



HARKISHAN SINGH SURJEET AS A COMMUNIST

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Cite This Article: Simranjeet Singh, "Harkishan Singh Surjeet as a Communist", International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, Volume 3, Issue 1, Page Number 121-125, 2018.

Harkishan Singh Surjeet was among the few Communist leaders to have left an indelible imprint on the national polity, the others being P.C. Joshi, Ajoy Ghosh, S.A. Dange, Bhupesh Gupta, E.M.S. Namboodiripad. Others like Jyoti Basu, A.K. Gopalan, P. Sundarayya, P. Ramamurti, C. Rajeswara Rao, Bhowani Sen, C. Achutha Menon had doubtless contributed to the Communist Party's development in different regions of the country but they didn't contribute towards shaping national political events. And it can be stated without any exaggeration that apart from EMS, Surjeet was the only CPM leader to have a genuine national perspective and even here Surjeet was able to comprehend, far more than EMS or any other CPM leader, the complexities of the Hindi heartland. Surjeet's contribution to the national polity was not commensurate with his party's influence or sweep – the individual Surjeet's stature and authority in national affairs far exceeded the CPM's standing on the national plane.

Bhagat Singh established a young revolutionary group known as the 'Naujawan Bharat Sabha' in March 1926. Comrade Ramkishan was the President of this Naujawan Bharat Sabha and Bhagat Singh was its Secretary. The 'Naujawan Bharat Sabha' declared that its objective was to establish "a completely independent Republic of Workers and Peasants in India".¹

The Naujawan Bharat Sabha played an important role in the political history of Punjab during 1926-29 by spreading anti-British and revolutionary ideas among the youth. Naujawan Bharat Sabha showed interest in anti-Government movements launched by political parties, and its members associated themselves with the boycott of the Simon Commission and of British goods. They agitated against the Trade Dispute Bill and the Public Safety Bill etc. They also took interest in the Communist activities of the Kirti Group by organising a Workers' and Peasants' Conference at Lyallpur.²

Influenced by the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Harkishan Singh Surjeet began his revolutionary life at the age of 16. After a year of the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev, in March 1932, the British arrested him when Surjeet hoisted the tricolour flag at the district court in Hoshiarpur.³

He joined Naujawan Bharat Sabha⁴ in 1930. A new episode began in Surjeet's life after his release from jail. He joined the Communist Party in 1934 and became a member of the Congress Socialist Party in 1935. 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'.⁵

The Communist Party was banned in 1934 but continued to exercise its influence on the working class and on the left in the Congress. The ideas of Socialism were becoming very popular and left dements in the Congress, become disillusioned with Gandhi formed the Congress Socialist Party, in order to give the Congress a Left orientation and realised that the vast masses of the peasantry could be brought into the struggle and their immediate demands they were also realising the necessity of organisation the peasantry as a class. They had already come to the conclusion that the struggle for real political freedom could not be separated from the struggle of the peasantry for an end to landlordism and for radical restructuring of rural society. The Communists were already trying to develop class organisations and had popularised the ideas of independent class organisations of the working class peasants and other sections of the toiling people. Thus it was the Left Congressmen, Congress Socialists and Communists who took the initiative in organising the All India Kisan Sabha.⁶

By December 1934, Congress Socialist Party started exploring the Punjab province to enroll members and to establish branches. However, none of these seemed to be really getting off the ground and it was a completely different organizational form that seems to have made it possible for the left-wing activists to get their act among the peasants really going. The karza or debt relief committees that soon mushroomed all over central Punjab represented this new form.⁷ Harkishan Singh Surjeet maintained that these karza committees were started on the basis of a decision of the Communist Party.⁸

An all-India peasant movement did not take shape until April, 1936, when the first All-India Kisan Congress was held in Lucknow under the presidency of Swami Sahajananda Saraswathi, a peasant leader from Bihar. A second congress was held in Faizpur in December, 1936, and the following national officers were elected: President: N.G. Ranga, General Secretary: Swami Sahajananda Saraswathi, Joint Secretaries: Indulal Yajnik, B.P.L. Bedi, Bankim Mukherjee. In 1936, Surjeet became a co-founder of the Kisan Sabha in Punjab. Surjeet was elected as the Secretary of the Punjab State Kisan Sabha in 1938. He was a young boy in 1936 when the government refused permission to hold the conference scheduled for Bundala, which was his own village, on the village common land, as was the general practice. So Surjeet ordered that the standing maize crop from four acres of his own land be cut down to make place for the conference. The crop was cut and the conference held,

