

Prem Bhasin: A Tribute by Anil Nauriya

Written in February 2003 on the death of the leading Indian Socialist, Prem Bhasin on January 25, 2003

Premji's passing is a big blow. How shall I write about him? I came into personal contact with him about a quarter century ago when he had taken up a home in Aligarh; we were in touch mainly through post. Later he moved to NOIDA, (Gautam Buddha Nagar, Uttar Pradesh) on the outskirts of Delhi and I saw him still more often. Details of his life are well documented in two books prepared by Dr K.L. Johar. These are: "Unsung Torchbearers: Punjab Congress Socialists In Freedom Struggle" and "Struggles And Memoirs of the Socialists 1947-1957 (Punjab, Pepsu, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh)". The first book was published by Harman Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991 and the second by the same publishing house in 1997.

The first provides an account focusing on his life till Indian independence. The second provides an account focusing on the subsequent years. Both are painstakingly written and a mine of information about socialists in Punjab and adjoining areas. Those who would like to have these accounts of his life should write to Dr K.L. Johar, 1133, Sector 17, HUDA, Jagadhri –135003, Haryana. As this material is already available, and Shri Madhu Dandavate has also written a detailed piece on Premji, I do not intend to place anything like a full account of Premji's life before the reader. What I will do is another thing. Premji had written on many of his contemporaries, especially socialist comrades with whom he worked. These accounts were collated by Dr K.L. Johar and the late Dr Hari Dev Sharma and later published in the year 2000 by Sneh Prakashan, 46-B Chopra Garden Yamuna Nagar – 135001, Haryana.

This collection of Premji's writings is called "Democratic Socialism: Profiles In Courage and Conviction". Premji seldom wrote about himself as such. But in these accounts about his comrades and contemporaries he revealed to us, here and there, a few glimpses of his own life and activities. And it is some of these glimpses that I shall try to put together for the reader.

My own recollections I will record where relevant in brackets. Premji (hereinafter PB) was born in Rawalpindi within a few weeks of the Russian Revolution. He grew up in the soft-spoken “Potohar” region. He accompanied his father, Gokal Chand Bhasin, to the Karachi Congress of 1931 <p 104>.

It was at Karachi that he obtained a copy of Jawaharlal Nehru’s Soviet Russia, in Urdu. On his way back by train he heard two Congress workers speak highly of the fiery and “dare-devil” Munshi Ahmad Din. One day in 1934 Tilak Raj Chadha who had joined the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NBS) and was a virtual brother to PB, brought Munshiji to PB’s home for dinner. Chadha had been one of the volunteers at the Lahore Congress session in 1929 and also at the Punjab Congress session at Gujranwala in 1930 which Jawaharlal Nehru had attended. The Munshi had come to see PB’s father. The NBS had been banned and the formation of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 provided an “opening” for Munshiji who operated under the banner of the Punjab Socialist party. Nehru’s book, which PB had already read, increased his attraction for the Munshi.

In 1935 PB joined Dayal Singh College, Lahore for his graduation while Tilak Raj Chadha joined D.A.V. College also in Lahore for his M.A. in Economics. PB’s father used to practice law in Rawalpindi, which would take him to the Murree Hills in the summer. There Munshiji joined them again in 1936. PB and Tilak Raj Chadha were in the Murree Hills too for their summer vacations and that is where PB really got to know Munshiji. Later he was to spend four years in Gujrat Jail in Punjab with Munshiji. In 1938, PB was at the Haripura Congress in his own capacity. There he remembers seeing Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Asoka Mehta from a distance. <p.38 and p.33>. Years later Basawan Sinha who earned a name for the trade unions he built up in Bihar recalled having seen PB first at Haripura. This is also when PB first heard of H.V. Kamath.

PB met Kamaladevi for the first time at the Congress Socialist Party Conference at Lahore in the same year. He heard her at the National Executive in Lahore, crossing swords with the communist group. At the Lahore meet, he records it was Ganga Sharan Sinha who foiled the communist bid to take over the CSP.

