

## **Dr. Kannabiran, Gndiyattam (Tamil Nadu)**

(Interviewed on November 6 and 7, 2000, in Gudiyattam, Tamil Nadu)

"Dr. Kannabiran is the real leader in this district and without him there could not have been any Communist Party," said the famous CPI(M) leader Kodandaraman in Gudiyattam.

Dr. Kannabiran was born on April 1, 1914 in a lower middle class family. Being the only son, he was great favourite of both the parents. They never could even dream that their son could ever go wrong. Since childhood, he was a methodical person and systematically maintained a diary in which he wrote about his reactions to every major event in the country.

He started taking part in social movements of Periyar when he was in early teens. In school, he was a staunch supporter of Periyar. He was MSO (Madras Student Organisation) member till 1945. Later he joined AISF.

In medical school he was actively involved in various student movements and later joined the Communist Party.

In 1948, unions were led by mostly communists in Gudiyattam, a small town near Vellore in Tamil Nadu. Being a centre for textile and bidi workers, the town had a background of revolutionary traditions. Various trade union struggles were launched by the communists here. Dr. Kannabiran was one of the early builders of the party in this district.

Among the early struggles, Dr. Kannabiran mentioned, the fight for the implementation of minimum wages had its own significance. On October 2 in 1948, communists started mass signature campaign asking the management to celebrate the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. The owner was loyal to British government. He informed the district police. The van came and arrested young Kannan who was the first communist detinue in the area.

When Kannan's mother inquired about him, Dr. Kannabiran went to police but they refused to give any information. Kannan was never put on trial. According to the standing order in the factory, any worker, who did not come for a week without informing the management, was terminated. Kannan was also terminated. Dr. Kannabiran came out with a silent procession in the factory area itself. When police came, they could not do anything.

However, the detaining of communists had been launched by then. The area police in charge came to the clinic and warned Dr. Kannabiran. Dr. Kannabiran lived in a house of a Brahmin. Those days no community allowed the other to stay with them. But when he started his clinic all communities took part in the celebrations. He was a medical officer and a popular doctor. While visiting harijans and poor people he never charged but for rich persons it was ten rupees. The money thus earned was usually spent on trade union work.

He had an understanding with his wife Shakuntala, who was also a doctor that all the family responsibilities would be looked after by her. She knew him from underground period.

Communists never counter attacked Gandhiji in Gudiyattam that had strong nationalist traditions. When Gandhi-Jinnah talks were going on, the textile unions prepared a flag with Gandhi-Jinnah slogans. The bidi workers loved Gandhiji and the unions celebrated his birthdays.

On the textile front, Communists were strong in Tamil Nadu. But the management decided to retrench 11000 worker and increase the work load on the rest of the workers. A strike was organised in Coimbatore and spread in the state.

However the trade union leader in Gudiyattam, a worker in one of the factories, refused to lead the movement as he did not want to oppose Gandhiji. Kodandaraman also refused to lead the movement in the district. It was only Dr. Kannabiran who was running the show, and police was informed.

The police came to the clinic and arrested Dr Kannabiran along with one more comrade, a leader of the bidi workers. Dr. Kannabiran was taken to Vellore and to the district magistrate who warned him of the consequences. The fate of the communist detenues was usually bleak as there was not to be any trial and no contact with the outside world.

Dr. Kannabiran was let out with a warning. He left his wife and two-day-old baby and went underground. He toured all over the area with a dream of getting the land for the landless and factories to the workers. They all thought revolution was about to take place. He could not think of sitting in jail and remain inactive.

The textile strike was the first one in Dr. Kannabiran's life that was led by him. He left his family, medical practice and got involved in the movement.

Thereafter came the railway strike in 1949. Dr. Kannabiran wanted the bidi workers also to join the strike. In Tirupattur, a secret meeting was organised. He addressed the meeting but the bidi worker leader's brother was a policeman. Dr Kannabiran was identified and arrested and sent to Vellore.

There were heroic struggles fought by the communist detenues in Vellore jail. Hundreds of poems were written in their praises. Com CA Balan, a Punnapra Vayalar hero in the Vellore jail had described the experiences in a touching way. On October 28. 1948, Com Jivanandan, KTK Thangamani and others were to be taken away from the rest of the communist prisoners as police wanted to split the communist groups. The comrades resisted. They started training themselves to launch a battle. A strategy was also planned. Dr. Kannabiran was to look after the wounded.

The struggle went on for several days with many wounded.

Dr. Kannabiran was unconscious for two days. He was tortured and the wounds are still not healed. The drinking water was also contaminated spreading various contagious diseases. Dr. Kannabiran suffered from Jaundice.

However inside the jail theoretical debates were also going on. The controversy over the role of peasantry and working class in the revolution continued for days.

The communists were released on Republic Day in 1952. He gave an undertaking that he was no more a Communist Party member. He was disillusioned with BT Ranadive line and wanted to fight it out. Being in jail was not going to help them. As a tactical step, alongwith several other comrades, the undertaking was given.

After coming out of jail, Dr. Kannabiran started organising the bidi workers from the scratches. He started selling literature throughout the district. The comrades who were active in Gudiyattam joined CPI(M). They criticised Com Dange in public meetings and called him an imperialist agent.

At Kodandaraman's house, CPI(M) meeting took place and Dr. Kannabiran was offered district secretaryship. But he refused. Dr. Kannabiran organised the CPI almost single handed in Gudiyattam in this period.

At the time of Chinese aggression, he was arrested with several others. After coming out of jail, he started working among the bidi workers and later organised an All India Bidi Workers Federation. In 1970 there was a conference in Guntur, a tobacco growing area. Several bidi legislations were introduced. They also struggled for central law for the bidi cigar workers in 1966 which was opposed vehemently by the owners.

Dr. Kannabiran was elected president of the Federation of Bidi Workers again in the conference in Gondiya in Maharashtra attended by large number of bidi workers.

Later when Kalyansundaram joined UCPI, most of the CPI comrades went along with him. Dr. Kannabiran was again left with the task of building the party here.

Dr. Kannabiran was in state trade union department in Tamil Nadu and also in the central leadership of AITUC. He looked after public health also.

He was active on sugar front too and labour commissioners never took any step without consulting him.

Dr. Kannabiran is still active and presides the Bidi Workers' Federation.