

TRIBUTE TO COM. HARKISHAN SINGH SURJEET

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Abstract

Harkishan Singh Surjeet played an important role in making the CPI(M) the largest contingent of the Left movement in the country. Surjeet polished Marxism-Leninism by his own self-study and learned from its experiences. He always stressed the fundamental importance of critically examining the Party's ideological and political positions on the basis of Marxism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the nineteen nineties, he guided the Party in arriving at correct positions learning from the experience of the past. As General Secretary of the CPI (M), he became the most authoritative spokesman for the Left and democratic forces in the country. He worked tirelessly for the defence of democratic and secular values and saw that India maintained its non-aligned and independent foreign policy.

KEY WORDS: Communist, Comrade, Party

Harkishan Singh Bassi (Surjeet) was born on March 23, 1916 to a Bassi Jat Sikh family in Rupowal Village in Eastern Punjab's Jalandhar district.¹ At the time of Harkishan Singh Surjeet's birth, Punjab was the epicentre of anti-colonial struggle. During this time the revolutionary activities were performed by Gadar Party against British rule during the First World War (1914-1918). Many ships carrying Gadar revolutionaries arrived in India and started the revolutionary activities against the British Government. But the activities of Gadar Party were suppressed with brutality by hanging 145 Gadarites while 306 were given life sentence and sent them to 'Kala Pani'. In 1930, the 14 year-old who was approached at home by leaders of the illegal Workers and Peasants Party in Punjab and asked to organise a meeting in the village, which he did effectively. The next day, the police were waiting for him at school. Although the headmaster, who knew the family, was sympathetic and wanted to protect him by getting him to apologise, he could not avoid expelling the rebellious schoolboy - who, said that he had "not committed any sin," but refused to apologise. There was no other school in the vicinity and, after a great deal of effort, well-wisher got Harkishan admitted to the Khalsa School in Jalandhar town. His mother had to work extremely hard to earn ten rupees a month (Rs. 4 each for fee and food, and Rs. 2 for milk) for his residential schooling.²

In 1932, 16 year old Surjeet came into political prominence on a larger stage through a daredevil act. He had just completed the written part of his matriculation examination and was waiting for

his science practicals. The district Congress committee had announced that it would hoist the Tricolour and bring down the Union Jack atop the Hoshiarpur district court building.

But after the district authorities threatened to clamp down on such seditious action and deployed the army, the plan was called off. Surjeet, who went to Hoshiarpur to participate in the event, remonstrated with the Congress office secretary to the effect that giving up on the plan was "an insult to the nation," whereupon he was challenged to do it himself. Braving army personnel who had orders to shoot, the schoolboy climbed up the stairs of the Hoshiarpur district court building, brought down the British flag, and hoisted the national tricolour. Narrowly escaping death and immediately jailed and tried, he mocked British rule by giving his name to the magistrate as "London Tod Singh" ("one who breaks London"). Sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment, he asked the court, "Only one year?" and had his jail sentence enhanced to four years. "Only four years?" he enquired of the magistrate who responded that, under this particular section of the law, he could not give him a longer jail term.³

He joined the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1934 when it was India's second most powerful party after only the Congress. It was while writing patriotic poetry and working for Punjabi papers, he acquired the poetic name "Surjeet" which means conqueror of the gods.⁴

In his early teens, Harkishan was initiated into anti-colonial activity by his father, Harnam Singh Bassi, and his more radical political associates.

He joined Bhagat Singh's Naujawan Bharat Sabha, and thus participated in the Congress movement. He made a lifelong commitment by becoming a member of the illegal Communist Party. He enrolled in the Congress Socialist Party in 1935. He subsequently made a name for himself as a Kisan Sabha organiser and leader.⁵

He was elected as the secretary of the Punjab State Kisan Sabha in 1938. The same year, he was externed from Punjab and went to Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh where he started a monthly paper, 'Chingari'. He went underground after the outbreak of the Second World War and was arrested in 1940. He was imprisoned in the notorious Lahore Red Fort where he was kept for three months in solitary confinement in terrible conditions. Later he was shifted to Deoli Detention Camp in Rajasthan. In common with the pioneering Communist leaders, Surjeet displayed amply the capacity to sacrifice and undergo difficulties. He spent ten years in jail, of which eight were in the pre-independence period; he also spent eight years underground.⁶

