

India: What it Was Like to Be a Young Communist and Trade Unionist in 1971

Kanpur

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What I saw of the role of the police and administration made me more convinced than ever of the truths of class outlook and class rule.

The year 1971 was marked with several 'big victories' – in politics, cricket and in war – all of which had long term implications for India. The national mood was buoyant, even if the country continued to struggle with endemic problems.

Fifty years later, we look back at those times and evoke some of that mood. [In a series of articles](#), leading writers recall and analyse key events and processes that left their mark on a young, struggling but hopeful nation.

1969, '70, '71: the three years flow seamlessly into each other. In July '69, I returned to Kanpur from college in the US, determined to joined one of three communist parties. Communist Party of India (Marxist) leaders, arrested soon after the party was founded in 1964, had been released before the 1967 elections, after which the party was able to lead coalition governments in Kerala and West Bengal.

Soon after my return, I visited Calcutta. It was a heady time of intense discussion and debate. The CPI(M) was trying to implement its line of using state governments as 'instruments of struggle'. In West Bengal, the police were not allowed to intervene during a wave of strikes, *gheraos* (a word that came into existence at this time) and agitations. and, as a result, in hundreds of small and large industries, workers could increase their wages which were pitiful.

In Kerala, the government was able to give relief to workers in the coir and *beedi* industries and to agricultural workers, and begin implementation of radical land and educational reforms, laying the foundation for the 'Kerala model of development' in the teeth of bitter opposition from vested interests. As a result, the E.M.S. Namboodiripad government was dismissed in July 1969. I was fortunate enough to stand on the sidelines of the mammoth rally that the CPI(M) organised in solidarity with the people of Kerala when EMS arrived in Calcutta, a day after he demitted office. To see the flooding of the Brigade Ground by thousands of the rural and urban poor, who turned it into a sea of red flags, was a revelation.

Back in Kanpur, after having decided to work with the CPI(M), I took a rickshaw one very hot afternoon to a gully off the Mall Road which was, of course, very much part of my world of privilege. A gully adjacent to 'our' dry cleaners led to Kurswan, a lower-middle-class locality of houses crumbling under the weight of ever-increasing generations of joint families and their growing unemployment and poverty.

Comrade Ram Asrey, the district committee secretary of the CPI(M), lived in one of these. He had

recently returned to Kanpur after having been externed for three years. A great orator, a gifted writer and a voracious reader, for me he was and remained the ideal communist leader. He guided me into the world of the working class of the city, taking me to gate meetings after which we would sit and chat with trade union comrades, working class militants and ordinary workers in the tea shops that clustered around each mill gate.

I had always lived near the mills. The hours of our days were divided by the sound of the mill hooters that marked the passing of shivering bodies making their way to work on dark wintry mornings, and flushed faces and tired bodies going home in the hot summers. All around the city, shifts were always starting and ending, tea was constantly being made on small stoves. Beedis and smoke made the air pungent. This was a familiar world but distant from my own. Now I was trying to become part of it. The one thing that changed forever was that whether I could completely be part of that world or not, I took my place on its side of the divide.

In early 1970, Comrade EMS visited Kanpur for three days to meet with the district committee of the still fledgling CPI(M). He stayed in our home on Asrey's request. This was not as strange as it may seem. My parents, though critical of the communists because of their violent distaste for Subhas Chandra Bose's relationship with the axis powers, had a great regard for all freedom fighters and, of course, EMS was one of them. My Malayali mother was very supportive of the role EMS had played in transforming hidebound, caste-ridden Kerala society. EMS was happy to stay with Indian National Army veterans.

He had no problem engaging in long conversations with an extremely opinionated and argumentative young person like myself. He told me that I should join the party and when I made some facile comment about 'losing my freedom', he said, "You can always leave! It's not like a marriage." I filled the party form before he left Kanpur.

At this time, many textile mills in the city had either closed or were on the verge of closure. The fear of closure naturally made the workers in the mills that were still running very apprehensive and acquiescent. One of the mills that had closed in the early 1960s was the New Victoria Mills, where my father had been general manager since early 1947.

In early 1970, Asrey as leader of the Suti Mill Mazdoor Sabha gave a call for organising a movement to force the government to nationalise and re-open the Victorial Mills. Most of the other unions opposed this as an adventurist move but the unemployed, desperate workers started coming in increasing numbers to the mill gate where we held regular meetings. It was decided that we would organise a *jail bhara* in support of our demand and, each day, batches of workers from other mills would court arrest.

A completely novel idea was that a batch of women would also court arrest, and I was given the responsibility of organising this. Every afternoon, I would set out from our home which was hardly 200 metres from the mill and head for the nearby *bastis* and *ahatas* where the Victoria Mills workers lived with their families. Our opponents and the press had a field day - '*Sahgal mill band karvaye, uski beti chalu karvaye*' was their derisive slogan. But the workers and their families were much more generous, as most working class people tend to be. Also, my mother was a much-loved doctor who treated the poor every day of the year except for Holi and my father too was not seen as an 'anti-worker' officer. I was the strange sight for them.

For two weeks, I trudged around from *ahata* to *basti*. I saw poverty, appalling living conditions and, in the midst of unbelievable chaos and dust, the humour and generosity of those whose deprivation was so obviously linked to my own prosperity and privilege!

Finally, more than 50 women of all ages agreed to court arrest along with me. Our procession from the mill gate to the district court, where we courted arrest, was an unusual sight and thousands of people gathered, some to cheer and others to gape. We were sentenced to a week in jail and this created quite a stir. Many unions and organisations came out in support of the workers and, soon after we were released, the chief minister, Chowdhry Charan Singh who had little sympathy for industrial workers and none for unions, persuaded the Central government to intervene and nationalise the mill. This was a historic moment and a great victory. I remember taking part in a victory march around Kanpur organised by Asrey that lasted for the entire day and covered about 15 miles.

