

MFC reminisces – 30 Years of Health Dialogues

Ravi Duggal

My tryst with mfc was to begin in 1983 with the women and health meeting at Anand. But I had to cancel my trip last minute for personal reasons and I missed all the action that happened there. The following year 1984, a year of terrible tragedies - the anti-Sikh genocide and the Bhopal industrial disaster, I took the train to Calcutta for the meeting at CINI on alternative medical education. The train trip is also memorable because the idea for the Socialist Health Review (later Radical Journal of Health) was also born on that journey.

At the Calcutta meet in Jan 1984 I was a quiet participant listening and observing the ethos and character of mfc. I had read in recent months books like the Political Economy of Health (Doyal and Pennell) and Limits to Medicine (Illich) and was already working on health systems and financing issues at FRCH. It was an exciting experience at the Calcutta meet and I was introduced to the mfc anthologies (price a princely sum of Rs. 10 each) which I bought and read and was inspired to do a review article in the EPW called Politics of Ill Health and Healthcare (16 June 1984) with the anthology Health Care – Which Way to Go as the peg.

When one reads this review article now it seems that the issues we are dealing with have not changed much, except for the fact that we now contextualize those issues in the universal access framework. Then we took for granted that healthcare meant public health systems, and one of my critiques then was that we were not looking at health systems and specifically the private health sector that was growing rapidly. Later that year Sheila Zubrigg's classic Rakku's Story was also published.

After Kolkata I became a regular mfc member attending all annual and mid annual meetings and the Bombay group of the mfc also emerged which took on the onus of organizing the 1986 meet on environment and health at Khandala. These years were an interesting phase of the mfc as we travelled to different parts of the country for both the annual and mid-annual meets – Patiala, Dalli Rajhara, Kaya (Udaipur), Bangalore, Calicut, Jaipur, Alwaye... and consequently the mfc membership also widened across the length and breadth of the country.

During the latter half of nineties and into the new millennium mfc has witnessed ups and downs and the cross national engagement narrowed and we became Sewagram centric. Energies saw diffusion within a global movement, the Peoples Health Movement, which brought the Health For All agenda back on both the global and national canvass. The Jan Swasthya Abhiyaan took the lead in India through a Right to Healthcare campaign giving rise to the Universal Access to Healthcare framework, and mfc took this up vigorously through a lot of work across 3 Annual Meets, including a direct engagement with the High Level Expert Group on Universal Coverage that was to help shape the 12th Five Year Plan. Today in 2013 we are going to Hyderabad after scaling the peaks of Uttarakhand (Bhimtal etc..) at the last mid annual meet, to celebrate 4 Decades of mfc and deliberate on Work, Health and Rights. Looks like a new phase of journeying has begun!

In the last few years new energies have come into the mfc with younger people taking charge and we hope in the coming decade we build on this and before our golden age have Health For all NOW.

Some interesting happenings during this journey....

