

# Jasbir Singh Bajaj (1936–2019)

Hardas Singh Sandhu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Orthopaedics, Government Medical College, Amritsar, Punjab, India

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Professor Jasbir Singh Bajaj was born on September 26, 1936 in Lahore as the younger of the two children of Sardar Makhan Singh Bajaj, a homeopath of repute. He grew up in an environment conducive to scientific pursuits. Post partition, his family was relocated to Delhi, where he excelled academically, earning honors and accolades throughout his schooling and education in college. During his undergraduate medical studies at Amritsar Medical College, he secured first position in Medicine and was awarded the Dr. H.B.N Swift Medal for securing highest marks in pharmacology and setting a new record in Punjab University in the subject. After his MD (Medicine) degree, he proceeded for his postdoctoral research in endocrinology and diabetes as a Commonwealth Scholar at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School, London, and at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in England.

From his early student years, he was a polymath who read voraciously to expand his intellectual horizons. On the shelves of his personal library, one would find Bertrand Russell's "Theory of Knowledge" beside treatises on immunology; the leather-bound volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica resided alongside his research papers on insulin kinetics.

He joined the faculty of AIIMS in 1967 where he served as a professor and later Head of the Department of Medicine since 1979, retiring in 1996. At AIIMS, he shaped the careers of generations of students with his famous teaching rounds. He derived his zeal as a teacher from the legendary Sir William Osler who was responsible for producing fine physicians who emphasized humility and humanity. Thus he set out on his ward rounds spending hours painstakingly examining the patient, instilling not only medical adeptness but also the ideals of discipline and patience in his students.

Recognized as a physician and diabetologist of exceptional merit, he was appointed as the Honorary Physician to the President of India from 1977 to 1982 and again from 1987 to 1992. He also served the Prime Minister of India as Chief Physician from 1991 to 1996.

He was appointed as Member, Planning Commission, in 1991, in the rank of Minister of State, Government of India, in which capacity he served till 1998. His uncanny ability

to assimilate information hitherto unfamiliar to him was such that, upon being the first ever biomedical scientist to be nominated to the Planning Commission, in no more than a fortnight, he had mastered modern economic theory and was able to participate in financial policy drafting.

In 2007, he was appointed Vice-Chairman of the Punjab State Planning Board.

Prof. Bajaj was recipient of many distinctions, awards, and honors at national and international levels. He was a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London and Edinburgh, and the National Academy of Medical Sciences. He was a founder fellow of the Indian College of Physicians.

In recognition of his highly distinguished services to the country, he was decorated with Padma Shri by the President of India in 1981, and with the coveted Padma Bhushan in 1982 and Padma Vibhushan in 2009, being the first diabetologist and endocrinologist of India to be so honored.

His interest in diabetes and endocrinology spanned over nearly four decades. His most outstanding research included the original work on entero-hypothalamo-insular axis, insulin dynamics in health and disease, hormonal contraception in males, and endocrinal and metabolic profile of protein calorie malnutrition. His proposed classification of a separate category of malnutrition-related diabetes mellitus, with its two subtypes, was accepted and incorporated in the new international classification of diabetes (ICD 10), recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) Expert Committee; the eponym of *Bajaj's syndrome* was assigned to this entity by international bioscientists.

He published five books on insulin and metabolism, diabetes mellitus and glucagons, and contributed chapters in several national and international textbooks, with more than 240 publications and research communications to his credit.

He was honored as Doctorate in Medicine (*honoris causa*) by the Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, during their 175th anniversary celebration in 1985. The citation



Jasbir Singh Bajaj

## Address for correspondence

Hardas Singh Sandhu, MS, FRACS,  
Kitty Cottage 883, Circular  
Road, Opposite Nurses Hostel,  
Amritsar 143001, Punjab, India  
(e-mail: hardasssandhu@gmail.com).

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presented on the occasion recognized him as “a leading research investigator in diabetes” and made a special mention of “his most outstanding work concerning the role of central nervous system in insulin secretion, insulin dynamics in health and disease, and endocrinal and metabolic profile of malnutrition.” The citation also recognized “Prof. Bajaj as a leading exponent in the field of health manpower development for diabetes health care and an advocate for the incorporation of diabetes in the newly emerging models of primary health care.”

Prof. Bajaj was the first scientist from outside Europe and the United States to have been elected as the President of the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) in which capacity he served from 1985 to 1988. He had the singular distinction of having been unanimously elected as the Honorary President (for life) of the Federation in 1988.

He had been deeply involved in medical education and health planning since 1967. He was responsible for the planning, organizing, and implementing the Rehbar-e-Sehat health care delivery model in Jammu and Kashmir. As the Chairman of Expert Committee on Health Manpower Development and the Chairman of Consultative Group on National Education Policy in Health Sciences (1991), he steered major initiatives for reorientation of medical and paraprofessional

education and facilitated the development of health-related vocational courses in secondary education.

He was the first sub-Dean of AIIMS in 1972. He was a Member of the Governing Body, and Chairman, Academic Committee, AIIMS from 1994 to 1999.

He was the President of National Academy of Medical Sciences from 1992 to 1994 and National Board of Examinations from 1994 to 1997, and served on the Executive Board of the World Federation for Medical Education from 1988 to 2003, and participated in developing policy initiatives and implementation of strategies to enhance quality and relevance of medical education at regional, national, and international levels.

For his distinguished achievements as an Educationist, the Management Committee of Dr. B.C. Roy National Award Fund selected him for the Senior Award under the category of “Eminent Medical Man, for the year 1992” which was presented by the President of India.

Prof. Bajaj passed away on January 8, 2019. This medical luminary, being a Padma Awardee, was honored with a State funeral as a mark of deep respect and in recognition of his outstanding services to the nation and contribution to health policy planning, medical education, and applied research in endocrinology and metabolic medicine.