

A Short Biography of Comrade Homi Daji

Comrade Homi Daji was born in Bombay on 5 September 1926. His father at that time owned a cotton ginning mill. His business was ruined, when the great depression of 1930s started affecting the cotton market in India. The crisis of capitalism plunged early childhood of comrade into severe economic hardship.

The family came to Indore and Homi began his education in Saint Raphael School- the best school in Indore. Soon, there was no money to pay the school fees. The principal was kind enough to allow him to sit in the verandah outside the class room and follow the teaching in the class. When he appeared for matriculation examination he had to borrow books from a friend who lived in the neighbourhood. He could get the books only late at night and he had read them under the lamp post on the road. There was one kerosene lamp in the house, which could be used for studying only after other members had gone off to sleep. In college also there was no money to buy books. This time Homi made an agreement with a bookshop. He would bring textbooks' orders for the shop and also deliver the books to the customers. In return, he would be allowed to read his course books sitting in the book shop. Indeed it was his brilliant performance right from the beginning and his extraordinary tenacity that enabled Homi Daji to get a first class degree in M.A. history (2nd position in Agra University) and then a first class degree in Law. Homi's early years were greatly influenced by his mother. She was a woman of great courage. Notwithstanding all the hardships, she was sure that Homi's education was most important. She expected that her brilliant son would bring prosperity back to the family. But when Homi chose to go for a life time struggle to change the system, she accepted it happily and offered him all possible support.

Homi Daji's political career began early. At the age of sixteen he participated in demonstrations organized in Indore under the 1942 Quit India movement. Once, he was beaten up badly by the police. In 1943, he joined the All India Students Federation. When congress moved out of student federation in 1945, Comrade Daji remained with the communist faction. On 1st May 1946 Comrade Daji became the member of the Communist Party of India. Straight-away, he was given the charge of working class struggle.

Indore was an important textile center. There were seven composite cotton textile mills in the town in which around 30 thousand workers were employed. Just when Daji joined the party, a twelve day long strike was organized in the textile mills. The senior leaders had got arrested and Comrade Daji had to take the charge. He addressed many meetings in the working class colonies and at the mill gates. He was a very powerful orator and soon became very popular with the mill workers.

The Communist Party of India in its second congress at Calcutta (28th Feb-6th March 1948), adopted a militant political thesis. As a result many provincial states banned the party. It was banned by the Holkar state in Indore also. Many of the leaders went underground. However activities on the student front and on the trade union front continued - albeit on a low key basis. The ban was lifted on the Republic Day 26th January 1950. The same year Comrade Daji was sent to Moscow as part of the AITUC delegation to participate in the May Day celebration.

There were two memorable students struggle in 1950s with which Daji was closely associated. Students in Gwalior agitated in 1950 and there was firing. Comrade Daji argued the case on behalf of students before the enquiry commission. Again in 1954, there was students' agitation in Indore. Once again police opened fire and innocent students were killed. Wanchoo Commission was set up to enquire into the case. Daji brilliantly argued the students case.

In 1957, comrade Daji got elected to the Madhya Pradesh assembly. This was the time when mill management had started harassing workers associated with the communist party or AITUC. Workers were summarily dismissed from their jobs without any explanation. Comrade Daji decided to protest against this victimization before the government in Bhopal. A cycle rally of workers was organized all the way from Indore to Bhopal covering 200 kms. The workers demanded that the government intervened and stopped the management from indulging in such victimization.

In 1958 Daji was elected the secretary of the Textile Mill Workers' Union. The dynamism of communist leadership on the trade union front unnerved the government. In the year 1960, Madhya Pradesh Industrial Relation Act was passed. The Act was worded on the pattern set by Bombay Industrial Relation Act 1946. According to this Act

only the representative union had the right to negotiate with the management on behalf of workers. INTUC was made the representative union in textile mills and the possibility of AITUC entering into direct negotiations with the management was ruled out.

This official handicap did not succeed in undermining the status of AITUC. Although workers took the formal membership of INTUC, but their demands were concretized and raised by AITUC leadership. Major strikes were planned by AITUC and many a times the management had to unofficially come to an understanding with AITUC before signing the formal agreement with INTUC representatives. Some of the major trade union struggles undertaken by textile mill workers under the leadership of Comrade Daji are as follows;

1. In weaving department, a worker was given charge of two looms. In 1964, Hukumchand mill decided to increase the workload by giving charge of four looms to a worker. It meant that half the workforce will be retrenched and the other half will have unjustified increase in work load. Comrade Daji and workers went on 14 day long hunger strike against this arbitrary move.
2. In 1972 a strike call was given to all the textile mills in the state. In Indore a successful 10 days strike was organized in which workers demanded and got some major benefits. Seven day's casual leave was sanctioned for the textile workers. Workers were given dearness allowance linked to the price index.
3. In 1979 a 32 days long successful strike was organized in textile mills asking for a wage revision.
4. In 1984 Hope textile mill declared an illegal lockout. There was an 8 day long hunger strike organized by Comrade Daji. Not only was the management forced into opening the mill, the workers' provident fund was also transferred to the Public Provident Fund account.

From 1960 onwards small scale industrial units came up in polo ground industrial area of Indore. AITUC spread its organizational work in this new industrial area. In small units with less than 100 workers, the representative union provision was not applicable which

provided greater space for trade union activities. In Malwa Vanaspati a big company in Polo ground industrial area, AITUC became the representative union in 1972.

