

# *Mr. Popular Science*



## Unique among editors, Surendr Jha's vision was to promote a culture of rationality and learning

BY MOHAN SIVANAND

**AT THE TIMES OF INDIA** group's headquarters in Bombay, I was being interviewed for my first job. Among the galaxy of editors seated before me was Khushwant Singh, noted author and legendary editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. At one point Singh glanced at my CV. "Hmm, you've done physics..." he said, when another editor interrupted, "Why would a science graduate want to be a journalist?"

*They've got me!* I thought, as they all waited for my answer. "Why?" I finally blurted, "it's all knowledge." *Cocky reply. They'll throw me out.* And they did.

"You wait outside," Singh told me. "The editor of *Science Today* magazine is not here. We'll call you again when he arrives."

I was back in the lounge with the other candidates, all finalists for selection to the Times of India group's Trainee Journalist batch of 1977. Getting in was competitive, but it meant a year's paid internship and then a permanent editorial job at a Times publication. Indeed, it

was the best foot in the door for any aspiring journalist.

After a while, a handsome, youngish, rather well-built man in a white shirt met me. "Surendr Jha," he said, shaking my hand. "Editor of *Science Today*." Though I'd read the magazine for years, I didn't remember its editor's name. But, ushered into a nearby room for a private chat, Mr Jha turned the tables for me. "More science graduates ought to be in journalism," he said. "You've

learnt to analyze facts. You can use that skill anywhere, if you work hard. Can you write well?"

"I think so."

"I'm a chemistry graduate myself," said Mr Jha, who had worked as a books editor and in *Current and Economic & Political Weekly* before he got here. Mr Jha was fascinating. He hopped easily

from one topic to another and showed an interest in me.

I got the job. After my training year with the Times, I was to spend the next five years under Mr Jha as the youngest member of the *Science Today*

SCIENCE TODAY



editorial. Looking back, for me, those were like years spent at a first-rate university with Mr Jha for a guide.

Mr Jha's monthly, which offered science "for everyman" as its cover used to state, was widely read. When I joined as a sub-editor in April 1978, its circulation had grown steadily to about 90,000 and its readership was in the millions—terrific for any magazine. Students read it, as did many grown-ups; libraries stocked it, everyone respected it. Founding editor Surendr Kumar Jha's vision was to spread rationality and see the science in everything. "We're on the brink of a technological revolution," he used to say. "We need to promote a scientific temper among the masses if India is to develop."

**O**N MY FIRST DAY at *Science Today*, Mr Jha offered me the desk that had been occupied by his deputy, Pradip Paul, who'd worked there since the magazine's launch in 1966. Paul had just migrated to Australia. "You sit here," Mr Jha told me, "I want you to be as good as Paul."

Motivating words—earlier, as a trainee, I'd worked briefly under the intelligent, soft-spoken Paul, who'd been the star of the *Science Today* team.

"Thank you, Sir," I said.

"Hey," Mr Jha laughed, hands akimbo. "Nobody calls me 'Sir' here. And I'm not a knight, not yet Kiddo."

Mr Jha liked calling me Kiddo, and laughed heartily at it himself. He was witty, but firm about editorial standards. "Our magazine has to be error-free," he'd say. And—God forbid—if a factual, typographical or grammatical inaccuracy slipped through the cracks and reached him! He'd emerge from his room waving the proof. "Mohan," he'd ask, "were you *able* to read this?" That meant trouble and a terse lecture on advanced errorfreeology.

Most articles in *Science Today* were published under the names of leading scientists, doctors or engineers, but it was we, the staff, who rewrote and polished them, converting jaw-breaking jargon and esoteric concepts into plain English. Every staff member—we were about eight—read every edited article. After that one of us would be quietly sent with the article to another expert from the author's specialty for a peer-review. With all this, major articles took weeks and months to produce.

Mr Jha travelled frequently. And except for his occasional editorial, he never wrote for the magazine under his own name. He'd often spend office hours chatting over snacks—he had a wide circle of friends—at Samovar, a popular city cafe. So, at first I thought chief editors had little work to do, while "subs" like me slogged away.

Only later did I learn that Mr Jha was meeting scientists, engineers and academics from "the areas," as he put it, to discuss new topics and to get

them to write. (Indeed, *Science Today* provided a visibility Indian scientists had never experienced before.) In the office, I'd find him poring over *Nature* or *Aviation Week & Space Technology* or one of the other journals we subscribed to. I gradually realized how any good chief editor had to be the ideas man. Mr Jha's task was to stay updated and maintain a steady flow of articles for us to work on. So, even as early as the Seventies and Eighties, *Science Today* covered computer graphics; how the machines could be networked, word processing, nuclear medicine, optic fibres, or genetic engineering. There were captivating series on science in crime, space, Nobel laureates, the trees of India, the physics of sports, environment, nuclear policy, and careers in science and engineering that drew the magazine to young readers and policymakers alike.

**M**R JHA brought out the best in me. In 1978, soon after the first test-tube baby, Louise Brown, was born in England, he told me to meet doctors and explain the *in vitro* fertilization technique to readers—my first *Science Today* article. I was made to read up, re-work and discuss it before he approved it—with a by-line, something you had to earn at Mr Jha's magazine.

Since I liked to draw cartoons, Mr Jha encouraged me to publish them [some samples he approved, on this page]. He'd chuckle at my gags.



*"If the herbs don't work, here's a broad-spectrum antibiotic from Pfizer."*



*"Hey! Can't you simply publish your findings?"*



"I wish I too could draw and make people laugh," he told me. I went on to do well over a hundred cartoons for the magazine.