In the first part of his political life, Harkishan Singh Surjeet was influenced by many converging strands of radical politics. First, the initial radicalism of the Akali Party, of which his father was a Jalandhar district organiser and leader, interacting with the Congress and Khilafat movements. Secondly, the uncompromising revolutionary spirit of Bhagat Singh, the shining hero of his youth. Thirdly, the excitement and twists and turns of the freedom struggle, as it mark ahead towards independence, combined with the working people's cause.⁷

He was one of the builders of the Party in the undivided Punjab and the Communist Party became a big force there. Unfortunately, the partition of Punjab aroused such communal passions and the resultant massacres and exchange of populations setback the movement.⁸ Surjeet got married with Pritam Kaur in 1938. Pritam Kaur, like Surjeet, was also associated with the freedom movement.⁹ She was active in various mass movements and she also gave arrest during "anti-betterment levy agitation" in Jalandhar.¹⁰

Harkishan Singh Surjeet was a prime example of how a person of modest peasant origin with little formal education can become an outstanding leader of the proletarian movement. This was due to the fact that he was imbued with the scientific

ideology of Marxism. He spent his years in jail studying Marxism and world developments. As his political evolution as a communist was rooted in the anti-imperialist nationalist movement, he was able to perceive the sectarian mistakes committed by the Communist Party. He always strove to make the Party inherit the legacy of the anti-imperialist national movement which was betrayed time and again by the bourgeois-landlord classes.¹¹

During Partition, Surjeet worked strenuously for communal harmony. The communal attacks on the minorities were planned. He saw those dreadful acts with his own eyes. Surjeet blamed that in the conspiracy, the Maharaja of Patiala was involved. The idea was that if the Muslims were driven out, the Sikhs could form their own state in eastern Punjab. In 1946, 400 Hindus were killed in Noakhali and 5,000 Muslims in Bihar and communal hate, political objectives fuelled frenzy in Punjab. The attacks on Sikhs and Hindus in March 1947 in Rawalpindi triggered off others. In March 1947, the Congress demanded partition of Punjab and Bengal. Sikhs and Hindus were determined to split Punjab. The League was determined to avert that. By then riots had spread. Surjeet tirelessly worked for humanity in violence-torn Punjab.¹²

In 1952, at the age of 36, Surjeet was elected the General Secretary of Punjab section of Communist Party of India. Later he was elected to Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1954 by winning the Nakodar seat with Akalis support.¹³ Surjeet was elected to the Central Committee and Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of India at the Third Congress of the Party in January 1954.¹⁴ He had a life-long association with the peasant movement. He led the anti-betterment levy struggle of the farmers in Punjab in 1959. He served as the President and General Secretary of All India Kisan Sabha for a long period.¹⁵

Comrade Surjeet belonged to that generation of communists that emerged from the fire of the anti-imperialist struggle. Like EMS Namboodiripad, P. Sundarayya, A.K. Gopalan and other leaders of his generation, he was simultaneously in the Congress, the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party. Like them, he concentrated his work on the peasantry to mobilise them in anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle. Throughout his life, Comrade Surjeet retained his association with the

peasant movement. He led militant struggles of the peasantry against feudal landlords in the princely state of Pepsu and later the militant anti-betterment levy struggle in 1959.¹⁶ In the early 1960s the Sino-Soviet split in global communism triggered a crisis in the Communist Party of India. This was further aggravated during the conflict in Indo-China relationship.¹⁷

Indo-China relationship was exacerbated in 1962. India never suspected that China would ever launch an attack, but it did. India was attacked on October 20, 1962 in what famously came to be known as Sino-India war of 1962. The belief of not ever being attacked by China did not let the Indian army prepare and the result was the standoff between 10,000-20,000 Indian troops and 80,000 Chinese troops. The war continued for about a month and ended on November 21.¹⁸ Many CPI leaders, including Surjeet, backed China and were imprisoned.¹⁹ He continued in the leadership of the CPI till the split in 1964. Surjeet was one of the leaders who fought against revisionism and constituted the core of the leadership who went on to form the CPI(M). His deep experience in developing the peasant movement and building the Party led him to shun Left sectarian positions whenever such deviations arose in the Communist movement.²⁰

