

(Memoir) Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi (1924-2021): A Committed Communist



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Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi, a stalwart of the Left movement in India's Hindi-speaking regions, passed away at the beginning of the year due to Covid-19.

Affectionately called 'Ganesh Da', Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi joined the communist movement through the student movement, the freedom movement and the peasant movement. He started his eight decade long

public life with the All India Students' Federation (AISF) and joined the Communist Party in 1942.

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi was born in 1924 into a zamindar family of Rajauli, which is today in Bihar's Nawada district. His uncle Gaurishankar Singh was one of the prominent leaders of the Bihar Congress. Leaders like the revolutionary peasant leader Sahajanand Saraswati and Jayaprakash Narayan came regularly to his house. Newspapers like 'Janata' and 'Chingaari' were read at their home. In this environment, socialist ideas had an influence on him.

Participation in freedom movement since school years

Due to these reasons, he started participating in revolutionary activities from his school days onwards. Regarding that period, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi said:

"There was a lot of controversy over the flag hoisting at the school in 1938. By then the AISF had been formed in the school. There was no college there. We had to go from village to village to tell them about how the country would be free. Then [I] became aware of landlord oppression, that if a man beats another man, it is not right. The British headmaster threw me out of the school. As a result, a strike was staged, it lasted for long. In the end, they had to compromise but I got a TC (Transfer certificate) and moved to Patna. I got admission in the Rajaram Mohan Seminary School here. At that time there was revolutionary fervour everywhere. The slogan 'Neither a brother, nor a pie' would echo.

Gandhiji only later fought against the British in the Second World War, he rather lagged behind the communists. Today Gandhiji might seem great to us, but at that time he seemed to be a puppet of the Britishers to us. There was a strike in the school. I was expelled from here too. Finally Rajendra Babu (Rajendra Prasad, the first president of the country) intervened, and the issue was resolved with an agreement on 'Forget and Forgive' basis. From there I came to the Patna Collegiate. Ali Ashraf, Surendra Sharma, Harikishor Mehrotra were the leaders there. Patna Medical College was our place of resort.

The AISF conference was held in which the slogan "People's War" was passed. The party's pamphlet came out by the name "Forward to Freedom". We went to the secretariat with around fifty thousand students. Firing happened. I was hit by tear gas and I fell. The boy, Umakant, who was at the forefront of the secretariat martyrs, was from our school. During this period, seeing my participation in revolutionary activities rising, my father got me married. He hoped that marriage might bring some 'improvement' in me".

When even his mother did not vote for Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi

After he was married, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi started a rebellion at his home when he used to walk to the bus stop to get his wife to take the bus. In the then feudal environment, his family members did not like it. Despite being born into a zamindar family, he started taking part in Swami Sahajanand Saraswati's anti-zamindar peasant movement. Swami Sahajanand admired Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi so much so that he wanted him to contest in the first general election to be held in 1952. But Sahajanand Saraswati died in 1950. Ganesh Da contested the 1952 election from the Kisan Sabha. His uncle also contested in that election. The

people of his family were so irritated with communist politics that even his mother did not vote for Ganesh Da.

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi was in school when the famous peasant revolt of Revda started. He used to often mention in his speeches about the oppression of the landlords. “The landlord there was very cruel. The land of Bhumihar, Kurmi, Koiri and Dalit started to be auctioned due to non-payment of Malguzari (a type of land revenue arrangement) during the 1930s crisis. The landlord was so cruel that he would say that if there is no cow’s milk in the house, then milk your women and bring it.

He took active part in the students movement after the 1955 firing on students by the police and the administration. Dinanath Pandey, a student of Bihar National College, Patna, was killed in this incident and the then Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru had to come to Patna to intervene and pacify the student protesters

First Chief Minister of Bihar, Shrikrishna Singh said ‘you scare me’

Sharing an experience he heard from Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi, the renowned critic of the fifties Bhagwan Prasad Sinha says, “In view of his influence and political status, the Communist Party assigned him the task of managing the election campaign of the communist candidate Bholu Prasad who was contesting against the then Chief Minister Dr. Shrikrishna Singh (A congress heavyweight). He was entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the votes of the poor from the domineering feudal elements in the Barbigah-located Teus village (in the Sheikhpura district of Bihar) to which Shrikrishna Singh belonged. Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi arrived on the eve of voting. A dominant family in the village was known to him. He used this [acquaintance] in favour of the communist candidate. At the time of voting, he went to the booth and confronted the feudal elements directly. The effect of this was that seeing the bloodshed, his relatives too came to the booth and hence the booth was protected”. Probably for the same reasons, as Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi himself said, “The first Chief Minister of Bihar, Shrikrishna Singh used to make me sit far and wide. He used to say that you scare me”.



