

Surendra Mohan (1926 -2010)

- Qurban Ali

A torch-bearer of the socialist movement, veteran socialist leader renowned thinker, activist, ideologue and writer Surendra Mohan was born in Ambala (United Punjab) on December 4th, 1926. He was educated at S.A. Jain College, Ambala City, Banaras Hindu University, D.A.V. College Jullundur City and D.A.V. College, Dehradun

His romance with socialist movement started in 1942 during Quit India Movement when he was still a student of eleventh standard at Banaras Hindu University (BHU). He was General Secretary, District Students Congress, Jullundur, 1945-46. A Lecturer by profession and political worker by choice, Surendra Mohan took part in student, peasant and political agitations and went to jail several times in 1950, 1957, 1973, 1974 and in 1975-76 during emergency.

After the formation of Socialist Party in 1948 he became whole timer of the party at his native place Ambala and later became the district Secretary of the party. In July 1952 he was the Chairman of the reception committee of the State conference of the Punjab Socialist Party held at Ropar (now Roop Nagar) and inaugurated by Dr Rammanohar Lohia.

For higher education Surendra Mohan went to Dehradun from where he obtained masters degree in sociology. He was investigator, Agra University, 1955-56 and was Lecturer in Sociology at Kashi Vidyapeeth, Varanasi, 1956-58. Later he resigned and opted to be a full-time political worker. He proved his mettle in the Praja Socialist Party and rose to become first General Secretary of its youth wing, All India Samajwadi Yuwak Sabha, 1960-61, Joint Secretary, PSP, 1965-71, (in between he was Joint Secretary of Samyukta Socialist Party, also for a brief period in 1964-65) and later the General Secretary of the All India Socialist Party, from 1972-77.

He was one of the General Secretaries of the Janata Party in 1977 (from 23rd January 1977 to April 30, 1977) and played a vital role in its historic victory. He was elected to the Rajya Sabha for a term from 1978-84. He was again appointed General Secretary of the Janata Party in September 1977 and held this post till February, 1981, and was member of its National Executive till October 1988.

He remained with the Janata Party, Janata Dal, Janata Dal (Secular) and was finally the President of the Socialist Janata Party till his death in December, 2010. He was a conscience keeper for the various factions and parties that emerged from Janata family.

He had been a school teacher, a college lecturer, entrepreneur, a trade union leader, an environmental activist, human rights and civil liberty activist and a Parliamentarian. He participated in many National and International seminars on Youths, Workers Associations and Agricultural labour and attended the Socialist International, Hamburg and of IUSY in Vienna in 1959. He organised social education among weaker sections, 1948-55, and involved in programme of rural development. He lent himself to several movements including the one in recent times against mega dams.

A political leader who believed in the power of ideas, Surendra Mohan was a prolific reader and regular columnist in Hindi and English for many newspapers. He was also the Editor of the socialist journal Janata. Four collections of his essays in Hindi were published besides three books authored by him. He was associated with Yusuf Meherally Centre, and Peoples Union for Civil Liberties ever since its foundation and was very active in promoting human rights. During the last six decades of his life, he spent much of his energy with youth, social movements and people's organizations like the Nikhil Bharat Banbasi Panchayat, Khet Mazdoor Sabha, Hind Mazdoor Sabha, National Alliance for Peoples Movements, Socialist Front, Rashtra Seva Dal. An internationalist at heart, he was active with Socialist International and supported Nepal's democratic struggle.

A friend of all the pro-people initiatives in the country, he would be missed by a wide range of followers and admirers across the political spectrum, socialist workers, pro-people intellectuals and peoples movements across the country.

Surendra Mohan was admired for his intellectual honesty, moral uprightness and personal sacrifices. He was imprisoned during emergency and when Morarji Desai-led Janata Party came to power, he declined the job of a Union minister. He was spokesman of the Janata Party during 1977, General elections and played a crucial role during the elections and in the formation of the first non-congress government at the centre.

He was widely respected for his simple life and political integrity, Surendra Mohan was a member of Rajya Sabha (1978-84) and the Chairman of Khadi and Village Industries Commission (1996-98).

In 2009, he was elected the president of the Dr Rammanohar Lohia Birth Centenary Programme Committee. His close associates describe him as a "directory of Socialists" in India as well as abroad. He had good connections with socialists in other countries and had personal rapport with Gandhians, civil society movements and intellectuals. He was an ideal socialist. Till the end he struggled for the deprived and the downtrodden. He made it a point to come to all programmes, big and small, for the causes he believed in."

During the emergency 1975-77, Surendra Mohan had suffered heart attack in jail and needed medical attention. Jayaprakash Narain asked him to come out on parole and get medical treatment but he refused. He then was treated at the All-India Medical Institute as a prisoner.

So committed was he to the cause of socialism that for several years he did not pay attention to getting married. One day his worried mother asked him when he would marry. Finally he married Ms. Manju Mohan in 1974 and had a son and a daughter. He was a common man but when he spoke he stood out as an extraordinary person. Surendra Mohan passed away on 18th December 2010 in Delhi.

On his death many political and social leaders and political parties paid rich tributes to him and termed him a fighter of socialist ideals for an egalitarian and just society.

The CPI said “he was a friend of the Communists and always took initiatives in building bridges for broad based struggles. Not only did he stand all his life for the causes of the downtrodden, vulnerable and poor people of the country but also remained active to these causes till the last.”

The Samajwadi Party said “He was the modern link of the old socialist movement. His thought and writings are a great influence on the new generation. Not only in words, was he a true socialist in action and deed. He created no wealth and lived a simple life full of personal sacrifices. The country has lost a true socialist”.

He was a prolific writer and contributed hundreds of articles on political and sociological questions in daily papers and periodicals in Hindi, Urdu and English. He started writing in PSP Journal ‘Janata’ in 1958, and was its editor till his death.

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