Gopal Singh Quami presiding and Jawaharlal Nehru the star attraction.⁹ Young Indira Gandhi too accompanied her father for this meeting.¹⁰

Harkishan Singh Surjeet, who was exiled from the province and had to live in Saharanpur in Congress-ruled UP, and hundreds of others who faced arrest, internment, prosecution, interrogation and torture under Unionist rule. The Kirti magazine was forced to migrate to Meerut, again in Congress-ruled UP, and emerge as the Kirti Lehar.¹¹

An important Kisan Conference was organized in January at Kamalpura in Ludhiana, where it was mostly the CPI group of Communists who were in the forefront: Master Kabul Singh, Sohan Singh Josh, M.L. Kalia, Abdul Waris, Harkishen Singh Surjeet. Congress ministries were praised for their stand on the release of political prisoners and for allowing publication of the Kirti paper. In contrast, Unionists had suppressed civil liberties and not done anything for peasants. The red flag was unfurled but the socialists' willingness to fight under the national flag, the tricolour, in the battle for freedom was emphatically asserted. Around 30,000 people participated in the proceedings of the Conference, which also appealed for non-participation in the coming war.¹²

In the election of office-bearers of Punjab Kisan Committee, Baba Kesar Singh became president instead of Baba Jwala Singh, who had met with a tragic and fatal road accident in May 1938 when travelling back from Montgomery. Baba Rur Singh, MLA, became vice-president and Bhagat Singh Bilga general secretary. Tehal Singh Bhangali became joint secretary. Harkishen Singh Surjeet and Harnam Singh Chamak were elected secretaries and Bhagwan Singh Longowal treasurer.¹³

Marriages used to take place at a very young age in those days. Comrade Surjeet was engaged to a girl in one village. His grandfather married for a second time to a woman from the same village. Custom did not permit two persons from the same family entering wedlock to girls from the same village. Consequently, Comrade Surjeet's marriage did not take place. Comrade Surjeet was pestered by boys of his age who started teasing him. One day while attending a marriage alongwith his mother he saw a young girl of nine years playing there. Pointing towards her Comrade Surjeet told his mother that he wanted to marry her. This was how Pritam Kaur became his life-long companion.¹⁴

Surjeet got married with Pritam Kaur in 1938. Pritam Kaur was also associated with the freedom movement and later involved in various social activities.¹⁵ He had however to wait for some more years before custom would permit the couple to stay together. In the intervening period Comrade Surjeet had grown into a leader and was on the run from the police. The time for bringing home the bride had approached. Comrade Surjeet accompanied by his mother was taking his wife home for the first time when police got wind of it and intercepted him mid way. His mother initially resisted but ultimately agreed to a compromise that Comrade Surjeet would surrender once he reached his house. In jail, when Pritam Kaur visited him in jail he was unable to recognize her. He needed his sister's help to make out that she was his wife.¹⁶ After few days of marriage Pritam Kaur wife of Harkishan Singh Surjeet went to jail to meet him then Surjeet didn't recognize her. Her sister-in-law told Surjeet that she is his wife.¹⁷

Anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda had been carried on in a vigorous fashion in Punjab. He declared that "in the event of a World War not a single man or a single pie would be provided to the British Government by the Indians". There was hardly any leader of note who had not made Anti-war speeches; and most of the meetings were in rural areas. This continued increasing till September 1939, when the War broke out and a large number of arrests were happened which led to a decline in open propaganda. Underground propaganda, however, continued, and in this the Communists and Socialists were particularly active. The Congress Socialist Party at its meeting on 9 September decided to send volunteers to all recruitment centres as soon as recruitment began and also to send its activists for intensive anti-recruitment propaganda in the recruitment areas. The Communist Party of India, as part of its overall plan of underground work prepared in order to forestall the possibility of all out repression, had appointed in Punjab a committee of three headed by Ferozuddin Mansur to arrange for the issue of anti-war literature and to conduct propaganda among troops and police.¹⁸

