

## Oli's early life and influences:

### A short interview with KP Sharma Oli on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2003

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In 2003, in the course of a research project<sup>1</sup> on the social history and current practice of activism in Nepal, the two of us interviewed KP Sharma Oli. In view of his current position as Prime Minister of Nepal, and also because (as remarked by his secretary at the time) we asked the kind of questions that the journalists who frequently visited him did not, it may be of some interest to publish a transcript of it now. The text was recorded by hand at the time in a mixture of Nepali and English and has been edited to remove repetitions.

The interview took place at Oli's new house in Balkot, where he and his wife had just moved, along with his wife's younger brother and family. The house was only just habitable and in fact the upper floor was still incomplete; bricks, beams, and other building materials were piled up outside.

While we were settling down, Radhika Shakya, his wife, related that Oli came out of jail finally in 1987 after 14 years, which was when she met him. She had a job in the Rastra Bank for 24 years, which meant that she was not in a position to work full time for the party. But all her relatives were communist supporters, including her younger brother, Gyanendra Shakya, who was then an elected UML ward representative.

**Oli:** I was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1952 in Atharai, Therathum, in Koshi Zone. This includes 10-15 VDCs. My mother died when I was young. I was her only child. I have one younger brother and three younger sisters from my step-mother. It was hard. My father was a farmer. He had studied maths and astrology. In the year I was born modern education had only just started. There was a traditional *pathshala* there. Because it was an agricultural place, 'winter school' was necessary for several years.

*DNG: Did your father have any education?*

He had a little. At home it was done according to tradition. I went through the ritual of commencing study, according to that tradition [i.e. worshipping Sarasvati and starting to shape letters]. The school teacher came to the house and started me off. According to the auspicious time (*sait*), I started in December. Then school started in January. We called the schoolteacher 'Dhungel guru'. I went to school and the following year I was in Class One. I studied in that school for four years. Then I went to the Tarai. In 1962 I went to Madhesh, to Jhapa, where my father lived. We sold up and migrated. It had become very difficult in the Hills. At first we stayed in Goramuni, Saddamati. It is now in Prithvinagar.

*DNG: Did you have enough land?*

At first it was enough, then it became a bit harder. You could buy easily, so first they just took a lease. By the time we bought, you couldn't buy much. So it became harder.

*DNG: Did your father teach as well?*

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<sup>1</sup> Link to <https://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/impact-activism-Nepal/>.

At first he did teach, but it was hard to teach maths and astrology. He had to go back to farming. There wasn't any alternative.

*DNG: Did your father have brothers?*

He had one elder brother, who died in 1983. He was also a farmer. His sons and his wife, they are all still there.

*DNG: Who was the greatest influence on you?*

It was my grandmother who influenced me the most. It was a good inspiration (*ramro prerana*). She was literate. But later she couldn't see. I would read *dharmasastra* to her. She died in 1991 at the age of 99. Once she was hit by an oxcart and became unconscious. It was around 1981, 2, or 3. Apart from that occasion, she took no tablets or injections all her life. Till the age of 80 she was strong. She could do all her own work. In 1987 I got out of jail. At that time she could still walk the two hours to market.

*MBK: Where is your maternal uncle's house?*

It is in Panchthar jilla, a place called Chhyangthapu. It is very much in the east, on the way to Sikkim, on the border of Taplejung and Panchthar. My grandmother wanted me to have an education, also moral (*naitik*) education.

*DNG: Do you remember when you first heard the word 'communist'?*

It was the time of the election that I heard it. In 1959 I was just a kid. At that time I heard it, as the parties were fighting. Perhaps I had heard it before. Everyone around there, my relations, neighbours, our teacher, we all supported Kajiman Kandangwa as an independent. He didn't win. But we all gave our votes to him because we knew him.