PB was in Montgomery jail in 1941 along with such figures as Hakim Abdul Ghani, who was President of the Rawalpindi City Congress Committee (Personal conversation with PB, 14 July 2002). The prisoners in Deoli jail had started a hunger strike in 1941. When PB and his co-prisoners heard about it, they started one too. The Deoli hunger strike was given up by the communists in 15 days. Socialists like Sehar Gul Khan continued it. Mahatma Gandhi intervened, got Sikander Hayat Khan involved and the Deoli camp was itself disbanded.

Later Dr Bhargava came to PB and his co-prisoners with the newspaper report about the Deoli prisoners' issue having been settled. PB and others then called off their own hunger strike (Personal conversation with PB, 14 July 2002). In 1943 PB was, after having been incarcerated at various places, ultimately placed in Gujrat Special Jail. That is when Sajjan Singh Margindpuri who PB describes as a "Congress-Akali militant activist of 1919-1920 vintage" was brought in. He insisted on being placed in the same ward as the one in which "Tilak and Prem had been lodged". He had been transferred from Deoli Camp Jail where Munshiji had told him about PB and Tilak Raj Chadha. PB would often cite the peasant struggle at Urmur Tanda, Hoshiarpur District, which started in 1946 and continued through 1947—to illustrate how socialist-led and socialist-launched struggles were appropriated by the Communist left in their history writing and portrayed as communist struggles!

The agitation had been started by socialists led by Tilak Raj Chadha. It is true that Mubarak Saghar, who had earlier become a communist, was also involved in this struggle. But before 1946 Mubarak Saghar had left the Communist Party, differing with its line on the Pakistan question. (Personal conversation with PB, October 19, 2001). PB had many memories of Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore which was the headquarters of the Punjab Congress Socialist Party. (This complex consisted of two-double storeyed buildings separated by half a furlong or so. One housed the office of the Punjab PCC. The other of the NBS. The socialists were, PB said to me on September 19, 2000, on the first floor of the NBS wing.) One of his memories was of the self-effacing Pandit Gyan Chand "whose life-story is the life-story of the freedom struggle and of the socialist movement in the Punjab".

Another of Baba Gani, a nationalist Muslim activist who would help put up posters, functions as the bugler and also cooks food for the socialists. (Personal conversation with PB, 19 October 2001) Another memory was of a lean man getting off from a tonga in 1946 with a letter from JP introducing him as the student secretary of the All India CSP. The man was B.P. Koirala who later became Prime Minister of Nepal. It was at this time in Lahore that PB met the trade unionist D.D Vashisht, who had been externed by the British government from Delhi on account of his activities. That is how the first Mazdoor Panchayat in India, the Punjab Mazdoor Panchayat was started with PB as the President and D D Vashisht as the general Secretary.

In Lahore in the same year PB heard about the work that had been done by the Bombay CSP and how Asoka Mehta along with Peter Alvares had built up the organization “brick by brick, into a powerful socialist base”. This is also when he met the austere socialist and freedom fighter, Harbhajan Singh.

PB tells us that his stint with Janata as its East Punjab correspondent started in mid-1946. The Janata editor was Edatata Narayanan and his office was on the top floor of the Odeon Cinema building in Connaught Place, New Delhi. PB was elected to the National Executive of the Socialist Party at Kanpur in February-March 1947. He made some contacts there as, for instance, with Alvares and B.P. Sinha. Madhu Limaye was there too but he and PB did not meet. But Kanpur, as PB said was a “huge affair and it was difficult really to ‘meet’ anyone there”. It was first post-war conference of the CSP. Also “pre-partition riots” had started in Lahore and Rawalpindi before the Kanpur meet dispersed. And as PB records, at the Nagpur meet (August-September 1947), where he reached late, there was no time for ‘knowing’ comrades from other places. The partition riots were on. There was another Munshi in PB’s life and that was the freedom fighter and the commander-instructor of the Volunteer Force raised by the Rawalpindi CSP, Munshi Ram Jain. PB has written: “Tilak Raj Chadha and I have the proud privilege of having been drilled and instructed by him. Communal disturbances had claimed Rawalpindi and adjoining areas in 1947. He was at the head of the effort to rescue and rehabilitate persons belonging to all communities, often braving hotheads on both sides at great personal risk”.

