

Com Prabhakar Chaudhary

A short biographical note on Com Prabhakar Chaudhary in Rajamundri, Andhra Pradesh interviewed on September 18, 2004

Chitturi Prabhakar Chaudhary was born on September 22, 1922 at a village called Kulla in East Godavari, three km from the sea shore near Yanam. His father had studied upto intermediate and was the only educated person in the village. He belonged to Khamma community and his kins were all together in the village in sixteen houses. They all had cattle and fields and needed hands to look after their property, hence got their daughter married among themselves only to maintain close cooperation. However, now from that village alone, sixteen persons are settled in the United States.

Prabhakar was in the village for his primary education and later was sent to Rajamundri for high school. His father too shifted to the town and started a business of his own exporting jute to China.

Prabhakar was staying with a friend who had a tutor. Whenever the tutor came Prabhakar used to leave the room. Once the teacher stopped him to ask where he was going. Prabhakar, in his confusion, said he was going to the temple. This reply was to change Prabhakar's course of life. The teacher started a debate on the existence of God which continued for weeks and made Prabhakar to study scriptures as well as Marxist literature. Finally the scientific world view had the edge and slowly Prabhakar moved towards dialectical materialism.

It was a time when Prabhakar had decided to relinquish the world and go for "Tapasya" to Himalayas. However, he did not go to Himalayas, though his "Tapasya" continued. He gave up the worldly pleasures and got himself immersed in the service of the masses. His father used to buy lot of books and "Why Socialism?" by Jaiprakash Narayan was one among them. When Prabhakar saw the book, he thought socialism would be too difficult to understand. It was only at a later stage that he read it.

Prabhakar was slowly getting drawn towards socialism. At that time there was Congress Socialist Party and the Communist party was banned. One of his friend's father was local Congress MLA and asked him to work for the party. Prabhakar became a member but kept questioning its policies and ideals. When Gandhiji said Pattabhi Sitaramayya's defeat was his own defeat, it struck Prabhakar that he did not accept the verdict of the masses.

In Rajamundri, there was another socialist leader called Madduri Annapurnayya who was in jail for fourteen years and inspired him to join politics. On April 6, 1942, Annapurnayya joined Satyagraha called by Subhash Chandra Bose and next day he was arrested. Prabhakar alongwith some friends was ready to join politics when his leader went to jail. All of them were in confusion when the brother-in-law of Annapurnayya said he was given a hint by the leader. The main points in the directives were that none of the boys were to join the army, and that currency had no value and it must be turned into gold. Prabhakar and his friends started writing the slogans on the walls but had no clue how to fight for the country's independence.

Prabhakar was disgusted with the call given by Gandhi for individual satyagraha as each person was to sit separately at a minimum distance of one mile and no two persons could sit together and no mass movement. Britishers mocked at the satyagrahis. Prabhakar and his friends got literature from the national revolutionaries that said that all white persons must be removed and then only the British would get the scare and leave the country. Prabhakar was not convinced by this reasoning.

It was at this moment that writings of PC Joshi started flowing in about all the topics that interested Prabhakar. Here he came to know about how to reach the masses. The literature suggested armed insurrection but not without mass involvement. The question arose how to attract the masses. Prabhakar realised that to be with the downtrodden, one needed to know their language of suffering and fight for their economic demands through which ideology could be given. Prabhakar joined trade union movement as it was the only way to act.

Prabhakar also started to visit villages and started working for adult education as it was easier to involve masses from labour localities for literacy. At three temples, night schools were started at Prabhakar's initiative where municipal workers and tribals from Orissa who came to Rajamundri to work started coming.

There were timber workers too who were organised by a Congress worker who was very old and asked Prabhakar to work for him. There were logs weighing a tone used to flow through Godavari and need twelve persons to carry the log ashore. These timber workers were actually under the influence of the Justice Party and was anti-Brahmin. They supported the British regime against the Congress. It was very difficult to convince them to support the Congress and national movement.

In 1945, a strike of municipal workers' was organised. There were divisions. The health officer was rude and cruel. It was against his tyranny that the workers of all divisions launched agitation as one of the fifth division worker was suspended. The British management brought "Yennadi" tribals who were untouchables from Nellore to fight the striking workers. The management had dissolved the division and transferred the workers to other divisions. The workers got scared and refused to take the struggle further.

Prabhakar was merely eighteen-old-boy and had left home. He was staying with one of the scavengers and eating whatever leftovers he brought from hostels where he was cleaning latrines and where Prabhakar once stayed as student.

At this time, Com Korapati Pattabhiramayya escaped from jail with Com AK Gopalan and came to Rajamundri for underground shelter. He suggested that women folk of the sweepers must be involved in the movement. Adolescent Prabhakar was shy but still talked to them. They were inspired by him and hoisted the flag of the AITUC asking their men not to be cowards and sit at home. The same evening, women invited the Yennadi workers for food and requested them not to fight against the municipal workers. The innocent tribals promised to them not to get involved in the agitation and left the town.