The Congress government was formed. The communists and the Gorkha Parishad also got seats. The Praja Parishad couldn't win any. We knew it was a Congress government. I was in Class 4. We had to read a book, we had to study in Hindi about Bapuji, i.e. Gandhi, and we had to learn, 'Hamara Pradhan mantri ka nam Jawarhalal Nehru' [in those days, the textbooks used in the Tarai were in Hindi]. We had to study that. I remember we had no TV, no radio, no films. The teacher asked us, 'When it says, *Bapuji-ne pucha*, what does *pucha* mean?' None of the class knew this word. The teacher got angry. 'I told you yesterday and you've all forgotten! It means *sodhyo* [asked].' Our master was Limbu. He had lived in Darjeeling. He only knew a little more than we did.

After that, in 1960, parties were banned. The next year, 1962, the Nepali Congress launched an armed struggle. They destroyed bridges, did ambushes, and set fire to offices. Congress became fashionable after that, but I already had an inclination towards communism.

*DNG: Where did you become a communist?*

I got the communist inclination (*bichar*) after I went to Jhapa to do my SLC. That was around 1967, possibly 1966. I had three or four close friends. We would play football together and go to a tea shop and discuss. It is child psychology that you don't want to lose an argument. We agreed that the Partyless system wasn't good. One friend said that Congress would win. I didn't really know what I was talking about, but I didn't agree, so I said, 'How can you say that? There are communists, right here!' I didn't actually know this. 'How can they win?' the others asked. 'The communists are the party of the poor. There are more poor people, so the communists will win'. That's what I said.

Another friend said, 'How can they be communists, if they haven't even studied it?' And he mentioned 2 or 3 Congress people by name. I couldn't name anyone who was a communist.

Elderly people had a tendency (*jhukav*) towards Congress. After that, I studied communism. A friend's uncle (*kaka*), who was also distantly related to me, explained it. I liked what he said a lot: not to follow the rules of untouchability, treating people the same, whether they are rich or poor, no oppression (*dabab nadine, napelne*), not harming others (*nas nagarne*). It sounded good to me.

I had Congress friends too. I went to my uncle's place. He seemed to know about China, Vietnam, Russia, and the USA. He knew the history of India. He seemed to know everything. He knew how Mao Tse-Tung, Che, Sukarno all came to power. Whatever I asked, he knew. He was called Ramnath Dahal. He knew all of history, including about [the leader of the slave revolt] Spartacus and Rome. I was very impressed by his knowledge.

Through him I learned about Siddhartha, and a bit about China, Confucius, the Buddha, various philosophical positions, even about Montesquieu. After meeting Ramnath, I learned the words *tanasahi* [dictatorship], *prajatantra* [democracy], *rajtantra* [monarchy]. Before that I thought Lenin was a king, also Sun Yat Sen. That's what children think. It was before SLC. I also missed a year in the middle.

In 1970 I sat for my School Leaving Certificate exams. That was when I became a member of the Party. I had to wait till I was 18. But even before that I was involved in all kinds of movements. It was a secret organization. Under the ban on parties, all organizations were banned.

*DNG: Did you boycott bourgeois education?*

The anti-bourgeois education movement was in 1971. In 1967 Naxalbari started, very close to us. Some of my friends did boycott bourgeois education. It was not just here. Ranadip did it in the USA too. I didn't leave it for that reason. We had made no progress doing demonstrations and raising issues. The administration was repressing us. We had to take another path, so it became violent. That was in 1971, 2, 3. The Naxalites had rifles, but we did not. The police could easily arrest us. We were drawn towards the Naxalites, so a new movement in Nepal began in 1970. Also the Cultural Revolution had an effect on us. We hadn't studied Marxism. So we just followed the line of the Cultural Revolution, but it was a mistaken path.

Then there was the war between India and Pakistan. India supported Bangladesh and it [Bangladesh] was created. We thought India could take small countries, so we became even more oppositional. We supported the most extreme opponents of the Indian government [i.e. the Naxalites].

Ramnath Dahal, I, and others opposed the violent path. We first did an analysis. This is not good. We shouldn't just copy what others do, we should find our own way. Others said, 'We can't leave the violent path (*ugrapantha*)'.