At Kanpur PB had of course become acquainted with Asoka Mehta but came to know him better only in the year that elapsed before Nasik in 1948. PB became a joint secretary of the party – one of four -- at Nasik. On August 6, 1947 PB traveled together with Munshi Ahmad Din to meet JP in Delhi on the next day. On the next day the Munshi returned to Lahore.

According to PB, Munshi Ahmad Din “saw to it that Dev Dutt Vashisht, Pritam Chand, Som Prakash Shaida and his family, and Ajit and Tilak Raj Chadha safely left for India in September 1947, while his Amritsar comrades had at great risk saved his (Munshi Ahmad Din’s) family and his house at JallianwalaBagh”. This included Professor Khushpal Singh. PB has described it in some detail: “The communal frenzy, raging on both sides of Wagah, knew no bounds. At Amritsar, it threatened Munshi Ahmad Din’s family and house. Khushpal Singh organized a band of committed nationalists and socialists to fight back. They rescued Munshiji’s family including his mother, wife and children, escorted them to a safe place, and did not allow his house to be either looted or burnt. Soon after he became part of Mridula Sarabhai’s Amritsar team and helped in rescuing abducted women”. Munshi Ahmad Din meanwhile went from Lahore to Karachi where he and others helped organize the Pakistan Socialist Party. This party according to Premji used to bring out the Urdu Socialist weekly “on which the Indian Socialist Party’s emblem was boldly printed on top”. Munshi Ahmad Din, Mubarak Saghar, Mohammed Yusuf and R.M. Sinha were on the editorial board. Later Munshi Ahmad Din returned to India.

In September 1947 PB had his “first (brief) stint at the Central office of the party in Bombay”. At Nasik, he was impressed by Asoka “who could keep his cool in the midst of an emotional crisis”. PB married about a week before the Mahabaleshwar camp meeting of the national executive in mid-October 1948. It was a ten-day long camp. At this camp PB got to know quite closely, B.P. Sinha, one of the “initiators” of the socialist movement in India. B.P. tended to take a measure of his colleagues to see if they were of “national timber”. PB was informed, with “a wide grin” that “Yes, Prem, you are made of that stuff.” Achyut Patwardhan had come up to PB at Mahabaleshwar, planted a kiss on his head and asked why he hadn’t brought his wife along.

PB had differed with Achyut Patwardhan on the minorities' question. (In a personal conversation on 19 September 2000 PB told me that Achyutji had become quite anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim around this time.) These differences persisted. The affection remained.

During his organizational tour of Uttar Pradesh in 1948, PB was accompanied by the freedom fighter from Bulandshahr, Beni Madhav, who was then the Provincial Joint Secretary of the UP Socialist Party. This was the beginning of a long friendship which was to span a half century. In 1949 PB and Madhu Limaye were elected Joint Secretaries at Patna. Suresh Desai and Rohit Dave were the other two Joint Secretaries. That is when PB really had "to give up his preoccupation with Punjab". His relation with the somewhat younger Madhu Limaye dates since then. This was also the time when his organizational tours brought him in touch with such socialists and trade unionists as B.S. Mahadev Singh of Secunderabad PB had happy memories of Yusuf Meherally.

It was in late 1949 that Keshav Gore and PB called on Meherally before they set out on a southern tour. Yusuf was ill but kept talking of the scenic beauty of Kerala. And he teased PB for being a "Punjabi barbarian". The reference was to a 1938 incident when, on being asked by Yusuf to escort Nargis Batlivala, PB had initially got into the front seat of the taxi when Nargis was in the back seat. PB met the Bengal socialist, Ajit Roy, for the first time in Patna in 1949. The friendship grew with the many organizational tours that PB made to West Bengal. Ajit Roy, whose wife was the Austrian Consul in Calcutta, later turned wholly to the practice of law. On the southern tour with Keshav Gore, PB also met P.S. Chinnadurai, the Coimbatore-based trade unionist, socialist and freedom fighter. In 1949 he toured the Telugu areas of Madras Presidency. That is where he met the eminent socialist, M. Ramachandra Rao and the socialist firebrand, A Chakradhar, both participants in the Quit India movement, the latter apparently associated with the burning down of the Tenali railway station. In the same year PB was invited to preside over the Madhya Bharat Socialist Party conference at Indore. Mama Baleshwar Dayal was present as an observer by invitation. PB writes "It was my privilege to enroll him as a member of the Socialist Party".