Among Congress leaders, many like Madan Mohan Malviya, Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad were soft on the Hindu variant of the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha. The Hindu tinge surrounding the Congress could be seen even at a symbolic level. Annual Congress sessions were inaugurated by the performance of 'havan'. This evoked a bitter response from Maulana Azad. Talking to Harkishan Singh Surjeet at the Tripuri session of the Congress in 1939, Azad said, "Which foolish Mussalman will come to the Congress if such overtly Hindu practices are followed at official functions of the Congress?" Such idiom and practices did not make for confidence in the Congress among the Muslim masses and made the task of the Muslim League of dubbing the Congress as a Hindu organisation easier. Surjeet observed the impact of the Muslim nationality line of the CPI of the mid-1940s, which led to the "lending" of Communist Muslim cadre to the Muslim League in the hope that they would influence the League, lamented that Ataulah Jahaniah, one of their best Muslim mass political workers, of whom there was a great shortage, was sent off to the League and he never came back.

Surjeet knew that they could not have Atallah Jahaniahs made to order; the loss, in the context of the lower availability of Muslim cadre, was a serious one.¹⁹

Harkishan Singh Surjeet brought out the Communist in Urdu and Gurumukhi and the Kirti group brought out Lal Jhanda. The Communist group also brought out leaflets titled Ailan-1-Jang in which there was a strong anti-war message. Copies of these were found thrown in the Regimental Lines of the 19th Lancers in Lahore. The Students Federation also carried on anti-war propaganda in rural areas. A report dated 29 October 1940 talked of "organized approaches ... being made to the families and relatives of serving soldiers and prospective recruits, and their imagination being stirred with exaggerated accounts of the dangers of overseas service". Underground workers continued to hold small meetings of 30, 40 or 50 people in villages where anti-war propaganda was carried out. Harkishan Singh Surjeet worked underground for over a year in this fashion. The impact of this tremendous effort at anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda could be seen in the response to the recruitment in the central Punjab districts. The governor was continually complaining of the shortage of Jat Sikh recruits and impressing on all his Sikh visitors the necessity for stimulating recruitment.²⁰

Arrests and detentions of Kisan activists had been continuing ever since the outbreak of the War. The arrests and detentions of so many political leaders at one go led to a big outcry in the province. Arrests, detentions, attachments of property of absconders, continued unabated. In December 1940, two major "absconders", Harkishan Singh Surjeet and Karam Singh Mann were caught; the former was reportedly the key man in the underground set up in the province. The figure for persons detained without trial was highest for Punjab in September 1940; 75 out of a total of 237 for all-India.²¹

Surjeet started actively organising small landholders around economic issues like debt and digging irrigation canals. Writing patriotic poetry and working for Punjabi political papers, he acquired the name "nom de plume Surjeet" (Conqueror of the gods).²²

He wanted to become a poet and took to writing under the pen name "Surjeet". His pen name remained but he could not become a poet and, instead of writing poetry, took to full-time politicking. He not only fought for India's independence but also carried on with equal zeal the social and economic reform programmes, starting a journal "Dukhi Duniya" from Jullundur. The British regime had kept a close eye on his activities and, in order to escape the oppression, he shifted to Saharanpur where he brought out the paper "Chingari".²³

On May 22, 1941, Hitler's army attacked Russia. By the end of that year, even America had been dragged into the war. Now the Congress could see the right time for talks: by the end of 1941, majority of Congress leaders had been released from jail as the British too wanted to break the ice. However, the Cripps Mission, sent under pressure of the allies, failed as the British were not ready to lose India. In these circumstances, the Congress seized the opportunity to increase its activity. In its Bombay session on August 18, 1942, the slogan of "Bharat Chhodo" was given. On the other hand, as the communist leadership was still in jail, their opposition to the war continued for six more months after the attack on Russia. Later, after a long discussion with the leaders imprisoned in Devli camp, it was decided that since the character of war had changed, support has to be given to the war efforts. After this, many Party leaders were freed in May 1942, though Harkishan Singh Surjeet, along with his colleagues, remained in jail till 1944. The Party was legally recognised after a long time.²⁴

When demand for the formation of Pakistan was raised by the Muslim League the Communist Party had decided in its favour. Bujha Singh and his Kirti group were already disappointed at decisions of the party. They considered the policies of the party as reformist and tailing the Congress. They shuddered when the policy on Pakistan was announced. They opposed the formation of Pakistan. They described division of the country on religious lines as religious conservatism. The central leadership of the party considered it as a question of the right of minority nationalities to self determination. The Kirtis who believed in internationalism and the rule of the working class strongly opposed the idea of Pakistan. Due to this opposition, the All India Committee of the Communist Party of India expelled Bujha Singh, Gandharv Sen, Harbans Singh Karnana and Bhagat Singh Bilga from the party in 1946.²⁵

