

## Kunwar Arjun Singh : some Reminiscences

**-Dr. M. N. Buch**

Kunwar Arjun Singh has been associated with the political happenings in Madhya Pradesh ever since its formation on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1956. My own association with him goes back to almost fifty years and I have known him as a member of the Legislative Assembly, a Minister, a Chief Minister, a gentleman farmer, a scholar and a friend. For years we were neighbours in Bhopal and one walked into his house to benefit from his knowledge, for interaction as a friend and for a chat with Mrs. Arjun Singh, who was always an amusing, hospitable and charming hostess. I have seen his children grow up and Rahul become a major player on the Madhya Pradesh political scene.

I was a civil servant and Arjun Singh was a politician. I have not always, been the easiest civil servant to work with from a politician's point of view and certainly Arjun Singh had have very major differences with me, including sparring matches, sometimes serious fisticuffs and once or twice almost a flaming row. It says much for the man that he never lost his balance with me, never raised his voice to me, tolerated even my most outrageous statements and gave me complete freedom of expression. I respected him for this because as a civil servant I had the right to express myself but also understood that a Minister can overrule me and this should cause no problem between us. That is precisely the relationship we had. When he became Chief Minister I told him that it was now for him to recognise my existence and I would never try and show familiarity. This is because I believe that a Chief Minister has to listen to many opinions and voices, he has to live within the political mandate given by his party and that he has to take tough decisions which must be objective and not biased by the friendship of a particular officer. I kept my part of the trust, just as he did his part. The fact that this relationship was cordial is proved by the fact that when I left the Service Arjun Singh and I went back to our old position of personal friendship which he maintained till his dying day.

There are some characteristics about the man which call for mention. At heart he was secular and he did feel that after partition the Muslim community has not always been treated with fairness. As Education Minister of India he tried to remedy this, though some of his decisions such as giving Aligarh Muslim University minority status were controversial. Certainly he maintained communal peace in Madhya Pradesh and ensured that the Police acted firmly under threat of communal violence. Arjun Singh saw for Madhya Pradesh an industrial future and the industrial estates he developed at Pithampur near Indore, Mandideep and Pilukhedi near Bhopal, Malanpur near Gwalior, at Raipur and Durg are permanent and valuable additions to the economy of the state. He also tried to improve the power situation in Madhya Pradesh. Indore and its environs are examples of development of a thriving automobile industry in the Pithampur area.

Arjun Singh realised that one method of looking after the urban poor and improving their future was to regularise their slum settlements. According to him security of tenure would encourage slum dwellers to invest in housing and this would ensure a gradual reconstruction of slums. Even though I was opposed to indiscriminate grant of *Pattas* I could see the logic behind Arjun Singh's decision and I do feel that the present scheme of *Pucca* houses for slum dwellers under JNNURM is a result of Arjun Singh's policy of giving *Pattas* to slum dwellers.

Equally important is Arjun Singh's contribution to the development of higher education in Madhya Pradesh. Sagar university has been given central status, Gwalior has the Indian Institute of Information Technology and Management, Laxmibai National Institute of Physical Education, Indian

Institute of Travel and Tourism Management and Education, Bhopal has the National Law Institute University, Indian Institute of Forest Management, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, School of Planning and Architecture, Maulana Azad National Institute of Technology and will shortly have the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. Indore is the only city in India to have both an Indian Institute of Technology and an Indian Institute of Management. Arjun Singh can claim the major part of credit for location of these institutes in Madhya Pradesh.

Surely the man had warts. Arjun Singh controlled the civil services but simultaneously damaged their hierarchy by playing favorites. He was not tolerant of dissent and many civil servants found this out at their cost. He was a past master of politicking but he was not strategic political planner or a builder of political institutions. Arjun Singh was a consummate politician who never became a statesman, which meant that an element of manipulative politics was introduced in Madhya Pradesh. Perhaps this is what prevented Arjun Singh from rising to the post of Prime Minister.

My wife, son and I enjoyed a warm personal friendship with Arjun Singh and his family. I have attended Bina's marriage. One of the loveliest holidays I have had was with Arjun Singh many years ago in Sada, his home village. He personally drove me around the beautiful Sidhi district and I fell in love with valleys of the Gopad and Banas rivers. Mrs. Arjun Singh introduced me to Bagja and Indrahar, two signature dishes of Rewa, I, in turn, named a bazaar, Bittan Market, at Bhopal after Mrs. Arjun Singh's name. Her real name is Saroj but her nick name is Bittan and I use this.

Arjun Singh will be remembered for long for his generosity. S.C. Bardhan of the IAS has a son with a rare blood disease whereby red blood corpuscles are not produced by the body. He requires regular blood transfusions. For his treatment in America at an informal request by me Arjun Singh sanctioned Rupees five lakhs. One can multiply these examples by hundreds.

Arjun Singh was a giant in state politics, an old fashioned congressman, a leader of people, a development guru and a good friend. In his passing Madhya Pradesh has lost a tall leader and I a good friend. I shall miss him.

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