

Shankar Guha Niyogi

Homage to a Martyr

by

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Shankar Guha Niyogi, the well-known trade union leader, was shot dead, while asleep in his house in the 'steel city' of Bhilai, in the early hours of 28th September 1991. As news of this barbarous murder spread, hundreds of small and medium units in the 75-km long Urla-Bhilai-Tedesra industrial belt, in the Chattisgarh area of Madhya Pradesh, closed spontaneously. Miners came down from the iron-ore *pahadis* of Dalli-Rajhara, Mahamaya and Danitola. Spontaneous condolence meetings were held in towns and villages all over Chattisgarh. Over one lakh people converged at his funeral on the next day, in the mining township of Dalli-Rajhara—heartbroken at the loss, nevertheless determined to 'carry on his struggle'.

What made Niyogi so important to so many people? For the past 20 years he and the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM)—a mass organisation of which he was a prominent leader—had through various struggles come to symbolise the aspirations of the people of this region. These included:

- The struggle of the miners of the captive mines of Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) against contractors and for establishing workers co-operatives;

- The struggle to resist mechanisation and to have instead a more creative proworker semi-mechanisation scheme, that did not affect

productivity. The struggle of the textile workers of Rajnandgaon for secure and safer working conditions;

- The struggle of tribals to recover forest rights and collective forest lands;

- The struggle to construct small stop dams independently by the people themselves to quench their parched fields;

- The struggle for all-round development of the region, lack of which forces thousands of poor Chattisgarhis to migrate to stone-quarries and construction sites in Delhi, Kanpur and other far-off places and work under sub-human conditions.

Niyogi began his life of trade union struggle in Bhilai, where in 1961, as a young man of 18 from Jalpaiguri, he joined the BSP as a coke-oven operator. Influenced by leftist political and cultural activities as a student, Niyogi was a pioneer of the trade union movement in the BSP, and was soon dismissed as a 'security risk'. He spent the next decade and a half in the tribal villages of the region, grazing goats for a living and studying the region; 'underground' for the police, but very much an organiser for the villagers. It was during this period that he came to earn popular respect for struggles against grain hoarders, corrupt *sarpanches* and unscrupulous religious heads. Eventually, he settled down in the Danitola Quartzite Mine, controlled by

the BSP. He worked in the mines and formed the embryonic organisation that was later to grow into the Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS). It was here that he met and married a tribal co-worker Asha. When the Emergency—during which he was jailed—was lifted, workers of Dalli-Rajhara, who had so far rejected all traditional trade unions, and who were then on a spontaneous and indefinite sit-in on the issue of housing rights, called him to help organise a union. This was the CMSS. Despite brutal repression, in 1977 (when 11 workers, including a woman and an 8 year old child died in police firing), and in 1981 (when Niyogi was detained illegally under the National Security Act), the CMSS spread to mines all over Chattisgarh, and then gradually as the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha to the surrounding villages.

The red-green banner of the CMM stood for 'worker and peasant', 'man and nature' as well as the relatedness of struggle and the building of alternatives.

The distinguishing factor of the CMM had been its ideological perspective and commitment to a radical restructuring of peoples' lives. This gave rise to an overall socio-economic-cultural programme of action, in which the economic programme was just one aspect. The best examples of this perspective are the Shahid hospital, the

anti-liquor movement and the annual celebration of *Shahid Divas* (Martyr's Day).

The health movement began in the region with the intention of providing simple cures and home remedies for diseases such as diarrhoea, which took a heavy toll. This resulted in the formation of small dispensaries. It culminated in the building of a 50-bed hospital in Dalli-Rajhara—the Shahid hospital. The remarkable feature of this hospital is that it has been constructed by the workers themselves and wholly with their funds and contributions. The doctors, who are equally socially committed, are wholly supported by workers' funds. These factors contribute to a democratic functioning and non-hierarchical relationship between the doctors and patients.

Women have been mobilised and have participated in all struggles of the CMSS right from the beginning. There have been struggles for equal wages, as well as against discriminatory retrenchment of women workers. Women have played an especially important and creative role in the anti-liquor movement. Most of the gains in wages, that had increased more than ten fold, were being lost because of daily liquor consumption by the men. Women not only struggled within the family against their menfolk, to make them give up liquor, but also took up collective actions against the liquor contractors. The movement led to almost 10,000 men giving up liquor. This was possible also because of the political perspective behind the movement, namely that the struggle against the contractor class has to be carried on beyond the work site.

Lakhs of Chattisgarhis come together every year to observe *Shahid Divas* on the 19th of December. It commemorates the martyrdom of Veer Narayan Singh, a Chattisgarhi tribal who fought against the British. While Veer Narayan Singh existed all along as a hero in the local folklore, CMM accorded him his rightful

place in the nationalist struggle, and made him the symbol of revolt and struggle for the Chattisgarhis. Homage is also paid to the workers killed in the 1977 police firing.

The broader social concerns of the CMM are also embodied in their setting up of six primary Shahid schools; a garage for training drivers and mechanics; and a model 'mini forest' to study the preservation of the original flora and fauna of the area. Attempts to set up a Shahid technical institute to impart technical training to Chattisgarhi youth have been continuously stymied by the state government, for fear of the long term implications of such efforts.

Over the past one year the CMM had been leading a militant struggle of contract workers in the private engineering and chemical industries ancillary to the BSP. Paid a pittance, far below the statutory minimum wages, sweating it out for 12-14 hours a day, constantly faced with extreme insecurity of employment and the *gondaism* of supervisors, contractors and factory owners, these workers had been left untouched by the central trade unions. With the emergence of the red-green unions here, a spirit of solidarity, determination and fearlessness was created. Almost immediately also came large scale victimisation and attacks on activists and leading workers. In this the industrialists had the support of the district administration. More than 1,000 workers have been detained illegally for varying periods of time under Section 151 over the past year. Niyogi himself was jailed for two months and when released by the High Court, the district police and administration made attempts to extern him from five districts of Chattisgarh. The workers have been holding on courageously, despite the lock-out like situation, to their demands for abolition of contract labour, a living wage and safer working conditions. They have been sustained in their long and continuing struggle by the solidarity and

material support of other red-green organisations. They are carrying out their struggle by constitutional and peaceful means.

Undoubtedly, this struggle and Niyogi himself were too much of a threat to the industrial houses of the region such as the Simplex groups and the Kedia Distilleries Group, who have amassed unaccountable wealth over the past 25 years. Possibly he had also become a threat to forces that are planning mechanisation of the steel industry in a region where unemployment is rampant, and to forces whose notion of 'industrial development' is anti-people and based on idle hands, cheap labour and voiceless people.

Shankar Guha Niyogi ended his trade union life where he began it, in Bhilai. Niyogi's wife has accused nine prominent industrialists of complicity in the crime. What his murderers do not understand is that Niyogi had ceased to be a mere individual and had become a symbol of a struggle, of a dream. Niyogi may be dead but his vision of a just society and aspirations for it continue to live in the ongoing struggles of workers in Bhilai and in entire Chattisgarh; and will continue to live as long as people struggle against oppression and exploitation.

There are enough indications that the district administration was in direct collusion with the killers. Although the case was handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation on October 28, 1991, apprehensions persist that the government will do its utmost to protect the killers because of their economic and political clout.

We appeal to Manushi readers to lend support to the CMSS in pressing upon the government of Madhya Pradesh to arrest and put on trial all those involved in the murder of Shankar Guha Niyogi. Please send letters of protest to Sunderlal Patwa, Chief Minister, Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal.

—Ed.