"You should become the editor here one day," Mr Jha would tell me as I grew older, sometimes appending his ultimate compliment. "You're like Paul." It was tough living up to that. He sometimes gave his staff multiple annual grade-increments, and had got the company to pay us a special monthly "science allowance." He must have invented the term before convincing the Times management that ours was backbreaking labour. "I don't want you to live in Bombay and be short of money, as I once was," he said, after giving me five increments at the end of one good year. "You've got to get married and start a family, Kiddo." It could well have been my father talking.

Mr Jha sometimes told me about his past—about his engineering college days, his law college days, his BSc days, his communist days, his activist days, his penniless days, of how he met Saroj, the charming young doctor he married. He talked of his roots in a large, land-owning Brahmin family in Bihar, of losing his mother to tetanus when he was a boy, of how self-made he was. When I moved to a flat in Bombay's Versova suburb, he warned me about going to the beach there alone. "My college was nearby," he recalled. "I once went to that beach with a girl and some men attacked me. I had to

fight and knock them out." It made me smile. The anecdotes were all somewhat incomplete, but since I was the kiddo and he the boss, I didn't ask questions. So, for me, his life remained a patchwork of mystifying stories.

**M**R JHA remained a fighter. But while he was generous with his staff, his own bosses were growing gradually discontented. *Science Today* wasn't the kind of magazine that made big money, so as managers changed, they were talking only of profits. Magazines rely on ads for that, but *Science Today's* advertising pages brought in little money. Making matters more difficult, Mr Jha protested against adverts that were unscientific—he was the first Indian editor I know of, who had such pluck. "We're in the business of promoting the truth," he'd say. One "Grow Taller" ad used to appear everywhere. Mr Jha refused to run it but the management gave him no choice. Advertising wasn't the editor's business, they told him. So, when the Grow Taller ad got published in our magazine, Mr Jha also ran an article next to it, from a well-known doctor who insisted that an adult couldn't grow any taller. "If you want to be tall," it concluded (and I'm sure this was the editor's touch), "choose tall parents." The management was furious; the advertiser mad.

"*Science Today* has a higher purpose than making money," Mr Jha would

say. Now, who was buying that? By 1983, as Mr Jha's relationship with his employers deteriorated, he grew distant and quiet. He soon resigned and moved on, still making efforts to reach science to the masses.

In 1986, he became the first winner of the Indira Gandhi Prize for Popularization of Science.

Months after Mr Jha left, I too resigned. With two new editors over the following years, *Science Today's* articles looked hastily put together and far from error-free. Later, they tried jazzing the magazine up, even altered its name. But nothing worked as well as the serious yet compelling ideas and high standards of earlier days. As readership dwindled, the magazine was shut down in 1992.

Meanwhile, I'd got busy at my new job and rarely saw my former editor. After Mr Jha suffered a stroke in 1995 and was partially paralyzed, I visited his home a couple of times. I thought he was simply too young to be so ill. But from his wife, Dr Saroj, then a health promotion expert with the World Health Organization, I learnt that although Mr Jha had looked youthful to me, he was actually born in 1928 and was about my own father's age! *No wonder he called me Kiddo.*

Frail and propped up in a chair, Mr Jha wasn't quite the man I knew. His memory seemed intact but he was upset about not being able to work. "I just can't depend on others and remain idle," he said. He also told me that the man employed as his carer was not kind to him. How everything changes—the strong, flamboyant editor I'd held in awe was suddenly so vulnerable.

As we spoke, he slipped forward off his chair and asked me to pull him back. I had to hold him close and settle him, more than once. I think he felt secure when I held him—he'd smile and thank me. Mr Jha passed away in April 1997. At his crowded

funeral, I wished I had spent more time with the man who gave me a career and taught so many people so much.



*The magazine viewed science in a very broad sense, as this 1982 cover on Harappa reveals.*

**R**ECENTLY, I met Dr Saroj Jha again and asked about her husband's past. "Yes, he did come from a landowning Bihar family," she told me, "but he'd hated the feudal life there. He even refused to let servants sweep his room and did so himself. "After school, he ran away to Calcutta, joined the Communist Party, even took part in anti-British activism. He later got a Bihar government scholarship to study engineering in

Bombay, but was expelled for leading a strike against a fee-hike. He finished his BSc and LLB, then practised law briefly before moving to journalism." Saroj, having met Surendr Jha through a common friend, admired the serious young man who could talk about everything. It was Mr Jha who had suggested to The Times of India group's general manager that they launch a science magazine. "Surendr was the best teacher I ever had," said Dr Saroj, herself a former professor of preventive and social medicine. "He taught me that knowledge is power and that if that power is not shared in a language that can be understood, it means nothing."

Dr Saroj and I spoke about the now-defunct magazine he'd founded and edited for nearly two decades. Today's youth would not have heard of it, but ask people from my generation, who are now senior engineers, scientists or captains of industry. "I grew up on

*Science Today*" is what most of them say. That's the one proof I have of Mr Jha's fulfilled vision.

In his editor days, there was no cable TV or the internet for medical or scientific information. But there was his widely read magazine. It helped motivate two generations of Indians to be part of an age of technology, or at least to develop an interest in science and nature. The Indian techie or Indian doctor-of-whatever is now everywhere.

Some years after Mr Jha's passing, I too became chief editor—much as he had wanted—of this magazine you are holding. I use the term "error-free" often with colleagues, with whom I try to be as encouraging as I can. I don't print anything unscientific, not even such advertisements and it's meant several battles fought and won. When new recruits call me 'Sir,' I've laughed, "I'm not knighted yet."

Mr Jha must be chuckling too. 