*DNG: Was there a split in the party?*

There wasn't a 'split'. In 1973 they killed Ramnath Dahal. There is a Martyr Ramnath Dahal Study and Research Centre now in Baneshwar.

*DNG: What work was Ramnath doing when you met him?*

He had a hotel, was a contractor, but his main occupation was agriculture. He had others doing the work. Yes, he had his own group. Later Man Mohan's group split off from it. Then again it split and we thought that the different groups should unite. We needed a united communist party to bring

democracy. Man Mohan wasn't ready for this and we were kicked out by the extremists (*ugrapanathi*). This was at the end of February 1973. Later the party was able to correct itself (*sachchaunu*). They took Dahal and four others to the side of the road and killed them while transferring them.

In 1973 October, Mohan Chandra, I, and others were arrested. Somebody informed on us. In those days, there was no paper arrest warrant. 500 people were held for a long time, 150 for over 5 years. There was no question of keeping rules then. They beat (*kutpit*) us.

*DNG: What was the name of the party at that time?*

It was just Nepal Communist Party. We had no General Secretary, just Secretary Ramnath Dahal. Our party was limited to Jhapa and even within that to a specific part of Jhapa, but we did campaigns in the whole of Jhapa. Because we split into lots of small groups, Ramnath made his own group. Then we joined with the district committee of Man Mohan and that united group went on the violent path. Then Man Mohan split again. The second time we made a Coordination Committee. I was the organizing secretary in 1972.

*DNG: Did you get a salary?*

No, even though I was working full time, I would just get money from friends. Yes, I left off college education. While I was secretary we took the reform line against the ultra-leftists. CP Mainali supported the Naxalites. I was against. He became strong, did a campaign, and removed me as secretary. That was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> week of February 1973. They also took away my membership. Then by the end of February or beginning of March 1973 the government killed Ramnath [and the others].

Then in October I was arrested in Rautahat. And was in jail till 1987. First in Gaur, then Birgunj, Bhadracol, Central Jail, Nakhu, Pokhara, Syangja, Hanuman Dhoka police custody for two months, then again to Central Jail. I had four years of solitary confinement (*ekantavas*) in Central Jail, Golghar. I was only allowed cold water and couldn't meet others. Eight or nine of the others [in jail] went mad, e.g. Mohan Chandra Adhikari. We could hear them screaming. Sometimes they would put him in handcuffs, for one and a half months he was put in stocks.

*MBK: Did they come and make you any 'offers'?*

No, they didn't. They just would beat me (*kutne, marne*) and transfer me from one place to another. 25 times they did it. After all my court cases were finished, they passed the Security Act. That let them put you in jail for just speaking to someone ten years previously.

In 1984 my case reached the Supreme Court and they ordered my immediate release. I had been brought there from Pokhara without handcuffs. Immediately they put handcuffs on me and sent me back to Hanuman Dhoka, then again to Pokhara, and from there to Syangja.

At one point, in 1984, I was outside jail, in hospital. The police were waiting outside for three hours. I said to them, 'If I run away, you will lose your job.' They laughed and said, 'Sir, we know that you won't run away.' In fact my secretary did say to me, 'Why don't you run away?' I replied, 'Why should I run away? It is very hard to conduct a movement while in hiding. You have to behave like a criminal.'

*DNG: Did they let your family visit you?*

For six years, 1973 to 1979, I had no contact at all. People lost all hope of meeting me.

*MBK: Were you in Nakhu Jail at the same time as CP Mainali and Pradip Nepal?*

Yes, I was in that same cell that CP Mainali escaped from. But by the time he did that, I was in Central Jail. Then for 1-2 years we could send letters. I met Ganesh Raj Sharma and Ramnath Dahal's widow. I appealed against the government's sentence.

At first, for one year, they wouldn't let me read. The jail had a library. There was a dispensary. I got hold of a pencil. On the packet of a Gold Flake cigarettes I started writing. The Naik said, 'Don't write'. But I wrote a poem and he liked it. He let me have other packets and eventually I had a stack of them. Later I brought out a book of these poems.