- **Under the Intelligence Lens:** During the Patiala mid annual meeting in July 1985 organized by the Peoples Health Group we had the Intelligence Bureau people listening in to our energetic discussions which included discussions on closing down mfc. The latter was strongly opposed by the younger lot and this resulted in creation of thematic/regional subgroups/cells. There were also detailed discussions on the Bhopal gas tragedy. I don't know what the IB people got out of the meeting but they followed us back to Delhi where many of us went to engage with the ICMR on the Bhopal gas tragedy issue. They left the trail when they saw that we were going officially into a government institution.
- **The Bombay mfc group:** In the late eighties and early nineties the Bombay mfc group was very active and worked around the issues related to the private sector and its regulation, health and human rights and medical malpractice with close collaboration with CPDR. (see mfc Bulletin 164-165 June/July 1990 and 171-172 May/June 1991 on Bombay mfc group) We discovered the Bombay Nursing Home Regulation Act and got involved in a PIL to demand implementation of this Act and to regulate the private health sector. I guess this made positive contributions to amendments in that Act and working towards a national legislation. This later also led to working on issues related to accreditation, medical malpractice, health and human rights, patients rights and ethics in medical practice.
- **Saving Public Health:** Another interesting issue the Bombay mfc group got engaged with is to form a Save Public Health Campaign in Mumbai. (see article on public hospitals by Bombay group in mfc bulletin 230-231, May/June 1996). There was an attempt by the Govt. of Maharashtra to privatize the GT Hospital in south Mumbai. The mfc Bombay group with other groups like MARD, hospital workers unions and other health groups came together for this and pushed hard. We saved the GT Hospital from privatization. But a few years later the Municipal Corporation mooted a public-private partnership policy that used the FSI (floor space index) of the hospital land to construct a private hospital and a similar capacity public hospital. This too we opposed but had only limited success as the policy remains intact but thanks to the inefficient bureaucracy implementation has been poor. Presently this PPP policy has been furthered by out-sourcing specific services like diagnostic, dialysis etc.. Also user fees were increased significantly and SPHC protested against that. The struggle continues but the Bombay group as a separate entity is no longer alive. The JSA Mumbai group has filled this vacuum to some extent and continues with the struggle on these issues.
- **Market, Medicine, Malpractice:** Between 1988 and 1994, the Medico Friend Circle (Bombay Group) actively helped the victims of medical malpractice. In this period, the MFC (BG) was literally flooded with cases of medical malpractice, as if there was an explosion of public anger against a system substantially alienated from people's needs. The MFC (BG) served not only as a catalyst but also as a channel for the articulation of people's grievances against the rising cost of medical care, the growing arrogance of providers and their refusal to be socially accountable and sensitive. The MFC's campaign created a sense of urgency and forced all concerned people

in Mumbai to respond. While handling individual cases of medical malpractice, the MFC (BG) organised seminars, meetings, and filed public interest litigation on the issues arising from the cases. It was against this backdrop of the campaign on medical malpractice, that a group of socially conscious doctors crystallised in Mumbai leading to the formation of an organisation for medical ethics ... and publication of the book Market, Medicine and Malpractice... (see <http://www.cehat.org/go/ResearchAreas/HleprMarketMedicine>)

Letter by me at the end of my Convenorship (mfc Bulletin 230-231 May/June 1996)

Dear Friends,

My Convenorship of two years came to a close at the, end of March. When I took over the Convenorship from my predecessor, Manisha Gupte, the mfc as an organisation was very active through its three cells, the women and health cell, the primary health care cell and the mfc Bombay group. While the 'Bombay group has presently become inactive, the w&h and PHCs cells continue to be active and organise their own meetings from time to time. The mfc bulletin under Sathyarnala's editorship has once again become regular and a number of members have taken a commitment to work towards increasing its subscription and circulation.

At the last Annual Meet and the General Body Meeting it was also decided to put in efforts at reviving the mfc core group in order to strengthen the mfc as an organisation. The fading out of the core group during the last five or six years had enthused a few action oriented mfc members to start issue based cells and/or local groups. This has helped mfc as an organisation to sustain itself but at the same time has created circles within the large circle of friends that constituted the core group. To revive and reactivate this larger circle of friends Ulhas Jajoo has taken the initiative of organising a core group meeting on 6th and 7th July 1996 and sent out letters to nearly 100 mfc members both who are currently active as mfc members and those who were active in the past. I do strongly believe that this revival is possible and that this is the right time for it. I urge' all members past and present to come together at Sewagram in July and reactivate the core group.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all mfc members, subscribers of the mfc bulletin and mfc sympathisers for their support during my tenure as convener. I hope all of you and many others would not only continue to support the new convener but also bring in a greater enthusiasm into mfc as an organisation as we move into the 21st century. From April 1996 the new convener would be Vijay Jani who is based in Vadodara. It is after a long time that the mfc Convenorship is moving out of Maharashtra and we hope this should help in bringing back many old mfc members to the frontline not only from Gujarat but also from elsewhere. The new mfc address from April 1, 1996 would be:
Vijay Jani, Convenor-medico friend circle, 34,Kailash Park Society, Akota, Vadodara-390 020
My best wishes to Vijay and all mfc friends.

In solidarity
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