The Bengal tours PB made put him in close touch with old CSP personalities like Debu Bose, who had been active in the Quit India movement and Badal Sarcar of Jalpaiguri who had “launched and led” the Tebhaga movement.

Sarcar and his band of socialist freedom fighters had organized the CSP in North Bengal and had also been active in Nepal. In 1950 K.K Menon was appointed secretary of the Socialist Party Parliamentary Board at its Madras Conference in 1950. The country’s first General Elections were due and in 1951, PB accompanied Menon for part of his Punjab tour. This took him to Ambala where the then District Secretary, Surendra Mohan, had organized a camp <pp 88-89>. In July 1952 PB had to go to Rangoon along with his wife and baby daughter and stay there for six months. He was the Indian representative on the three-man preparatory committee for the Asian Socialist Conference in Rangoon in January 1953.

At the end of the Conference it was suggested that PB become the General Secretary of the Conference with his HQs in Rangoon. He was not inclined to stay away from India any longer. Later Colonel Wijono of Indonesia became General Secretary and Madhu Limaye the Joint Secretary. The J.P-Nehru talks in March 1953 led to differences between PB and Limaye. PB says: “I did not want to choose between JP and Lohia (but) if compelled to choose, I had no doubt that I would not go with Dr Lohia”.

1953 saw PB head also for Stockholm and London for the Socialist International meet. N.G. Goray had advised him to look for Nath Pai in London, praising him highly. That was the beginning of a long friendship. In another four years Nath Pai was in the House of the People. This seems to have been his year of travel for in the same year he visited Pakistan, meeting old socialists, including Mubarak Saghar in Karachi. (Personal Conversation with PB, 19 October 2001). Prem Bhasin kept up his active involvement in Kisan movements and in 1954 was arrested in the Kisan Satyagraha at Hissar. The Karnataka-born socialist freedom fighter and artist, V.N. O’Key, did the sketch of PB which was published on his arrest on Janata’s front page.

In the mid-fifties, PB and Surendra Nath Dwivedi (PB has a lapse of memory here as he mentions Surendra Mohan instead of Dwivedi) had a role in persuading Acharya Narendra Deva to continue as the Chairman of the Praja Socialist Party for the Gaya session, despite Acharyaji's poor health. It seems the argument that persuaded Narendra Deva was that he would be provided with a Deputy Chairman on whom he could completely rely.

This was Ganga Sharan Sinha, or Ganga Babu as he was known. The party constitution, which did not provide for a Deputy Chairman, had to be amended to make this possible <pp 66-67>. The National Executive appointed by Acharyaji at Nagpur in November 1954, did not include PB. He was therefore not initially invited to the national executive camp meeting in Jaipur in July 1955. He, however, received a message when he happened to be touring Jullunder to attend the Jaipur meet and arrived when half the proceedings were over < p.98>. Besides, he lost his purse on the way and Farid Ansari had to arrange for his return ticket. PB was, however, again appointed a party joint secretary, which he had earlier ceased to be at Betul in 1953. On his return to Delhi he stayed first with his eldest brother T.R. Bhasin who then had a place near Jama Masjid, in old Delhi. Farid Ansari who as Joint Secretary, had been looking after the Central Office, invited PB to come and stay at 18 Windsor Place, New Delhi where the office was located.

Farid Sahib was a freedom fighter who had been in the 1930-32 movements, in the 1940 individual Satyagraha and in the Quit India movement. PB has recorded many vivid impressions of Farid sahib who was much older than PB and like a "benevolent guardian" to him < p.99>. PB and K.K. Menon represented the PSP at the Kathmandu meeting of the Bureau of Asian Socialists Conference in Kathmandu in 1958. According to PB this successful meeting may have led the King to "strike before it was too late". PB saw his old friend B.P. Koirala when, as Prime Minister of Nepal, Koirala came over for a quiet breakfast meeting at the Praja Socialist Party office at 18 Windsor Place. Party work often took PB to the Northeast. He had been to Assam and other northeastern areas in 1956. Here he was warned that "no one should take the Assamese for granted".

