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In Memory of Shapurji Saklatwala

Harkishan Singh Surjeet

June 16, 1996 marks the 60th death anniversary of Shapurji Saklatwala. Coming from the pioneering capitalist family in India, going to England for his family's business interests, Saklatwala played an important role in the working class and the communist movement in Great Britain. He was among the only four communists ever to be elected to the British Parliament, till date.

The old generation of the Communists know his immense contribution to the cause of working class movement in Great Britain, his uncompromising struggle against British imperialism with firm support to the national liberation movement, his undaunted fight against racism, his strenuous efforts to build the unity of British working class and Indian freedom movement, his admiration for Great October Revolution and his contribution in developing the Indian communist movement. Many efforts were made to direct him from the revolutionary path. He was offered important posts by the British government which he flatly refused and chose to face all types of repressive measures in order to serve the cause of struggle for Indian independence and social revolution in Great Britain.

We are publishing here extracts from an article on Saklatwala written decades ago by one of his biographers, Mike Squires. The article throws some light on the contribution made by Saklatwala to the cause of the working class in various spheres. We are also publishing extracts from a reference to the activities of Saklatwala by Rou Rarudu in his book "The Making of the Black Working Class In Britain".

Communists of my generation who joined the movement in the early thirties knew him as a communist, as a staunch anti-imperialist and admirer of October Revolution. But little was known about his class origin, that he comes from a rich Bombay Parsee family, known as

the Tatas. Jamshedji Tata, his maternal uncle, founder of the Tata house, deputed Saklatwala to lead a prospective expedition for iron and coal deposits in central India in 1902. After having failed his team moved to the Loharu region of Northern India where they succeeded and he was amongst those responsible for the setting up of the TISCO. While in search of iron and coal Saklatwala came to know the plight of tribal people in those areas who were living a miserable life. This deeply moved him -- the vast gap between rich and poor -- the poor living even without drinking water and other minimum human necessities. Among the experts who accompanied him was a Russian Social Democrat. A biography written by his daughter, Sahri Saklatwala, exhaustively describes as to how his views were being moulded during this period.

In 1905 Saklatwala was sent to England to manage the Tatas office at Manchester. After a short stay he moved to London where he came in touch with liberals like Lord Morley, secretary of state for India. The experience in London became a turning point in his life and he rejected liberalism and decided to enter working class politics. In 1906 when he was staying in Mallock, a suburb of Derbyshire, he met a working class girl, Sarah Marsh from the village of Tausley who he married in August 1907. After they moved to London by the end of the same year, Saklatwala joined the Social Democratic Federation, a Marxist group, founded in 1884. Later this was renamed as British Socialist Party. He also became a member of Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1909 and automatically became a member of the Labour Party.

During the first world war, he came out against the war taking firm anti-imperialist positions alongwith a section of the I.L.P. He carried a big campaign against the war and this activity brought him to national prominence.

The Russian revolution inspired him tremendously and he fought the wrong attitude of the I.L.P against the Communist International alongwith Rajni Palme Dutt who was also a member of the I.L.P. When he failed in rallying the majority, he alongwith Rajni Palme Dutt and some others joined the Communist Party of Great Britain and devoted his life to the cause of the working class, national independence, and for socialism till he breathed his last in June 16, 1936.

Between 1905 and 1936, till his death, he was able to visit India thrice -- in 1912, 1913 and in 1927. Ironically his entry to India was banned even when he was a member of parliament and the Labour Party was ruling. In May 1912, he alongwith his wife and children had come to India to permanently stay here but he had to leave as the British considered him a danger to British empire. He left for England in 1913 to permanently stay there. Later he visited India in 1927 after getting elected as a Communist MP.

When the League Against Imperialism was formed in 1927 in Brussels, he was elected to its executive committee alongwith Jawaharlal Nehru.

In understanding the importance of united front against imperialism his understanding arose out of concrete experience of development of freedom struggle in colonies particularly in India. When the sixth Congress of Communist International wanted to dissolve the League against imperialism, he firmly opposed it and emphasised the need of broad front in the struggle against imperialism. He also made an immense contribution on the colonial question when he fought against the erroneous views of M.N. Roy that Gandhi and bourgeois leadership has no potential in this struggle.

The purpose of this introduction is not to write in detail the contribution Saklatvala made in developing the Communist movement in India and Great Britain, while this is also necessary, here the intention is to highlight the fact that though Marxism is the ideology of the working class and it is class struggle which is the motive force of history, but once these ideas grip the mind even a person coming from the Tata family becomes a staunch revolutionary and dedicates his whole life to the cause of putting an end to exploitation of man by man and nation by nation. It is the scientific outlook which determines the course of action of a man not merely his class origin. In the struggle for social liberation many intellectuals from well to do sections have joined the communist movement, some vacillated at crucial stages of class struggle, but those who have fully grasped the ideology of Marxism-Leninism and integrated it with practice have upheld the revolutionary banner. The example of Shapurji Saklatvala stands out sharply as a he comes from the biggest industrial house of India, marries a working class girl coming from a very poor family and involves himself in the working class movement, in the struggle against capitalism and lives a life of staunch revolutionary till the end of his life.