Prabhakar had organised the bullock cart drivers too whom he called "Ballus". The businessmen used to hire bullock carts to get supply material from villages. For every cart there was a fixed rate which was quite low, but the drivers did not know how to get more from their em-

ployers. Once one of the bullocks slipped and broke one of his front legs. The cart stopped. It was a major incident as all the following carts also had to stop. Those who were in the front stopped in solidarity with the others and they all demanded a new bullock.

Prabhakar wanted to exploit the situation in favour of organising a union and sent a delegation of the "Ballus" to negotiate for a wage hike, and not for the price for a single bullock. The businessmen had to agree as entire supply material was blocked. The Ballus realised the significance of forming union through a practical experience.

Prabhakar had also organised the Mathadi workers locally called "Jatlus" and their supervisors, called "Maistry". It has blossomed into a powerful organisation and today it has a three-story-building with two full time office bearers who are paid by the union.

There have been attempts to disrupt the Jatlu union. The builders have constructed shopping centres in the outskirts of the city with passages for the trucks to directly reach the shops where loading and unloading can be done even without the Jatlus. The old shops in the town are inside the gullies and no heavy vehicle can reach them, hence the dependence on Jatlus. But as the shops started shifting, new coolies were hired from the villages around the shopping centre. Jatlus sat on a dharna in front of the new shopping centre with their womenfolk blocking the road. Finally, the demands were accepted and the shopping centre is still awaiting its tenants.

Prabhakar had also formed a cooperative and started an alluminium factory. The unusual experiment stopped only after alluminium industry itself faced a crisis. He was also president of the Andhra Pradesh Pulp and Paper mills for a long time.

Prabhakar Chaudhry, at the age of 84 years, is still active and busy making future plans.

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I was born on September 22, 1922 at a village called Kulla in East Godavari, three km from the sea shore near Yanam. My father had studied upto intermediate and was the only educated person in the village. He belonged to Khamma community and his kins were all together in the village in sixteen houses. They all had cattle and fields and needed hands to look after their property, hence got their daughters and sons married among themselves only to maintain close cooperation. However, now from that village alone, sixteen persons are settled in the United States.

I was in the village for my primary education and later was sent to Rajamundri for high school. My father too shifted to the town and started a business of his own exporting jute to China.

I was staying with a friend who had a tutor. Whenever the tutor came I used to leave the room. Once the teacher stopped me to ask where I was going. I was confused and said I was going to the temple. This reply was to change my course of life. The teacher started a debate on the existence of God which continued for weeks and made me to study strictures as well as Marxist literature. Finally the scientific world view had the edge and slowly I moved towards dialectical materialism.

It was a time when I had decided to relinquish the world and go for "Tapasya" to Himalayas. However, I did not go to Himalayas, though my "Tapasya" continued. I gave up the worldly pleasures and got myself immersed in the service of the masses. My father used to buy lot of books and "Why Socialism?" by Jaiprakash Narayan was one among them. When I saw the book, I thought socialism would be too difficult to understand. It was only at a later stage that I read it.

I was slowly getting drawn towards socialism. At that time there was Congress Socialist Party and the Communist party was banned. One of my friend's father was local Congress MLA and asked me to work for the party. I became a member but kept questioning its policies and ideals. When Gandhiji said Pattabhi Sitaramayya's defeat was his own defeat, it struck me that he did not accept the verdict of the masses.

In Rajamundri, there was another socialist leader called Madduri Annapurnayya who was in jail for fourteen years and inspired me to join politics. On April 6, 1942, Annapurnayya joined Satyagraha called by Subhash Chandra Bose and next day he was arrested. Alongwith some friends, I was ready to join politics when my leader went to jail. All of us were in confusion when the brother-in-law of Annapurnayya said he was given a hint by the leader. The main points in the directives were that none of the boys were to join the army, and that currency had no value and it must be turned into gold. Alongwith my friends, I started writing the slogans on the walls but had no clue how to fight for the country's independence.

I was disgusted with the call given by Gandhi for individual satyagraha as each person was to sit separately at a minimum distance of one mile and no two persons could sit together and no mass movement. Britishers mocked at the satyagrahis. We managed to get literature from the national revolutionaries that said that all white persons must be removed and then only the British would get the scare and leave the country. I was not convinced by any of these reasonings.

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I started to visit vilages and working for adult education as it was easier to involve masses from labour localities for literacy. At three temples, night schools were started at my initiative and municipal workers and tribals from Orissa who came to Rajamundri in search of work joined in.

There were timber workers too who were organised by a Congress worker who was very old and asked me to work for him. There were logs weighing a tone flowing through Godavari. It needed twelve persons to carry the log ashore. These timber workers were actually under the influence of the Justice Party and were anti-Brahmin. They supported the British regime against the Congress. It was very difficult to convince them to support the Congress and national movement.

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Though I am 84, I still feel active and keep myself busy making future plans.