The socialist Biswa Goswami told him that the “Assamese remain unperturbed for long, but it becomes difficult to control or contain them when they are roused”. PB writes: “I could discern the Assamese stamp on Biswa”. PB and Ganga Babu were in Tezpur when the Chinese announced their unilateral ceasefire in November 1962.

In 1963 PB was elected the General Secretary of the PSP at Bhopal. He then received some unsolicited advice from R.P. Parasuram, who had been with Gandhi in Noakhali and was prominent in the socialist movement: “Don’t try to be clever.” The reason? “You can’t be clever; you will lose both ways if you try it. Therefore, try to be honest and good. It will pay you more in the long run”. PB writes that “the feeling of hurt was transitory; and one was soon grateful for an honest though unsparing advice from a person of Parasuram’s understanding and affection”. When Asoka Mehta, without resigning from the PSP, accepted membership of an official Indian delegation to the UN, PB and Ganga Sharan Sinha, decided that the National Executive had to take the unpleasant step of terminating his membership of the PSP < p.68>. Nath Pai had not supported the decision. PB remembers his association with N.G. Goray, with whom he could differ and even “to oppose and outvote him in meetings of the national executive, without generating any ill-feeling in him” < p.86>. In late 1966 PB started his election tour for the 1967 elections from Trivandrum. That is also when he met K.K. Menon for the last time, about a week before the latter’s death.

As soon as PB crossed into Karnataka he read about the death of Menon. He remembered fondly that association with Menon between 1947 and 1966. Menon had in later years moved to Delhi when Acharya Narendra Deva decided to shift the office from Bombay. Writing of Ganga Sharan Sinha, PB records, “Ganga Babu, as far as I know, was not a believer. Nor am I one”. In the late sixties PB went to jail again! He used to tour Vindhya Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. This is also when he met Ladli Mohan Nigam. Yamuna Prasad Shastri, the socialist and trade unionist used to accompany PB. Shastri had organized workers in the Jhagrakhadan coal mines in Sarguja District. PB went twice to this rather isolated area.

On one occasion he was invited by Shastri to lead a satyagraha of landless cultivators for possession of land. They were arrested. They had “tried to till the land with a plough in the midst of pouring rain”. They were jailed in Rewa and bail was refused. Later Shastri joined the CPM. PB notes: “It is difficult to say (if) he was happy in the CPM. But happy or not, he stuck to it and he died as a front-ranking leader of Madhya Pradesh CPM”.

After the Congress victory in the 1971 General Elections, moves were initiated for the merger of the Praja Socialist Party and the Samyukta Socialist Party. It was at this time that PB suggested to Madhu Limaye the terms of a compromise which facilitated the merger. PB suggested that Karpuri Thakur should be the chairman and Madhu Dandavate the General Secretary of the merged party. PB withdrew from active political work in 1975. There was an exception to this. He went to campaign in the 1977 elections in Samarendra Kundu’s constituency in Orissa. Characteristically, he found time to spend with Kundu’s ailing mother. It is indicative of PB’s likability that Raj Narain, with whom he had clashed in the past, repeatedly urged him to become General Secretary in 1971. Of course PB did not accept. He remained associated with the Acharya Narendra Deva Samajwadi Sansthan. His association with Acharyaji’s family continued till the end and he remembered gratefully the hospitality of Acharyaji’s son Ashok Nath Varma and daughter in law Shakuntala at their house in Lucknow.

PB’s days in Aligarh brought him closer still to the socialist Aziz Ahmed Siddiqui of whom he wrote: “He had the guts, in 1946-47, to vehemently oppose the Muslim League and its demand for Pakistan. While a student of the Aligarh Muslim University, he dared Muslim fanatics and communalists in their own den and came out unscathed and unchartered.

Earlier, he had been drawn into the vortex of the Quit India movement and so had to go underground for a period of time. The partition holocaust saw him in pitched battles with Hindu and Muslim fanatics, and he joined forces with Thakur Malkhan Singh, Aligarh’s most renowned freedom fighter, to save hundreds of innocent men, women and children from mob fury.”