In 1964 a faction including Surjeet broke away to set up the Communist Party of India (Marxist). In later years, ideological fervour within the CPI (M) gave way to pragmatism and business-friendly regional governments. Latterly, with funding from the People's Republic of China drying up, Surjeet's party could rely on support from emigrant British and North American Sikh communities.²¹

Surjeet was elected to the Central Committee and Polit Bureau of the CPI(M) at the Seventh Congress in 1964 and he continued in these positions till Nineteenth Congress of the Party. In these four decades, Harkishan Singh Surjeet made a key contribution to the Party's programmatic and tactical policies. He was a master tactician who could translate the Party's political line into practice, implementing it with great skill and innovation.²²

His was a life-long fight against communalism. He was one of the first leaders who recognized the threat posed by the rise of the communal forces to the secular principle of the Indian State. His concern for party whole-timers was very

touching. If anyone was unable to make both ends meet, he would write an article (in the "bourgeois press") and give that comrade cheque he would get as remuneration, quietly. Having been denied the opportunity and the wherewithal to have had a formal education, he nevertheless pursued writing, and acquired the pseudonym 'Surjeet'—his original name being just Harkishan Singh. Surjeet woke up in the morning, and with his lota went into the khet (field) and returned to tell his comrades, that "urban Communists will have to work very hard to understand real India"—a lesson that remains relevant even today.²³

He has been variously described as a 'pragmatic politician', a 'Chanakya' of Indian politics but there is not a shadow of doubt that he was a politician par excellence. Ever since Ajoy Ghosh, as the fourth General Secretary of the undivided CPI, brought him into prominence by being instrumental in his assumption of the post of Secretary of the Punjab party, he played a crucial role in political developments first in Punjab and subsequently in the country (especially since the end of the Emergency regime in 1977). Initially he was close to all factions of the Akalis in Punjab that is why Indira Gandhi (and many others both within the communist movement and outside) used to characterise him as an 'Akali Marxist'. This journalist was himself witness to Surjeet, the Marxist, playing the role of a mediator between different Akali factions—led by Badal and Tohra—in the late seventies, 1978 to be precise, when the Akalis and the CPM were backing the Janata Party Government at the Centre.²⁴

Harkishan Singh Surjeet elected as the member of Rajya Sabha in 1978 with Akali support. In later years, ideological fervour within the CPI (M) gave way to pragmatism and business-friendly regional governments. Latterly, with funding from the People's Republic of China drying up, Surjeet's party could rely on support from emigrant British and North American Sikh communities.²⁵

Since Indira was working in alignment with the Communists at National Level, the elections due for SGPC were not held till 1979, when Akalis were working in alignment with the Janta Government. Again, the House elected in 1979 was kept in office for another 17 years thanks to Congress-Communists combination working in alignment during the period, to prevent the rise of

new leadership among the Sikhs.²⁶

During the July crisis in 1979 when the Morarji Desai Government fell and Charan Singh assumed power at the Centre there was a crisis in the CPM as well. Distinguished CPM MP Jyotirmoy Bosu threw his weight behind those in the party opposing the move by a strong segment (led by Surjeet and B.T. Ranadive) to withdraw support from Morarji Desai primarily because of his government's anti-working class positions as reflected in the Industrial Relations Bill it was seeking to introduce and silence over the issue of dual membership (of the Janata Party and RSS) of the erstwhile Jana Sangh leaders that Socialist stalwarts like Madhu Limaye had raised within the Janata Party; Bosu's argument was simple: by this move the CPM leadership was seeking to ensure the return of Indira Gandhi to power.

Even Morarji as the PM contacted Jyoti Basu, who was then in London as the West Bengal CM, to enlist his support to save the Union Government by changing his party's stand. However, Jyoti refused to oblige as he pleaded ignorance of the intricacies of national politics which, he had no hesitation ever in conceding, but were best known to Surjeet. At that juncture Surjeet himself had assured this journalist that the CPM would remain steadfast in its opposition to the Morarji Government and the spectre of Indira's return to power would not deter it from opposing the Janata Party administration. He explained, that CPM's line of backing the then Central Government was 'tactical' unlike the CPI's support to Indira Gandhi, during S.A. Dange's stewardship of the party, that was 'strategic' both before and during the Emergency. The course of events showed that the Surjeet-Ranadive line prevailed over the West Bengal line during the crisis.²⁷

