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# India: Book Excerpt: What Is The Place of A Woman In A Revolutionary Movement?

Saturday 5 March 2022, by [Yashpal](#) (Date first published: 5 February 2022).

**An excerpt from eminent Hindi writer Yashpal's first novel 'Dada Comrade', translated into English by Simona Sawhney.**

*Eminent Hindi writer Yashpal (1903-1976) studied at the National College, Lahore along with Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Bhagvati Charan Vohra.*

He joined the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) under the leadership of Chandrashekhar Azad and was imprisoned for over six years for his role in the armed struggle for India's independence.



A poster advertising a reward for the capture of Yashpal and other HSRA members, including 'Prakasho Devi'.  
Courtesy Anand.

*After his release he turned, in his own words, from "bullet to bulletin," and became a prolific writer.*

His novels, short stories, essays and memoirs are an immensely significant part of modern South Asian literature and history. Dada Comrade, his first and partly autobiographical novel, was published in 1941.

The excerpt below narrates the first meeting of the novel's remarkable heroine Shailbala with Dada, a thinly disguised version of Azad. Harish, the male protagonist of the novel, is also Shailbala's friend and lover, while BM appears as his political/sexual rival. This incident of the novel is based on an early meeting between Azad and Prakashvati, a member of the HSRA who later became Yashpal's wife.

Shailbala was sitting in her room writing an urgent letter. A servant informed her that two men had come to meet her. Continuing to write, she said, 'Ask them for their names.'

The servant returned with a piece of paper. As soon as she saw it, she came outside. Joining her palms together, she greeted the two men and took them inside. Seating them on the cushioned armchairs, she looked at BM and asked with a smile, 'You have graced us with your presence after a long time—I hope all is well.'

She looked at BM's companion with a cursory glance. The gravity of physical strength was manifest in the face of the powerful, well-built man. Not tenderness, but determination shone in his large eyes. Shail addressed BM again in a low voice: 'When did you come? How is Harish?'

Pointing towards the window on the wall behind him, BM asked, 'Can we talk here?'

In place of a smile, a serious expression came over Shail's face. 'Yes,' she said, bowing her head, then she rose and went to the adjoining room behind the curtain, closed the door from inside, dragged her chair close to BM and sat down.

Gesturing towards his companion, BM introduced him in a low voice, 'This is Dada.'

Looking at Dada, Shailbala greeted him again, and smiling respectfully, she said, 'I've heard so much about you, now finally I meet you.'

BM said, 'Dada wants to ask you something.'

Dada suddenly asked, 'Where is Harish?'

With some surprise and apprehension Shailbala replied, 'Why? . . . I do not know. He came here about three weeks ago. He had to meet someone here. Then he left—I think to meet you all. Since then he has not come here.'

'So in the past three weeks Harish has not met you?' BM asked.

'Do you know where he may be found?' Dada's question had sparked a fear in Shailbala's mind that Harish may have been arrested again, but BM's question suggested that it might be something else altogether.

Looking at Shailbala's chair, Dada said, 'You should tell us where he is.'

As though Dada's words were not clear enough, BM immediately coughed and said, 'It is something very important.'

Shail looked at both of them with surprise. Neither the anger in Dada's tone nor BM's attempt to control the situation had escaped her notice. She asked in a surprised voice, 'What are you both saying? I'm afraid I don't understand.'

'The fact is that we can't find him, and due to this the party is suffering several losses. It is astonishing that he would come here and not meet you!' BM continued the conversation, 'because often our messages are received and dispatched from here.'

Without even looking at Dada, Shailbala could sense his growing disquiet. As if in accordance with her wish, Dada said, 'Look, the blunt question is whether for you the party is more important, or Harish.'

With the apprehension of not knowing what lies ahead, Shailbala looked at Dada, eyes wide with surprise, and responded, 'For me the party is indeed more important, but I am not able to

understand the import of your question.'

Dada asked in an even more severe tone, 'What is your relation with Harish?'

With increasing astonishment, Shailbala responded, 'Why? . . . He is my *friend*.'

The red lining in Dada's eyes expanded. Restraining himself, he said, '*Friend* . . . what does *friend* mean? What does *friendship* between boys and girls mean?'

Shailbala was stunned. Unable to give any answer, she kept looking at the floor for a few moments. Her wheatish face turned rosy. Addressing Dada she said, 'I have immense respect for you in my heart. I used to think that you people are very liberal in your thinking . . . but now I see something else altogether. BM had spoken in a very different way about women's independence and old traditions . . . but let it be. I can't understand why you are concerned about my personal relations.' When she began, Shail was speaking in a humble voice, but her tone had sharpened by the time she reached these last words. She turned her face towards the window and in the same agitated tone, addressing BM, she continued, 'I want to help you people as far as I am able to, but I won't hear any criticism of my personal conduct from anyone but Father.'

The ground gave way under Dada's feet—he was taken aback. Thinking he should be civil to a woman, he swallowed his humiliation. Holding his breath, he bit his moustache ruminatively, then asked, 'Why, are you not a member of the party? As a member of the party, you will have to remain *disciplined*. Do you know how much loss you have caused us?'

Shailbala, holding her breath in astonishment, and BM, with trepidation, looked at Dada, but he did not pay attention to any of this, and continued, 'You have rendered useless the right hand of the party. The man who earlier carried his head in the palm of his hand, today uses the excuse of public unity just to save his own life, all because of this friendship of yours. . . . You came to help us, but you have destroyed us, and even now, disregarding the party's *discipline*, you refuse to tell us about his location.'

Shame, agitation and humiliation constricted Shailbala's throat. Tears came to her eyes, but ignoring them, she said, 'Look, you are humiliating me needlessly . . . Mindful of the respect due to you, I have listened, but you have gone too far. Who says I am a member of the party? I don't even know it, and I am a member of the party!' With all her strength, she tried not to let her tears become visible. A tremor ran through her body and her tears spilled on to her hands. Ashamed of her tears, she was wiping them with her aanchal, face turned towards the wall, when footsteps were heard outside. In an authoritative tone she said, 'Wait!'

A voice came from outside, 'Bibiji!'

Shail wiped her tears, gestured to her guests with one hand to remain seated and went outside.

(Note: Words in italics are in English in the original Hindi text).

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**Yashpal**

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**P.S.**

The Wire

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