

Why I Loved MFC?

The Medico Friend circle is now 25 years old. I was not a founder-member and came to know about MFC through the first ever issue of its printed Bulletin. I attended the next MFC-meet at Rasulia in 1974; and thereafter barring a couple of meetings, have attended all MFC-Annual, mid annual meets, and have been one of those who have spent considerable time and energy for MFC. Why did I do so and why do I now feel somewhat detached from MFC? My brief personal explanation as an activist in the health-movement in India may throw some light on the 'MFC-phenomenon.' I was (and still am) a Marxist and was looking for a broad platform interested towards working for a fundamental change in the health care system in India. MFC appeared to be such a body. I, therefore, got attracted towards MFC. The attraction was sustained because of the non-sectarian approach of the founder-members and founder-editors; many of whom were a new generation and a new type of Gandhian radicals. They welcomed us despite our known differing ideological background. It was a refreshing experience that doctors and other health-activists and concerned academicians could run a platform on the basis of some mutual, reciprocal trust (besides shared perspective) despite sharp ideological differences. Sincerity, frankness, openness, drives towards grassroots work amongst the rural poor and intellectually stimulating debates were the attractive features of MFC. No funds, no personal politics, no leg-pulling; on the contrary an overall friendly, informal atmosphere, despite some very sharp, rigorous debates, kept us together. MFC did not degenerate into a goody-goody mutual admiration society, (though it did act as a friendly peer group) nor did it get unnecessarily split in a stupid way into factions.

Has MFC been socially relevant for the health-movement in India? In terms of the indepth discussions on a whole range of important health-issues from a grass-root, people's perspective, yes, MFC has provided the only all India platform for 25 years, for relevant debates; and almost all health-activists in India have learnt from and contributed towards MFC-debates. Given its ideological, geographical and now interest-wise heterogeneity, perhaps a substantially improved performance was not possible. However, more 'professional', socially productive performance was and is still possible. MFC has remained a platform for discussion and a thought current. A couple of health-surveys, including the two surveys of victims of Bhopal Gas Disaster, have been the only collective actions (apart from publishing of the MFC Bulletin) by MFC. These surveys were well done, but also gave an experience that collective action is not MFC's forte, given heterogeneity of its members in many respects. This heterogeneity has been a strength when it comes to discussing complex, health issues from a grass- root level perspective. But for collective action at national level, the same becomes an obstacle. Secondly MFC has not been very active even as a thought-current. MFC has not been responding to various National Health Policy issues-be it privatization of health care or cut in the already meagre financial allocation for health care, or Universal salt iodization or new draft rules for blood banks, or a legal ban on cross-practice. Even the Bulletin has been quite irregular during the last 5-6 years. So even as a thought current, it has become more and more ineffective. Compare MFC with, say, the Health-Committee of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti/All India People's Science Network formed a few years ago. They have been much more active, partly because they have some government funds, but also because they have political commitment to work as a collective at the national level. The National Medicos organization, or BJP-RSS outfit, is also active. One would not of course expect MFC to be active in the same way. But unless there is some attempt to take positions on certain national health issues and to propagate them through the media, MFC would further marginalize itself. (The MFC-declaration opposing the role of a section of medicos during the Post- Babri riots in Jan 93 and

against the Pokhran nuclear tests in May'98 have been exceptions). MFC has been unique. It is neither a funded NGO like the VHAI nor a health wing of a people's organisation/movement. Without abandoning this uniqueness, MFC can be far more effective as a thought current. But it is depressing to see that this is not happening.

In my view, the main reason for the decline and marginalization of MFC has been, apart from objective factors, the declining inputs by most of the old-timers. With increased responsibility in local work and family matters, and declining energy, since we are well beyond middle-age, It is difficult to give time for MFC. But, if there was more political understanding and hence commitment to develop this pro-people, secular, democratic platform, more inputs would have come forth by going beyond personal interests, likes, and dislikes. But barring exceptions, this has not happened. Only a handful of old-timers are prepared to give time for MFC-work and not many new members are interested in strengthening MFC as such, though many people attend the MFC-meet. I feel somewhat depressed about MFC's future and am feeling myself somewhat detached. The Bulletin continues to be in heavy loss, mainly because there are too few subscribers; and I do not see how it can continue meaningfully for very long. The silver lining to the overall pessimistic scenario is that an enthusiastic team has emerged in South India. Let us hope that it would be able to get wider support to sustain MFC, and to make it socially effective.

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