On the one hand, the Kirtis were opposing this division, while on the other hand, Harkishan Singh Surjeet, leader of the Josh group, was writing a thesis for a Sikh Rule. It is an irony of time that when the movement for Khalistan started in Punjab the party of Surjeet, who had demanded the establishment of a Sikh State.²⁶

Surjeet was propounding his own thesis for a Sikh homeland on the model of the Pakistan being proposed by the Muslim League. But Surjeet's idea was firmly quashed by Rajani Palme Dutt, the Communist party of Great Britain's chief ideologue, who for many years supervised the CPI on behalf of Stalin's Comintern.²⁷

He raised the concept of a separate Sikh homeland first in the 1940s, but said he did so to counter the two-nation theory accepted by the then Communist Party of India.²⁸ He had drafted the "Sikh homeland" document to blunt the arguments of another leader of his party, Sajjad Zaheer, in favour of Pakistan. Sajjad Zaheer had sent him a 34 page concept paper while he was in a Gujarat jail in the early 1940s. The paper contained strong arguments in favour of the two-nation theory, which too was the accepted party line and later

became the basis of partition. Irked with the party stand, Surjeet wrote back to the party that "if Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations then so are Sikhs."²⁹

Indian Independence was accompanied, as we all know, by the scourge of Partition. Punjab suffered as much as it was possible to suffer when a single whole is rent into two. The peasants of Punjab were amongst the worst sufferers. Many had to leave hearth and home and try to start life anew. Others, who were luckier, and did not have to leave forever their ancestral lands and homes, were sucked into the madness of looting and killing. Among those who had been leading the peasants, and had some influence over them, only the Communists and Congressmen retained their sanity and tried to help the peasants retain theirs. Harkishan Singh Surjeet, however, asserted that only Communists remained secular in the moment of frenzy. Stories abound of heroic efforts by secular political activists, mostly Communist, to save encircled groups of Muslims, keep them in safe custody and escort them safely across what had become the new border.³⁰

Harkishan Singh Surjeet witnessed the events and said in an interview: 'The communal attacks on the minorities were definitely planned. I know more about the persons involved in the eastern wing because I was there. I saw those dreadful acts with my own eyes. In that 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." The attacks on Sikhs and Hindus in March 1947 in Rawalpindi are regarded as one of the major crimes that triggered off others.³¹

Comrade Surjeet took part in the freedom struggle at very young age when he was a student. He had an important role to play in the building up of the Communist movement in the Punjab. He had been the Secretary of the Punjab State Committee of the Party. Surjeet was made a member of the Polit Bureau in 1954 at the Third Party Congress held at Madurai. Jyoti Basu was also elected to the Central Committee there.³²

Jyoti Basu was present in Amritsar to participate in Party Congress. A lakh of people attended the open rally. There was a big procession of the Party Congress delegates before the rally. Jyoti Basu along with Comrade EMS and Comrade Harkishan Singh Surjeet were in an open jeep. Jyoti Basu remembered when the procession was moving around Amritsar, women and children were showering flower petals on them from houses on both sides of the route they took. Then Jyoti Basu came to realise the depth of the mass base of the Party in the Punjab and importance of Harkishan Singh Surjeet.³³ In 1952, at the age of 36, Surjeet was elected General Secretary of the Punjab section of the CPI.³⁴

Conclusion:

He was the prominent designer of the Communist Party in the undivided Punjab and the Communist Party became a big face there. Unfortunately, the partition of Punjab between India and Pakistan aroused such communal passions and this resulting massacre and swapping of people between India and Pakistan impeded the movement. He was a perfect example of how a person from remote village of Punjab with less education became an outstanding leader of the Indian politics. This was only due to the fact that he was instilled with the logical philosophy of Marxism. He spent so many years in jail before and after the independence of India, studying Marxism and world developments. Due to his political progression as a communist was rooted in the anti-imperialist nationalist movement, he was capable to identify the various mistakes committed by the Communist Party in 1942 and 1948. He always attempted to make the Communist Party take over the legacy of the anti-imperialist nationwide movement which was betrayed the time and again by the bourgeois-landlord classes.

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