

Remembering Javeed Alam

It is not surprising that a multifaceted personality should have attracted a tribute of respect and love from eminent philosophers and social scientists such as Akeel Bilgrami (“A Life of Commitment and Inquiry,” *EPW*, 31 December 2016), Partha Chatterjee, and Nivedita Menon (*Social Scientist*, January–February 2017). I also knew Javeed well. He was one of the most upright and lovable human beings I have ever known, which is why I am prompted to write this letter. Unlike many Marxists, Javeed was a firm believer in formal democracy. He was the man who wrote articles like “What Is So Bourgeois about Bourgeois Democracy,” or a book like *Who Wants Democracy* (2012).

While remaining a totally committed member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) all his life, he was not afraid to question its dogmas. He wrote, for example, critically about the principle of democratic centralism which governs all Leninist parties from the Communist Party of India to the Revolutionary Socialist Party (“Can Democratic Centralism Be Conducive to Democracy?,” *EPW*, 19 September 2009). For him, of course, formal democracy had to be layered with substantive and communitarian democracy, allowing people to live with dignity with their cherished identities unviolated. That does not mean that he had any romantic illusions about communities as such. He wrote on the

problems of caste and religious identities in *EPW* (“Is Caste Appeal Casteism?,” 27 March 1999; “The Contemporary Muslim Situation in India: A Long-term View,” 12 January 2008). He knew that communities, religious or otherwise, could be horribly oppressive, disallowing any entry into or exit from those ascribed identities (“Public Sphere and Democratic Governance in Contemporary India” in *Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy*, 1999). For him, of course, the best identity was a constructed identity, an identity he shared with his fellow scholars and fellow activists. But when challenged he would assert his identity as a Muslim, however unbelieving he might have been.

For him, drinking in moderation was a part of civilised living. But it was also a way of relating to the lives of the people of Himachal Pradesh, among whom he spent his life as a communist activist. I remember a story he told me about his experience in leading a group of Democratic Youth Federation of India activists to an all-India conference in Rajasthan. Some of these comrades drank on the train. The president of the conference came to know about this and complained to Javeed. Javeed’s reply was that if he did not like the Himachal Pradesh comrades drinking, he might as well forget any idea of spreading communism among them, for, drinking was part of their daily living. They regularly drank the local brew and offered it to the devi they worshipped.

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