

## **Tribute to Kanu Bhavsar - Activist, Researcher, Therapist**

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Kanu Bhavsar, one of the leaders of the Navnirman movement against the corrupt Congress regime in Gujarat in the 1970s, passed away in Delhi on 3 February 2015. Although Bhavsar did not publish a book, set up an institution or make a political name for himself, he touched the lives of many.

My good friend Kanu Bhavsar died in Delhi on 3 February 2015. He was always proud of his role as one of the leaders of the Navnirman movement against the corrupt Congress regime in Gujarat in the 1970s. A passionate orator in Gujarati and Hindi, he was always on the side of social justice and freedom of speech and thought. His often idealistic reactions to inequalities, corrupt dealings, discrimination and religious fundamentalism blighted any chance he might have had as a career in academia – though history and political science were his abiding interests. He was a man of a fine and generous spirit.

### **Early Life**

Kanu was born in Ahmedabad on 25 February 1942 in a family of traditional textile dyers Raipur settled in the old walled city of Raipur. His uncles were staunch nationalists, involved in the *akhada* or gymnastic movement in the 1930s, and part of the socialist wing of the Indian National Congress. When he was young his hero was the socialist leader Indulal Yagnik, who had a strong following in the city in the early years after independence. While a teenager, Kanu participated in the Mahagujarat Andolan, which was directed against the stifling hold of the old-guard Congress Party, led in Bombay state by Morarji Desai. Kanu was jailed in this protest in 1958, and his fellow-prisoner Yagnik remembered him as the youth who played the harmonica to lighten the days of their mutual incarceration.

Kanu went on to study political science under P G Mavlankar—the son of G V Mavlankar, the first speaker of the Indian Parliament. Kanu also frequented the Harold Laski Institute of Political Science run by Mavlankar at his home in the Ellisbridge area to attend its weekly discussions on current affairs. He also trained as a bonesetter, or *hadvaid*, following in the

footsteps of his uncles and father who made a living through this profession. Kanu worked in his father's dispensary, located strategically at the major intersection of Saraspur Char Rasta, becoming a registered medical practitioner. He was also awarded a scholarship to work for a PhD at the Gujarat Vidyapith, the university founded by Gandhi in 1921, where he carried out research on Vallabhbhai Patel.

In early 1971, his wife developed bone cancer and tragically died. This was a dreadful blow to him. He carried their photo as a couple for the rest of his life. Soon after this, in late 1971, I met him when I was staying at the Gujarat Vidyapith while working on my own PhD on the nationalist movement in Gujarat. We became steadfast friends. He more than anyone helped me to get to know Gujarat from the inside, giving me insights into a society that, despite its many strengths, could also be deeply disturbing. He also accompanied me on one of my research tours of Kheda District.

## **Political Mobiliser**

Kanu was highly critical of those who ran the Vidyapith. The chancellor was Morarji Desai - out of power in the 1970s and the leading opponent of Indira Gandhi. The vice chancellor, Ramlal Parikh, and his fellow academics were for the most part staunch supporters of Desai's Congress (O). Most of the students there were from poor adivasi and dalit backgrounds. They had been typically educated in paternalistic Gandhian ashram schools and were expected to respect and obey without questions the high-caste Gandhians who ran these institutions. Kanu sympathised with them rather than the hierarchy. He then set up a bonesetting dispensary close to the Vidyapith in Usmanpura, which hosted radical political discussion groups. He lacked the skills to make this enterprise financially viable, but it survived long enough to provide one focal point for the student discontent that was brewing in Ahmedabad at that time.

He played a leading role in mobilising support for P G Mavalankar, when he stood for bi-elections from Ahmedabad in 1972 as an independent and won a seat in the Parliament. His mobilising skills came into full play in 1974 when some students rebelled against the excessive fees charged in their hostels. This escalated into a student strike throughout Gujarat known as the Navnirman movement. The chief target was the venal Congress (I) government led by Chimanbhai Patel, popularly known as "Chiman Chor". There were large demonstrations. The calling in of the army to quell these led to over one hundred people being killed. Kanu was jailed along with other leaders and then flown by the Indira Gandhi government to Delhi for negotiations.

