[**A splendid dream interrupted**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1747078/a-splendid-dream-interrupted)

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THE 1968 students’ uprising in Europe changed the matrix of campus politics in much of the world, India being no exception. Lahore-born Suneet Chopra was a student at SOAS in London around the time and was inevitably influenced by the compelling logic of revolutionary change. In December 1970, the Students Federation of India (SFI) was created in Kerala from the clay of a divided communist movement.

Two years later, Suneet was scouting for talent to expand the reach of the students’ movement. One remembers him visiting the Aligarh Muslim University with fellow communist partisan Prakash Karat. They planned to set up an SFI unit at AMU, a hugely daunting task for several reasons. The times had changed since Moin Ahsan Jazbi, Ali Sardar Jafri and Asrar ul Haq Majaz walked the hallowed portals of the university, writing revolutionary poetry to awaken the masses. The Tableeghi Jamaat had moved in, not as violently as the Jamaat-i-Islami-supported anti-left student bodies in Pakistan’s universities of the 1970s, but efficiently anti-liberal, anti-women nevertheless.

All was not lost, however. Blessing the Chopra-Karat visit were renowned Marxist historians Irfan Habib and Iqtedar Alam Khan. Of the two visitors, Suneet spoke spontaneously with fire in the belly, while Karat was professorial in connecting the dots of practice and theory of Marxism for the mostly uninitiated students. Suneet was the indefatigable dreamer of the egalitarian dream, the more romantic of the two. Karat went on to become the general secretary of the Communist Party of India-Marxist.

Suneet peeled off to organise the peasants. He strove to declass himself but it was difficult to take the country out of the boy. It was among other facets of his personality reflected in the love of art of which he would become an avid and knowledgeable patron. This unusual blend he shared with one of India’s finest people’s artists, the late Vivan Sudaram.

‘One can’t be a good communist if one is not also a good human being.’

Suneet died last week at 81, collapsing in the Delhi Metro on his way from Gurgaon, which was barely a week after Vivan’s death. Both passed away even as the dream they lived by looked a tad more distant from its fruition.

Suneet helped set up the SFI as the dominant flavour from among a range of leftist groups at the newly created Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1972. Soon the emergency was declared and leftist students were rounded up.

Devi Prasad Tripathi, known to Pakistani peace activists as DPT, was the president of the SFI-led students union when plainclothes policemen kidnapped him from the campus. He spent the entire emergency in prison. Karat went underground but would visit the campus on odd nights for closed-door meetings with senior activists. Cyclostyled pamphlets were slipped under hostel doors. The late Urdu scholar Ali Javed was a student leader of the pro-Soviet group. He was strategically embraced as a trustworthy ally. The cyclostyling machine, paper and ink were parked safely in his room to dodge detection. Javed called it his contribution to perennially elusive left unity.

Unlike the standard fare from the communist stable, Suneet’s communication skills were rarely doctrinaire. On one occasion, he decided, as only he could, to give a free lesson on animal rights, an unusual digression for a communist fighting Indira Gandhi’s assault on democracy. That day he had nursed a wounded dog to its feet and declared over a celebratory cuppa: “One can’t be a good communist if one is not also a good human being.”

When the emergency ended, I joined Suneet on a route march to Bhiwani where the SFI was supporting a hitherto unknown woman called Chandrawati against Mrs Gandhi’s defence minister Bansi Lal. A notorious anti-Dalit leader, Lal was a staunch supporter of the emergency.

It was a sweltering summer afternoon and Suneet was marching briskly towards Chandrawati’s election office. Some of us were famished, thirsty and tired. An abandoned road-roller was smouldering in the heat when I, being taller than others, spotted a few twigs of green chickpeas the driver seemed to have left on the seat. I took a few and passed them on to the marchers behind me. The news mysteriously travelled to Suneet. He stopped the route march and gave the most disapproving look I have ever seen. “You know what, comrade. Mao (Zedong) would have taken you apart for stealing from the peasants.” The funny thing is he was serious and meant business. What remained of the twigs was promptly returned, and the march resumed. To Suneet’s joy, Chandrawati won handsomely to become the first woman MP from Haryana.

Suneet made it to the powerful central committee of the party but was sidelined along with others in the minority with him when they tried to back Jyoti Basu, a founding member of the CPI-M, to become India’s first communist prime minister. Basu would later describe the party’s decision to forgo the chance to have a communist prime minister as a historic blunder. The truth of the assertion is perhaps glimpsed in the party’s unending misery in West Bengal and Tripura, the two states it ruled but where it stands marginalised. Making it worse, CPI-M is leaving no stone unturned to remove fellow opposition leader Mamata Bannerjee from power in West Bengal, a move the BJP is thrilled to support.

Years before the party fell on bad times, Suneet was a lead speaker at a Delhi seminar and Nar­e­n­dra Modi was a rookie participant for the BJP. Making a scholarly presentation of India’s poor ranking in HDI indices, Suneet cited detailed re­­ports from official agencies. Modi began his intervention with a confession that signalled the prohibitive toll it would one day take on India’s de­­mocracy. “I am not an Oxford-educated man like you, Suneetji, but…!” The words would stalk Su­­n­eet Chopra’s splendorous dream for years to come. As they would haunt his teeming comrades for not heeding the signs of the times before it was late.

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