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Member of the Legislative Assembly for the first time in 1977, took

command of the party at difficult time

When the CPI split in 1964, Ganesh Shankar was among those who joined the CPI(M). Ganesh Da became a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the first time in the 1977 elections after the National Emergency. When it was declared that he had won, the people of his family who had never paid heed to him appeared in the frontline of the victory procession. Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi became MLA twice. He later became a Member of the Legislative Council. From 1980 to 2005, he was the state secretary of the CPI(M) in Bihar, and also a member of the CPI(M)'s Central Committee, the highest decision-making body of the Party, for nearly 30 years. The CPI(M) in Bihar experienced several splits between 1964 and 1980. First the Naxalites parted ways, then in 1973, the Marxist Coordination Committee (MCC) was formed under the leadership of the famous leader AK Rai. In 1980, another faction broke away under the leadership of the then state secretary Siyawar Sharan Srivastava to become the Marxist Communist Party of India (MCPI). Ganesh Da took command of the party during this difficult time.

He not only kept the Party intact after this, but also expanded the CPI(M) significantly. The Party waged a massive land struggle. Many important activists died in that land struggle. The murder of Ajit Sarkar came as a shock to the Party. CPI(M) State Secretary Awadhesh Kumar describes that difficult period: "Ganesh Da's hold on the poor and common people was strong. As soon as the news of the assassination of Ajit Sarkar, MLA and leader of the Bhumi Mukti Andolan, came on 14 June 1998, a team of the Party under the leadership of Ganesh Da reached Purnia. I was also a member of that team. Purnia was closed and the entire population, especially the tribal and landless people were on the streets in anger. The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) was in power and there was anger against their government. Lalu Prasad Yadav wanted to come to Purnia and wanted to pay tributes to Ajit Sarkar. Lalu ji, being in a dilemma about the public anger, called up Vidyarthi Ji. Vidyarthi Ji convinced Lalu Prasad and asked him to come. Lalu Ji came and paid tributes and made announcements and returned".

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi was very affectionate towards his comrades. Awadhesh Kumar recalls: "I had to go to attend the Youth Festival in Moscow in 1986, but there were some problems within the organisation. I was in the SFI state office at Annie Besant Road, Patna. As Ganesh Da got to know he came directly [to the office] and said, you have to go to the Moscow Youth Festival. Go. Once you are there go to Kremlin and shower flowers on the dead body of comrade Lenin. And later he told me in depth about Lenin and the Russian Revolution".

Class Outlook should not have been allowed to be dismissed during the Mandal movement

By 1990, the presence of the CPI(M) in the Legislative Assembly also increased. There was also representation of the CPI(M) in the Parliament from Bihar. It was the time of the Mandal Commission. Looking back at that period, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi said that the class outlook should have been taken care of. "Those who are poor among the backward should get the benefit of this [the recommendations of the Commission], but our weakness is that we could not make this line effective. If we had succeeded in creating a class outlook among the downtrodden and Dalits then the vested self-interest that is foiling the Mandal movement wouldn't have unfolded. They would not have succeeded in using caste sentiments".

Ganesh Da remained committed to Marxism throughout his life. When the publication of *Janashakti* resumed in the pandemic, Ganesh Da joined the meeting and spoke about the importance of the party newspaper. He remained fond of Marxist books until the end. He used to buy and read new books and would inspire others to read them. CPI(M) Central Committee member Arun Kumar Mishra says, “Ganesh Da was eager to read new books till the last moment of his life, just as a child is eager to play with new toys. Of late whenever we got an opportunity to talk, he would discuss one or the other book and would recommend reading it”.

Ganesh Da was a rare example of a person upholding Marxist principles and communist behaviour. It is for this reason that people from all streams of the Left had an affinity for Ganesh Da. In his last years, curious activists, journalists, sympathisers of the Left movement all reached out to him to know about the past of the communist movement. They would hear stories about veteran communist leaders such as SA Dange, PC Joshi, BT Ranadive, EMS Namboodiripad, and Pramod Das Gupta.



Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi with his fellow comrades (Picture Credits: Unknown)

In his long political life of eight decades, Ganesh Da saw many ups and downs. But the dream of establishing a society without exploitation never disappeared from his eyes. However, the way to establish socialism is not easy either. During this time, he spent nearly six years in jail. He never received a pension although he was a freedom fighter.

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi's family had also been involved with giving up of his land and to be divided among the agricultural workers. Though, when there was a delay in the land redistribution he visited Shubhmurthy, who was the chairman of Bhoodan Yagya Committee. He said "I knew Vidyarthi Ji since the days of the Bihar movement. His father and uncle had donated a lot of land as part of Bhoodan. He was over eighty years old when I was the chairman of the Bhoodan Committee. He came to my office with a walking stick and requested that we properly distribute the land they had donated. Due to many disruptions in distribution, it was delayed, but he kept coming to the office from time to time. He was active while the entire list of landless workers were prepared in the village. It was under his chairmanship that I distributed the Bhoodan certificates among the women agricultural workers. Even at that age, his passion was worth seeing, it was very inspiring".

Ganesh Da also led many land movements in his district of Nawada. Some of the important ones are Rajauli Dhab, Kumharua, Dhamani, Dibour, Hamza Bharat of Satgir and Sirdala, Nad, Kebal and Khatgyangi.

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi was widely respected in administrative circles. Rajyavardhan Sharma, a popular IPS officer of Bihar, recalls, "We heard his name in our student life. During the Jayaprakash movement, we heard many stories about Vidyarthi Ji, that he was born into a zamindar family and got a very good education, but later he became a communist against the hopes of his family. Despite hearing so much about him, I did not have the opportunity to meet him until 1986. I was transferred to Begusarai, which was called the Leningrad of Bihar, in July 1986. In 1986, some people of his party were beaten up by the miscreants and the opposition party members and some were prosecuted. Because of my own fault I remained unable to explain the matter to him in detail. But he was impressed by the decision and quick action taken by me. After that, he got confidence in me. In April 1987, a huge meeting of opposition parties was organised. The main agenda was to attack and question the administration. He came to see me before going to the meeting. We spoke on the issue which caused misunderstanding. He listened carefully to me, was satisfied and went to the meeting. It was a matter of pleasure for us that he did not attack us in his speech. He was a true communist living a simple life. Today's youth can hardly believe that he had abandoned the comforts of his life for the cause of the common people. But at the same time there is a sad side to it that after 1990 and in the first decade of this century, some people attacked him on the basis of [his upper] caste [background].

Those who got land were not politicised

After leaving the post of the state secretary, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi gave an interview to a newspaper. With regard to the functioning of the Left movement and the parliamentary deviation, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi said in an almost cautionary note, "It is a fact that parliamentarism has prevailed among our people. People want to at least become a mukhiya or a cabinet member. Earlier, if there was some murder or something, people would themselves start protesting, demonstrating, gheraoing etc. Now however, activists ask, what will happen with the sit-in demonstration? They ask us to talk to the Collector or SP and get the matter resolved. A daughter is raped in front of her father and he wants to compromise and get some compensation instead of fighting. Why is the spirit of fighting diminishing? Even the families which got land after our hard work and struggle, have now shifted to the RJD (a regional political party in Bihar)". Giving the reason behind these developments, he says, "It is because we had not politicised them. We did win one battle by giving them the land. But we did not do the work of getting in touch with them every day, getting them acquainted with Party literature, and constantly raising their level of consciousness. [We] did not make them communists. We did not develop their class consciousness and make them members of the Party. We

did talk about taking the class aspect forward at the time of reservation, in fact a decision was also taken on paper, but we did not take these things to the public. The result of [us] not being able to intensify the class struggle, had been that the problems within the Left parties increased. Casteist influence impacted us too. Opportunism grew among the workers, that if they are in the RJD they would get to become MLA and MP, while if they stayed in CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(ML), nothing will happen. Feelings of this sort arose”.

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi often used to say that the path of change is long. In the above-mentioned interview, Ganesh Da made a very insightful comment about the Left: “There is no shortcut for change. There is only one way to change – struggle. If we do not bring class forces into our side, then change will not happen. If leftists together make efforts in this direction, change will definitely come”.



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(The article has been written by Anish Ankur, a cultural activist and a journalist in Bihar).