Thereafter Surjeet played a key role in building up the Third Front in the 1980s by relying on such personalities as Mulayam Singh Yadav of UP and N.T. Rama Rao of Andhra Pradesh even though it did not make much headway. During this period Surjeet was also in constant touch with Indira Gandhi through Pranab Mukherjee, the then Finance Minister, in helping the government tackle the challenge of Khalistani separatism in Punjab. Giani Zail Singh and Surjeet were the two pillars on which Indira developed her response to the Bhindranwale phenomenon whereas CPI leaders in Punjab—Darshan Singh

Canadian (who fell prey to terrorists' bullets) and Satyapal Dang—actively fought the Khalistani secessionists-cum-terrorists on the soil of Punjab.²⁸

It is this bitter experience which made Surjeet acutely aware of the grave danger that communalism poses for the working class movement. From this stem his continuous endeavour to isolate the communal forces particularly the RSS-BJP combine. Just as he fought Hindu majority communalism, he fearlessly opposed Sikh fundamentalism and the Khalistani terrorism in the 1980s. He was one of the prime targets of the extremists but he did not flinch in opposing them in all possible ways.²⁹

Surjeet played a remarkable role in the defence of national unity and in formulating policies to counter the threat from the divisive forces. His firm stance and leadership in fighting against Khalistani terrorism in Punjab and the sacrifice made by over 200 Communists in fighting extremism constitutes a glorious chapter. From the late fifties, Surjeet was involved in tackling the problems of Jammu & Kashmir. He played a role in the evolution of the Assam Accord in the eighties. Imbued with deep anti-imperialism and the values of the nationalist movement, Surjeet looked at all issues of national unity from a democratic and secular standpoint.³⁰

He uncompromisingly led the party in the fight against Khalistani separatism and terror during the eighties, and provided both the strength and inspiration for a party which lost its leading comrades (apart from numerous other sympathisers who were martyred in that dark period). Surjeet's greatest strength was his ability, as a true Marxist, to evaluate concrete conditions with his head on his shoulders and to never be surprised by them.³¹

He continued to rise within the party until he was elected General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPI (M) in 1992. This was a period when the CPI (M)'s profile rose to such heights in the national politics. He was a person of rare foresight: at a seminar on economic reforms in 1992. He summarily rejected the idea of referring to China's economic reforms in the final resolution; his argument was—we have to wage our own battle without bringing in China as that would complicate matters. He was a lifelong friend of the mainstream family having enjoyed N.C.'s close association since the fifties, that is,

the days of Ajoy Ghosh's stewardship of the CPI. On a personal note one could disclose that in the recent past he had complimented this journalist for bringing out one of the best among the contemporary periodicals in terms of political content; despite its fiercely independent positions on different issues.³²

Surjeet was the chief architect of the United Front Government that followed the end of the Congress Government led by P.V. Narasimha Rao in 1996. He was in favour of the CPM joining that government with Jyoti Basu as the PM but that move was scuttled by the majority of the party's central leadership on the sterile argument that the CPM's mere presence in the Ministry would not be able to influence policy. Subsequently Jyoti described it as a "historic blunder"; even if Surjeet did not make such a statement in public, he fully shared the view in private. However, if the party had allowed Jyoti to become the PM, it is reasonable to speculate that Surjeet would have, with his political acumen and foresight, played the most crucial role in guiding the PMO and in the circumstances it would have become exceedingly difficult for the Congress leadership to withdraw support to the UF Government. In that case Indian politics could have traversed a different trajectory.³³

Despite his best efforts he could not convince his party to let Jyoti Basu become the Prime Minister of India in 1996, and had he enjoyed power he would have saved the CPM from making this historic blunder.³⁴

Surjeet alongwith Jyoti Basu played a critical role in helping the Congress form the UPA Government in May 2004 by ensuring the Left's support to the ruling coalition that would have been difficult in his absence. External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee has aptly described Surjeet and Jyoti Basu as the architects of the UPA Government. Observers are of the considered view that had Surjeet been politically agile and active the UPA-Left understanding would not have collapsed under the impact of the Indo-US nuclear deal and, even if there would have been a parting of ways between the two, it would not have led to the kind of bitterness one is witnessing at present. As for the current controversy surrounding the Lok Sabha Speaker, Surjeet would not have allowed it to snowball into such a big issue and, in any case, he would have amicably sorted out the matter such that Somnath