I also started working in the JK Rayon Workers' Union and, later that year, helped to form a union in the IEL Fertilizer Factory owned by the British ICI. There were strikes in both these factories and the workers won some significant gains.

Just before the IEL strike, I went to jail alone for the first time. I was arrested at night along with two male comrades and the huge, intimidating witch-like shadow of the woman prison guard fell on the wall. She turned out to be a very kind woman!

A third strike that year was that of the JK Jute Mill workers, demanding a wage increase of Rs 30 similar to what the West Bengal jute workers had won, the largest wage increase ever! During this strike, I came in close contact with workers from Bihar who lived around the mills and constituted the bulk of workers and I also met Ramrati, one of the few women jute workers left. She was barely 4.5 feet tall, thin, wiry and very militant. She would stand outside her room at dawn, before the first shift started, holding a *phukni* (an iron tube used for lighting the stove), threatening to beat any strike breaker that crossed her path to pulp!

What I saw of the role of the police and administration made me more convinced than ever of the truths of class outlook and class rule. Comrade Jyoti Basu's refusal to allow the police to be used as strike-breakers and management goons took on a new meaning. The dismissal of the West Bengal state government was certainly a response to its upsetting of the class apple-cart.

This was a time of political developments in Pakistan that led ultimately to the formation of Bangladesh. The atrocities committed by the Pakistani army against the people of East Bengal were horrifying and led to a massive influx of refugees into West Bengal. In early 1971, Basu appealed to doctors to come and work in the refugee camps. My mother immediately volunteered and was soon hard at work in a camp at Bongaon. She was extremely impressed by the devotion of the party activists and sympathisers manning the camp and after it was wound up, she decided to join the CPI(M). She had some issues to be addressed, however, and she met Basu and talked to him about the party's attitude towards Subhas Chandra Bose. Basu had no hesitation in accepting, publicly, that there was absolutely no denying Bose's patriotism. After this my mother joined the party, one of the few people to do so at the age of 54!

This was at a time of great political turbulence in West Bengal. After the dismissal of the United Front government in 1970, elections to the assembly along with the Lok Sabha elections were held in March 1971. Despite the fact that the Congress (I) swept the elections and came to power at the Centre with an overwhelming majority on its 'Garibi Hatao' slogan, the CPI(M) improved its position and number of seats, emerging as the largest single party. It was also able to win 20 Lok Sabha seats. Significantly, the CPI fought against the Congress (I) in this election and made a poor showing. The election witnessed much violence and three candidates were murdered. The Congress used its political strength to form a government keeping the CPI(M) out. Within a few months, the government fell and president's rule was enforced. Attacks on the CPI(M), its supporters, trade unions etc. increased tremendously.

In Kanpur, Comrade Shiv Verma, an associate of Bhagat Singh and the youngest inmate in the Andaman jail, was our Lok Sabha candidate and I had my first taste of electioneering. We could get only 5000 votes and, very soon, we experienced the brunt of the attacks of a resurgent Congress, firmly in the saddle at the Centre and state. The Uttar Pradesh labour minister, G.S. Bajpai, declared that he was a destroyer of unions and, in collusion with the government, the IEL and JK Rayon factories were locked out, as was the jute mill. There was large-scale victimisation in textile mills too.

The IEL lock-out lasted 52 days, during which we marched the 18 km that separate the factory from the district court innumerable times. Along with union leaders, I spent the last weeks of the lock-out in Delhi, where we had several meetings with cabinet ministers dealing with labour and fertilisers and the management. At one point, when we were telling the management about some assurances given by one of the ministers, one of them said derisively, "That dog won't dance!" That arrogant comment reflects the kind of authority that multinational corporations exert over governments in the Global South, even Indira Gandhi's!

Most of the year went by in facing these attacks. Processions, dharnas, meetings, public fundraising. Finally, the lock-outs were lifted and we were also able to get the victimised workers reinstated – always the most difficult part of working-class struggle. The heroism and commitment displayed by thousands of workers facing the worst kind of privations and pressures is indescribable. The leaders, standing firm despite police repression, arrests and offers of huge bribes, are etched in my memory.

In 1971, I was involved in the formation of a new union of electricity workers. This was a statewide union and I remember going to all the major areas where there are power-houses with one other comrade. We would just arrive at a workers' colony and try to find some sympathisers, some comrades and, amazingly, we usually did! Soon after the union was formed, a statewide strike was called by the older established unions.

Comrade Daulat, my colleague, and I were given the responsibility of going to the Power House in Kanpur and ensuring that the workers went on strike. We had been pursued by the police for two days before this and I was going around in a burkha. The Power House was also surrounded by the police and I was standing in front of the gate holding a plastic basket with a small tiffin. As soon as the shift came out, I stood up on a stool in front of a tea shop and made my speech, and the strike started. It was quite dark by then and I was pushed into a small room behind the teashop by workers who did not want to see me arrested. Somehow, I made my way through a maze of small gullies and understood the meaning of the word 'solidarity', as I found a helping hand at every turn.

The attacks that we faced in Kanpur were only a small part of the general attack on the working class that started that year.

1971 ended with the exhilarating victory of the Indian Army against Pakistan and the declaration of independence in Bangladesh. Indira Gandhi's prestige and power were at their zenith. Unfortunately, they were used to steadily weaken democratic institutions and attack the opposition, specially the CPI(M). 1972 saw the beginning of the reign of terror in West Bengal. A prelude to the declaration of Emergency in 1975.

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