According to the former member of Parliament and biographer of Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, Dr M. Hashim Kidwai, Siddiqui's elder brother, Jamil Ahmed Siddiqui, also in Aligarh, was of a similar temperament. (Personal conversation, February 9, 2003). During the emergency (1975-77) PB and Aziz Ahmed Siddiqui became especially close. PB writes: "He would visit me regularly and sit with me for hours, when some others were afraid of even recognizing me while passing by".

In 1982 PB saw his old comrade B.P. Koirala for the last time< p.58>. It was in New Delhi. He was ailing at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. (It was in the following year that my own extended interaction with PB really started. I sent him a long paper on Narendra Deva and Indian Socialism for his comments. At one point I had had the temerity to criticize something he had written. He was patient, sending me a kindly note dated, 12 November 1983 which ran into nine closely written foolscap sheets. I revised my paper after his comments. Later, in 1984, it was published in Janata). Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, though quite ill, came to 10 Ashoka Road, New Delhi on March 25, 1988 to the function to mark PB's completion of 70 years. PB says her affectionate words left him fumbling. In the same year, he and his wife Kamla, had their last meeting with Ganga Sharan Sinha.

PB never lost his zest to keep track of old comrades. In November 1989, PB and Tilak Raj Chadha went to meet Sajjan Singh Margindpuri at his village, barely 10 miles from Pakistan's border. Margindpuri, the old socialist and freedom fighter, and a former President of the SGPC, then 92 years of age, was one of the few who had defied and condemned Bhindranwale. They saw him again in the following month when he came to Yamuna Nagar on the occasion of Chadha's 75th birthday. On this occasion the 89-year old Dada Ganeshi Lal, another old socialist and freedom fighter, was also present. Ganeshi Lal, had been one of the first in Punjab to organize the agricultural tenants, or Muzaras. PB writes that Ganeshi Lal, who was "an important link in the production and distribution of illegal Punjab CSP literature, particularly of Lal Dhandora and later of the Bolshevik" used to say: "Swami Dayanand had dyed me Bhagwa, Gandhiji washed it white". It was in 1996 that PB helped me nail a case of one-sided and misleading historical scholarship.

The controversy took place in *Mainstream* in 1996-97 and PB's intervention (*Mainstream*, New Delhi, July 27, 1996) certainly helped. Madhu Limaye and Dr Hari Dev Sharma, to both of whom PB had come close in later years, passed away quite suddenly. When Madhu died, PB could not help "patting both his cheeks which were literally as cold as death". Comrade Ram Chandra, a founder of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha died in New Delhi on September 18, 1997. PB who had worked with him for many years, wrote a moving tribute and later spoke on him at a commemorative meeting organized at the Gandhi Hindustani Sahitya Sabha, New Delhi. He felt Hari Devji's loss as keenly: "In time we came so close to each other that while he was ever-ready to undertake any amount of labour (at his own cost) for me, I became absolutely dependent on him for all the inputs I needed for my writings, I almost feel helpless now and remember him at every step".

One account by PB – that of the unostentatious (as PB describes him) socialist Assamese writer and Jhananpith Award winner, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya who died in 1997– is unique for its musings about himself. PB asks himself why he lost contact with a person like Bhattacharya and writes: "And, then, suddenly – I really don't know how – the link snapped. Searching my mind at this late stage, I am inclined to ascribe it to a psychological trait that inhibits me from rushing to greet or contact (with rare exceptions) friends after they attain high position. Something in me rebels against thrusting myself on or appearing to run after a V or V.V.I.P... But the fact remains that I did not write to congratulate him or to say how happy I was to hear about the well-deserved top literary award of India. And the link remained snapped."

Among PB's many writings is his book "Riding The Wave" Ashajanak Publications, New Delhi, 1972. It is a gripping account of the events leading to and after the split in the Congress in 1969 and the General Elections of 1971 and the state assembly elections of 1972. The book contains a comprehensive analysis of the land reforms issue which had come to the fore at the time. There is a foreword by Prof. Madhu Dandavate. The book itself is ascribed to PB's wife Kamala "whose fortitude and undemanding love have sustained me in all moments of crisis." January 2003.