After a month, Chimanbhai was ordered by Indira Gandhi to step down and President's rule was imposed in Gujarat. Morarji Desai then turned the protest to his advantage, launching a fast unto death for the dissolution of the assembly and fresh elections to be held, which he achieved through a fatal alliance with the Jan Sangh. In retrospect, it is possible to trace the start of the upward trajectory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Gujarat to that period.

The Navnirman movement itself represented a coalition of many political tendencies, though the more radical activists were probably the most dynamic element. Kanu always said that the (later) claim that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was a driving force in the campaign was largely hot air, and that the Congress (O) and the RSS hijacked this movement and turned it to their advantage. Within this movement and in its aftermath, some of the other Navnirman leaders were able to capitalise on their new-found fame to launch their own careers as politicians of different tendencies, activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Kanu himself could have done so, as he was offered the chance to stand as a Congress (O) candidate in the 1975 elections—but he turned it down, as he had no love for the old-guard Gandhians. The virulently anti-egalitarian element among students in Gujarat came to the fore again a few years later, when in 1981 they launched the first anti-reservation movement. This, more than anything, spelt the death of a hopeful democracy in Gujarat. The Navnirman movement had the potential to be the start of something very different—but this was never to happen. People like Kanu could be inspired agitators, but proved unable to consolidate their political gains to achieve their aims.

### **Short Stint at Centre for Social Studies in Surat**

Kanu drifted after this—with no political affiliation. After clashing with the Vidyapith authorities, and even launching his own protest fast against Morarji Desai's chancellorship, he never gained his PhD, and his hoped-for academic career floundered and died. He left Gujarat and lived in Chennai for some time. He subsequently returned to Gujarat to work as an investigator at the Centre for Social Studies in Surat, then under Ghanshyam Shah, who knew Kanu from the Navnirman days. Here he deployed his knowledge of Gujarat society to great advantage, but his employment there was relatively short.

I was also based at this research institute during the 1980s, and I employed Kanu to work with me, travelling in the adivasi areas of South Gujarat and Maharashtra, researching the Devi Movement of 1923-24. This research work was turned into a book, which was published in 1987. Kanu had excellent contacts amongst educated adivasis, as many had been tutored by him at the Gujarat Vidyapith. They had struggled against the high-caste Gandhians, and their oral testimonies provided a very different perspective from that of the Gandhian social workers. This informed the book, and with the commitment and dedication Kanu showed to this work, I was able to write of things that could never be found in historical archives.

We moved all over this region on a Jawa Yezdi 250cc motorcycle - with sometimes me driving and sometimes Kanu - staying wherever we could find accommodation. Kanu was able to break the ice with our informants in a way that was beyond me, being a somewhat diffident Englishman, and his engaging personality warmed everyone around him. In the evenings, we sat and discussed our findings, working our way to an understanding of an

often-baffling phenomenon.

## **Practising as a Bonesetter**

Kanu subsequently practised as a bonesetter in Surat and developed skills in reflexology. As *hadvaid*s also practised therapeutic massage, this can be regarded as an updating of his skills to become what we now class as an alternative therapist. I returned to the United Kingdom (UK) in 1989, and Kanu stayed with Parita and myself in our flat in London. He first practiced reflexology amongst a welcoming extended family, and then found that he could maintain himself by using this therapeutic skill to heal others.

On his return to India, he settled in Delhi. He felt alienated from a Gujarat that was lurching towards the Hindu right. He maintained a precarious existence as a reflexologist, travelling all over the city on a battered old scooter to the homes of the wealthy. Kanu often felt humiliated by the way most of them treated him as some sort of inferior *jajman*, contrasting it with the way his patients had related to him as a respected equal in England.

We continued our friendship - made much easier once cheap cell phones became available - and we always met when I visited Delhi. He sometimes joined me on my research trips in western India, but this time the relationship was not that of a researcher with a research collaborator but that of soul mates, remembering our earlier ventures. Kanu did not publish a book, set up an institution or make a political name for himself. His life is a salutary lesson in what happens to an individual who refuses to bow to the pressures exerted by a society that is not ready to receive him. He touched the lives of many. He was a very good friend, and I shall miss him immensely.