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Com Chandi Prasad (Transcription of the interview of Com Chandi Prasad in Patna on June 13, 20001) (Phase III)

(Com Chandi Prasad is a prominent CITU leader in Bihar and is a member of the Legislative Council.)

"I was born in early twenties in a village called Shekhpura in Munger. My father was a landless labour working in rich peasants' fields. Nobody in the family bothered to remember the day, month or year of my birth. There was no way I could know the exact year but since I remember the earth quake of 1935 and also that I was studying then in a primary school in Munger and staying with my uncle, it could be around some time in early twenties.

It was around this time that I got married also at the age of seven or perhaps eight. My wife was also same age.

After some time I had to come back to my father who was working on the "Bakasht" fields of a zamindar (landlord). Bakasht land usually was taken away from the peasant when he failed to pay the "lagan" (taxes) to the landlord. Against this system, a popular movement was launched by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati and in my village also, camps were organised. I was totally taken by this movement as I had witnessed the hardship faced by the poor landless peasants. The responsibility that was given to me was to organise the kids in the village who could work as voluntteers. We also took part in the camp activities like preventing the peasants from working in the Bakasht fields in a peaceful manner. I was arrested also several times alongwith others. It was the beginning of my activities among the peasants in 1934-35. The movement was widespread and in Munger jail alone, 600 juveniles were kept.

After coming out of jail, I resumed my studies and appeared for primary and then middle school examinations. By this time I was working in the fields of a rich peasant who got me admitted in Shekhpura high school. I could not go on with my studies as Quit India call was given by then and I became actively involved in the movement.

In 1943, I shifted to Patna and met the CPI members in Langartoli office and became full time worker. Later the office was shifted to Patna city. By this time Bengal was in the grip of famine. People in Patna and its suburbs were also suffering from food scarcity. The Communists started food camps to regulate and distribute food.

As it was getting difficult to get grains for the food camps, we started to organise the shopworkers in Patna city and also the kulis (palledars) who carried the grain sacks to the shops. These kulis also supplied information about the hoarding of grain by the shopkeepers.

As we had planned to attack the hoarders they were terrified and even came to us with requests to spare them. They promised to contribute and later even helped us in running the camps. They organised two free food camps also. These were the first experiences of mass work for me.

By 1947, Communist Party decided to have its organ called Janashakti and I was asked to help as I had learned composing in Jharia at the instructions of the party. I also joined Patna

Press Workers' Union and mobilised the members on party line. On March 8, 1948 Party went underground under the leadership of Com B T Ranadive. The leaders were arrested and their houses searched. I was asked to leave for Calcutta.

On March 9, 1949 the call for railway strike was given. At Danapur, Jyoti Basu came to address a meeting and everything went smoothly though party was underground. The strike fizzled out but the workers had to face brutal repression. In Bihar alone, 1000 workers were dismissed.

Electoral victory came to Bihar comrades only in 1956 when Com Chandrashekhar Singh got elected. As Bihar had a feudal background, Congress leaders' political influence was greater than others.

In 1957, Bihar had four communist MLAs as the support base spread over among the agitating poor peasants who had been struggling for their rights under the leadership of the Communists.

Com Kedar Das was elected from Jamshedpur and party had developed a strong base there. In 1958, a massive strike was launched in TISCO, first of its kind in Bihar. There were charges of criminal conspiracy against Com Kedar Das and others and warrants were issued.

I was given the responsibility of taking Com Kedar Das to the Assembly safely as he was underground. Once inside, Com Kedar Das remained there from Monday to Friday.

Later the party had contested the parliamentary seat also from Jamshedpur.

However within the party, tension was growing as ideologically, the communists were not united and the mass fronts started getting affected. In 1965, AITUC meeting was organised and all the comrades attended as there was unity in the trade union front till then even though party was divided.

Till 1970, I had worked in AITUC unions. In this period I was arrested also and was in jail for two years. In 1970, a conference was organised in Goa by those who differed with AITUC. The conference ended with the formation of CITU. I was working in South Bihar in this period with Com A K Roy who was in CPI(M) till 1970-71.

For me the area of activity centred around the unorganised sector mainly. I was working among bidi workers, construction workers, sand carrying kulis, stone cutters, engineering and handloom workers engaged in small scale units and other employees. In the agitations launched by the bidi workers, one worker was even killed in Biharsharif in 1952.

In Bihar, challenges against the trade unions came not only from the capitalists but from the social setup itself. The exploitation was unimaginable. I have seen workers treated worse than animals. When I was in Jharia, the coal mine workers from Gorakhpur were kept in chain. Their hands and feet were in shackles always except when they were inside the pit. When the mine workers called for a strike, these workers were also drawn in as their shackles were literally broken by the fellow workers. The strike had continued for twenty days.

In 1972, when I was in Ranchi, I mobilised the workers of Ramgarh factory to launch an agitation. Meanwhile, workers from another factory asked comrades to help them form their union. The owner

was Mr R R Murarka, son of famous Congress leader and member of Rajya Sabha.

The recognised unions of HMS and INTUC were under the owner's control and were ineffective. I formed the union from Ranchi itself secretly and got the support of the entire workforce. The demands were placed in front of the establishment and both the owner and the labour department ignored. Workers themselves proposed slowdown strike but could not restrain and on third day, production went down drastically.

The owner declared lockout and for two months the factory was closed. When it was opened none returned to work. Except forty percent of the locals, all were migratory workers. The strike continued for a month and other unions also helped the movement in every way. There were feelers sent to union leaders but workers refused to compromise.

Meanwhile HMS leaders decided to surrender for reasons best known to them. The strike broke down.

I had led an agitation of press workers also in 1976 but the union general secretary issued a statement against me that led to my getting sentenced for one month in jail or a fine of Rs 1000. Comrades paid the fine and got me released.

(16) Com Chandi Prasad (Interviewed in Patna on June 13, 20001)

Com Chandi Prasad is a prominent CITU leader in Bihar and is a member of the Legislative Council.

Com Chandi Prasad was born in early twenties in a village called Shekhpura in Munger in a family of landless workers. He did not know the exact year but among his earliest memories was the earthquake of 1935 when he was a student of primary school in Munger (staying with his uncle).

After some time he had to come back to his father who was working on the "Bakasht" fields of a zamindar (landlord). Bakasht land usually was taken away from the peasant when he failed to pay the "lagan" (taxes) to the landlord. Against this system, a popular movement was launched by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati and in his village also, camps were organised. Com Chandiprasad organised the kids in the village and took part in the camp activities like preventing the peasants working in the Bakasht fields in a peaceful manner.

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