The Indore unit of AITUC needs to be complimented for spreading out trade union activities to a domain much larger than worker-management negotiations. Comrade Daji's contribution in this direction was substantive. A citizens committee was formed. The party (union) members were encouraged to participate in local electoral processes and represent the interests of the working class. The presence of party (union) members in the Municipal Corporation became large enough to influence the Municipal rulings. In 1958 corporators affiliated to the party successfully abolished the municipal tax on cycles and municipal house tax on slum dwellers. This gave enormous fame to Daji that people started calling him a "Cycle tax abolisher". The politicization of union members in this manner paid progressive dividends in many spheres and for a long time.

In 1958 Daji made another very important contribution to Indore town. The square outside the palace of Holkars has been known as Rajbada. Daji insisted that in the independent republic it has to be dedicated to the people and gave it name Janata Chowk

In 1967 when chief minister D.P. Mishra came to Indore Comrade Daji gave a call for Indore Bandh against his draconian policies Entire Indore was completely shut down right to the level of a Pan Shop. Black Flags were shown to him through out the town.

In 1974 Comrade Daji organized a very impressive citizens' protest against the price rise. The mill workers participated in large numbers and got themselves arrested. Their number was so large that it became impossible to carry out even the routine production operations in the mills. The mills had to be closed down. The protest acquired an unprecedented momentum and the administration was forced to clamp curfew on the town.

In the 1980s Comrade Daji was in the forefront of the campaign demanding that Narmada water be brought to Indore because the traditional sources could no longer fulfil the requirements of this rapidly expanding town.

In 1962, Daji got elected to the parliament and the working class identity of Indore town was impressed on the national scene. Daji's clear thinking and his special aptitude for

debates was noticed by the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. After the Chinese aggression, Comrade Daji was included in the delegation, which went to Colombo to meet the representatives of Non-aligned Countries. The delegation was sent with the special task to explain the Indian side of the Indo-Chinese conflict.

In 1972 Daji was once again elected to the Madhya Pradesh assembly with a huge margin.

It should be noted that during his tenure at the parliament in Delhi or at the assembly in Bhopal, Daji did not delegate all the trade union struggle responsibilities to others. As mentioned above the hunger strike for Hukumchand mill workers was organized when he was a parliamentarian. Similarly the 1972 all Madhya Pradesh textile strike call was given when he was an assembly member.

In 1964, Comrade Daji became the general secretary of Madhya Pradesh unit of AITUC.

In 1980 he was elected as all India general secretary of AITUC. From 1974 to 78, he was a member of the central secretariat of the Communist Party of India.

He has represented the party and AITUC to the outside world on various occasions.

In 1950 he was in AITUC delegation which went to Moscow to join the May Day celebration.

In 1973 he went to Moscow to participate in World Peace Conference.

He attended the meet on World Solidarity with Vietnam Meet.

He attended the tri continental conference in Cuba in 1966.

He went as AITUC delegate to attend the trade union conferences in Yugoslavia, China East Germany.

Comrade Daji's political career came to an abrupt halt when in 1992; he suffered a paralytic stroke because of brain hemorrhage. It took a long time for him to recover, even partially. Incidentally, this was the time when the machines in the composite textile mills also came to a halt. Mill after mill closed down and workers were thrown out on the streets. Although the three NTC mills gave idle wages for a few years and then also VRS,

the workers lost their working class identity. Now, the physical structures of the mills are also demolished and what remains is only the fond memory.

With the closure of textile mills, the trade union movement in Indore received a big setback. There was no other industry which has so many workers working at one place. Moreover, the modern mills in Pithampur and Indore-Dewas industrial area do not entertain trade unions affiliated to political parties. They prefer in-house unions which are apolitical and pliant.

There have been major upheavals in Comrade Daji's personal life. He lost his younger brother at a very young age. He also lost both his children when they were at the prime of their career. His son Rusi was a promising young lawyer. But his much greater achievement was that he followed his father's ideology with great enthusiasm. He was always by his side in every struggle and decided that rather than settling down with a mainstream career, he would devote his life to the work started by his father. His daughter Dr. Roshni Daji did her medicine from Moscow and then served this country's poor working class in a true comradely spirit. After her brother's death she took the responsibility of providing the strength and support to her parents and other comrades in the town. She evolved into a very promising young comrade in Indore, who could lead the women's movement on one hand and organize progressive doctors under one. The untimely death of both the children was indeed a big loss to the family. But it was a bigger loss to Indore town and to the progressive movement at national level.

Comrade Daji's paralytic attack in 1992, severely constrained his movements. Despite all the set backs, comrade has remained active mentally and as far as possible, physically. He has retained his zeal for life, which only a comrade is capable of. Even now when we interviewed him at great length, he only talked about struggles --past struggles and future demands on left politics. For him politics is supreme and an individual's personal life is inconsequential.

This biography cannot be completed without saluting his wife, Comrade Perin Daji. He married her in 1950. She belonged to a well off family and willingly gave up all the comforts to join Homi in his grand revolutionary project. She knew at the time of her marriage that life is going to be hard and very demanding. She told Comrade Daji that I'll

be with you everywhere in every struggle. Only do not ask me to join your hunger strike; I don't want lavish food but I can't remain hungry. For last 57 years she has been his strength and support in all difficult times. She showers affection on every one around her. She is devoted to comrade Daji and is very proud of his struggles in life. He surely draws infinite strength from her love and from her respect.

On 5th September 2005, the citizens of Indore organized a magnificent meeting to honour comrade Daji's lifetime achievements. Irrespective of party affiliations, people came from all sections of the society to pay respect to him. Comrades of the town came in big numbers with their red flags. Memories of 50s and 60s were revived.

However, paying respect to a comrade cannot be a matter of one gathering. It demands much more. It demands a rejuvenation of working class movement. It demands tireless strife for a better society.

Let us pledge to pay our respects not only to Comrade Daji but all the Comrades who joined his fight against injustice and exploitation. Let us pay our respect to those who dreamt of a free and just society by carrying their dream forward.

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