THE HEALTH ADVOCATE

THE PEOPLE’S CHARTER FOR HEALTH: DOES IT MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU?

Dr. Ravi Narayan*

People’s movements across the world are working to identify and demonstrate that the path to sustainable development does not lie in the neoliberal globalization but in alternative models for people centred and self relevant progress.

Nearly 24 months ago, 2500 health professionals and activists reached Kolkata in four People’s Health Trains from all over India, for the first National People’s Health Assembly. They brought with them perspectives, enthusiasm and inspiration from months of mobilization for the Health for All Now campaign launched by 18 national networks on 7th April 2000 (World Health Day, now People’s Health Day from 2000) at Hyderabad.

The mobilization included state, district and taluka level meetings, kalajathas, people’s health enquiries, policy dialogue and the most significant of all, the publication of five consensus documents on the health situation and challenges in India.

- These booklets included a wide range of concerns brought together under five titles, (1) What Globalisation does to People’s Health! (2) Whatever happened to Health for All by 2000 AD? (3) Making life worth living (meeting basic needs) (4) A world where we matter (health of women, children and the marginalised in society) (5) Confronting commercialisation of Health Care.

- These booklets are now available in most Indian languages and appreciated all over the world these five little booklets – the distilled wisdom of decades of working on Health for All issues represent a phenomenal consensus not only of health networks like medico friend circle; Catholic Health Association of India; Christian Medical Association of India; All India Drug Action Network; and Voluntary Health Association of India; but also the science movements; women’s movements; national alliance of peoples movements and groups like the forum for creche and child care services and even the Federation of Medical Representatives Association of India and others!

- After two days of interactive workshops and solidarity oriented plenaries, a health exhibition; a celebration of the diversity of kalajathas and cultural activities in health; a public march for health and a public rally, an Indian People’s Health charter was evolved. Then nearly 300 Indians went across by bus and other modes of transport to Savar, Bangladesh to participate in the first global People’s Health Assembly – a 5 day multi cultural celebration and reflection on Health for All.

- At the end of it, all there evolved the People’s Charter for Health – the largest consensus document in Health since the Alma Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care in 1978. The People’s Charter for Health now translated into several of the world’s languages is “an expression of our common concerns for health, a vision of a better and healthier world;

*Dr. Ravi Narayan, Community Health Adviser, CHC/PHM
a call for radical action, a tool for advocacy and a rallying point around which the
global health movement can gather…’

How many of you dear readers, have heard about the People’s Health Assembly? How many
have seen the five little booklets? How many have read the People’s Health Charter?

a. If your answer is a definite No – then it’s a time of reckoning!

Have you been so busy and occupied with your bio-medically oriented health initiative that
you missed one of the largest health mobilization of our times. Perhaps as the ‘Cor Unum’
document of 1976 recorded, ‘the leaven is still for removed from the bread’ of health

b. If the answer is a qualified No - I have been too busy working with my sick and unhealthy
community or my crowded OPD and wards – tackling problems with my limited resources
and my overstretched capacity! Then too a time of reckoning has come!

Its time to take stock of your work, share your innovative experiments at micro level with a
larger network of people, learn from the experience and enthusiasm of others and join the
movement bringing your zeal and local experience into it.

c. If the answer is a qualified Yes – but I was only peripherally informed and perhaps
involved very little, then it's a time of reckoning as well!

Perhaps you are still dazzled by the glamour of ‘technological prescriptions’ of health
promoted by social marketing strategies including our medical education that are driven by
market forces rather than the basic health needs of the people and the socio-economic-
cultural realities of their lives. Its time to absorb the new emerging frameworks of health
action from the Movement and the Charter.

d. If the answer is a definite Yes - I have been deeply and enthusiastically involved, then too a
time of reflection is at hand!

It’s a time to reflect whether in line with the framework of action outlined in the People’s
Health Charter your current medical / health initiative promotes health as a human rights
concern; tries to tackle the broader determinants of the health problem-economic, social,
political, cultural; tackles environmental challenges to health including the viruses of conflict
and violence; makes your health initiatives more people oriented, more people determined,
more people accountable? Perhaps you are in the right direction but there are ‘miles to go
before you sleep!’

As you read the Charter many may say, of course I believe in Health for All but ‘isn’t the charter
too political?’ Others may say of course I believe in Health for All - but why be so against the
new economic policies of globalisation, liberalisation and privatization? Aren’t they improving
outreach, quality and efficiency?

The answer to both these questions are being reiterated all the time.

✓ Prof. Geoffrey Rose a famous epidemiologist and a committed Christian, wrote this as his
last testament a decade ago after an illustrious career in epidemiology of health:
“The primary determinants of disease are mainly economic and social and therefore its remedies must also be economic and social. Medicine and politics cannot and should not be kept apart”.

✓ **Prof. D. Banerjee** of the Jawaharlal Nehru University has cautioned health professionals for decades that ‘health service’ is a socio-cultural process, a political process; a technological and managerial process with an epidemiological and sociological perspective.

✓ **Dr. Fidel Castro**, well known political scientist and leader warned health leaders in a WHO Assembly speech that “Never before did mankind have such formidable scientific and technological potential, such extraordinary capacity to produce…. Well being but never before were disparity and inequity so profound in the world….

Another ‘Nuremberg’ is required to put on trial the economic order imposed upon us. The current global system is killing by hunger and preventable and curable diseases, more men, women, children every three years than all those killed by world war II in six years….”

The evidence is available? The perspectives are emerging as we move into the next millennium.

**ARE YOU READY FOR THE PEOPLE’S HEALTH MOVEMENT?**

**DOES THE PEOPLE’S HEALTH CHARTER MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU?**