be done. He also valued our inputs immensely. The mission moved faster than expected. At last the National Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (the name christened by Professor Harkishan Singh) got established in Mohali, Punjab.

#### ***Reflecting on the History of Pharmacy in India***

By the time I returned from USA after completing the Fulbright Visiting Professorship (1988-1989), Professor Harkishan Singh had superannuated (retired is not an appropriate word to describe a man who keeps on working even at 90 years of age). He had become UGC-Emeritus Fellow and was on another mission mode, reflecting on the history of Indian Pharmacy! In these 30 years, from 1988 to 2018, he has travelled extensively both in the country and abroad to collect information on history of pharmacy and has built a mini-library of his own in his home. He has produced seven volumes on various aspects of the journey of pharmacy in India, from men to material, from legislations to their imple-



**At my retirement function in 2008.**



**Dr. Singh in his study at home in 2017.**

mentation, from industry to professional practice. His collection could be easily called the referral information center on who's who and what's what in Indian pharmacy. He used to take pride in giving a tour of his personal library. No wonder the Government of India recently recognized his commitment to the profession by honoring him with *Padma Shri*, fourth highest civilian award, a rare distinction for a teacher. The Universities and the professional bodies have not lagged behind; he was awarded D.Sc. (Hons) by the Universities of Philadelphia, USA and the Panjab University, Chandigarh, respectively. All most all the national professional bodies have honored him with various awards (the list is long).

As Professor Singh continued to work on his missions, my professional career also advanced significantly. By the time National Institute project was rolled off, I was heading the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences (which was re-named as University Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences in 1994 on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee) in the University. The following years till my superannuation in 2008 were very hectic and eventful, both academically and professionally. Of the many things that happened, I was elected as the Fellow of the National Academy of Medical Sciences, a rare distinction for a non-medical scientist, also elected as the national President of the Indian Pharmaceutical Congress Association and presided over the 51<sup>st</sup> Indian Pharmaceutical Congress in 2001 and served the University as DUI (equivalent to Pro-Vice Chancellor). Professor Singh felt happy (a reserved person rarely expresses!), he had not expected that I would last that long in the University. In early 2000 the University was contemplating on appointing some emeritus professors. Professor Harkishan Singh was the obvious choice and the University honored him with the emeritus professorship and gave an opportunity for him to re-join the institute and for the UIPS to receive him back in the department.

He makes it a point to visit the department once a week. Perhaps, he is on another mission!

In one of my recent visits to the department Professor Singh mentioned about his biography, *Witness to an era- an autobiography*' and as promised he sent me a copy. He narrates in the opening statement in the book, 'I had a humble beginning..., spent my younger days in villages in pre-partition Punjab'. The village life, joint family, training with Sikh priests before formal schooling and the value system inculcated in a young age perhaps have left a lasting impact while growing up as well as his approach later in life including his professional life. It is often difficult to change as one grows in age.

I had my first meal in Chandigarh at Professor Singh's house (F-27, sector 25) on Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> January 1979! He told me to reach the department at 9:00 am the following day. I was there on dot. Wearing a white coat, he took me round the department and brought me to the room (no. 9) which became my office as well as my lab in the beginning. It is still my office which I use on my visits to the University.

In those days the departments had pyramidal structure, Professor and Head (only professor) and rest was junior colleagues (Readers and Lecturers). Once a Head, you are the Head until you retire. The Heads used to be very dominating figures. During the time he (Professor Singh) was the Head of the department, none of the colleagues including senior teachers spoke in front of him (out of respect or fear!). It was strange experience for a newcomer who had come from the free world (USA), but I started interacting and expressing my point of views.

In my many decades of interaction with Prof Harkishan Singh, I found him to be a private person who held strong principles, convictions as well as opinions – whether it was of his writings, works; or people, research, institutions and occasions. In early 1970s, his research group had synthesized '*Chandonium iodide*' a neuromuscular blocker likely to be used as adjunct in anesthesia. In those days the regulatory requirements were not that stringent that the molecule could have been approved for human use, but for Dr. Singh's insistence that CSIR, the agency that funded the research, took it to market place. In my personal observation, CSIR let the research and the molecule languish and eventually killed the molecule.

He writes about Mrs. Singh in his autobiography, the lady behind the success of the man, '...my wife Gian and our children who tolerated my spending time in academic pursuits which good extent belonged to them'. His long-life partner of forty odd years Mrs. Singh passed away in 1998 under difficult circumstances. He acknowledges her many qualities in the book, from her interests in 'Gurbani kirtan' to how she kept herself engaged with the family, taking care of his ageing parents, children and other members of the family when the man of the house was busy in academic work. She was loving and caring person and often enquired about our children.

As I grew up with the profession, I started forming my own opinions and perspectives which were divergent at times to the views held by Dr. Harkishan Singh. He valued my constructive criticism of his writings. But that did not deter our understanding of each other, instead my respect for his wisdom and perseverance grew with

passing years. It is always pleasure listening to him and for me, a great learning experience. At times he expressed his anguish or dissatisfactions with the happenings in the profession, more so with the quality of education, proliferation of institutions and practice of

pharmacy which is so dear to his heart. We are celebrating his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and pray that he completes the 100 years mark! We wish him many years of active life to unfold the mysteries of the profession.

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- A tribute to Professor Harkishan Singh on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday

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