Chatterjee's expulsion from the CPM could have been eventually avoided.³⁵

And when the phenomenon of coalition governments emerged, Surjeet again displayed his genius as a person who could lean over to other parties, win over foes, build bridges amongst different political parties yet never leave his own base, his own ideology and his party. Many felt that he enjoyed immense power within his own party and that had he been well, the Left's stand on the nuclear deal and the trust vote would have been different, for as far as Surjeet was concerned, the biggest enemy of India was communalism and he always stressed that communal parties must be kept out of power. The UPA's ride to power in 2004 is given as an example of this. But this would not subscribe to this notion, and would rather maintain that he was in the minority. He authored the books Land Reforms in India, Happenings in Punjab and the Outline History of the Communist Party. He wrote innumerable pamphlets on current political issues.³⁶

In the Lok Sabha elections held in 2004, with 43 seats, the CPI (M) was the third largest party in India's parliament after Congress (145 seats) and the BJP (138). The CPI has 10. Surjeet was considered the main obstacle to the CPI (M) reuniting with the CPI and his passing may hasten reunification.³⁷

He was the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPI(M) till 2005, retiring at the age of 89. Surjeet was known for his steadfast opposition to the BJP and communalism. He was instrumental in forming a number of anti-BJP coalitions and for ensuring left support the UPA government. After retiring from his post as General Secretary, Surjeet continued to play an active role in Indian national politics. Many times his role has been that of a cunning king-maker in parliamentary politics, mending and assembling broad coalitions.³⁸

As General Secretary of the CPI(M), he became the most authoritative spokesman for the Left and democratic forces in the country. He worked tirelessly for the defence of democratic and secular values and to see that India maintained its non-aligned and independent foreign policy. His views were sought and his advice heard with respect in political circles.³⁹

The general secretary of the Communist party of [India \(Marxist\) for 13 years was a major power-](#)

broker. It was a role he described as one of the most trying of his life. A key issue for Surjeet was keeping the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) out of office. The CPI (M) leader was a Sikh, and combating communalism - whether by religion, language, caste or region - was central to his beliefs.⁴⁰

Surjeet was a simple man with simple tastes. His home was modest, his clothes and lifestyle simple but he loved his tea with a lot of sugar. At the beginning of his political career he owned eight acres of land in his native village Bundala near Jalandhar and at the time of his death he still owned just those eight acres. Yet he was the man who was known as the kingmaker, the person who made Prime Ministers, Chief Ministers, officials, and groomed young comrades who now run the party. He helped many set up business enterprises and he was the person who collected huge funds for his party, the CPM, but for himself, he was a simple man.⁴¹

In the afternoon of August 1, 2008 passed away in NOIDA's Metro Hospital, former CPM General Secretary Harkishan Singh Surjeet, 92, after a prolonged illness. Since he relinquished the post of party's General Secretary in 2005 he had been ailing and due to ill-health and old age he could not meaningfully contribute towards shaping the course of as well as effectively intervene in the country's political developments that new detriment of the nation and its people at large.⁴² Harkishan Singh Surjeet's wife Pritam Kaur passed away in December 2016. She was 97. She was active in various mass movements.⁴³

Harkishan Singh Surjeet is survived left his two sons, Paramjeet Singh and Gurcharan Singh (Punjab CPI-M Committee Member) and a daughter Charanjeet Kaur and younger brother Jujhar Singh. One daughter predeceased before him.⁴⁴

Conclusion

As a young man, Comrade Surjeet threw himself into the freedom movement and worked wholeheartedly for the liberation of the country from colonial rule. Throughout his long and distinguished career he championed the cause of the poor and the oppressed. His unflinching commitment to secularism will serve as a moving inspiration for everyone in public life. His open mind and generous heart, his willingness to listen

to others, understand their compulsions and then find a common meeting ground brought together people of divergent political belief and opinions to work for the national interest. The warmth of his personality, his gift for friendship, his wisdom and experience won him devoted friends from every walk of life and across the political spectrum. Comrade Surjeet lived a long, rich and fulfilled life, leaving a precious legacy. The country lost a great patriot and a great communist revolutionary whose loss cannot be easily filled. We remember him as a wise counsellor, patient and pragmatic negotiator and as someone who had tremendous power of taking everyone with him in his endeavours. Many vowed to carry forward the torch he left behind for the struggle of working class, for the basic change in our society.

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