

Shankar Guha Niyogi: A tribute

By Bharat Dogra

THE killers who fired six bullets at Shankar Guha Niyogi on September 28 had not been sent to kill a man. They had been sent to destroy one of the few remaining symbols of hope in an increasingly dismal and even desperate situation. At a time when hope of humane, peaceful ways of bringing about socio-economic change is at a low ebb, Niyogi's efforts over the last 14 years were like a small lamp in the darkness. That light refused to get extinguished despite all kinds of attempts by a powerful array of vested interests to put it out. When all other means failed, they killed him.

Niyogi struggled throughout his life for the weaker sections of the Chattisgarh region. He led many successful struggles of miners, workers and peasants against terrible odds. He was recognised mainly as a dedicated labour leader. This identity, however, at best covers only a part of the work and thoughts of Shankar Guha Niyogi.

Those who knew him closely observed how ill at ease he frequently was with the nitty-gritty of trade union activities. To close friends he would confide how the day-to-day tensions of a trade union came in the way of wider social creativity. His frequent complaint against the people who ganged up against his movement was that in the middle of all the problems and tensions created by these saboteurs it was not possible to implement more of the social experiments he had in mind.

Despite innumerable obstacles the Niyogi-led movement in Chattisgarh won praise all over the country for its many constructive activities such as health programme, anti-liquor campaign and cultural regeneration. The movement had a clear vision of the wider process of socio-economic change which inspired a large number of people and helped them to overcome many obstacles.

Having decided at an early age to devote his life to reducing the sufferings of weaker sections, Niyogi brought to his work a deep understanding of the process of social change rooted in his very close interaction with the people. While he realised the importance of fighting against economic exploitation, he was equally clear that this was not adequate. The system which exploited the workers would continue to snatch their increased earnings through social evils such as liquor and gambling, through a

highly commercialised medical system and in other ways. Hence the need for social reform and a health movement. But this was easier said than done.

To make such social change possible the tribal worker, who has willy-nilly developed an inferiority complex, needs to acquire pride in his own identity and that of his movement. Hence the need for cultural regeneration. But of what use is this socio-economic change if it is confined only to pockets of mining or industrial workers? Hence the effort to take the voice of the emerging movement to villages.

The understanding of the Niyogi-led movement was not confined to these linkages. It went one step further and recognised the linkages among the vested interests behind economic exploitation, social evils and political power. The same interests which were responsible for economic exploitation had high stakes in the liquor business and also had a big say in the corridors of political power. By anticipating these linkages to some extent or by recognising these at an early stage, the movement was able to face the combined onslaught of various exploitative forces.

Niyogi was first and foremost a great social thinker of the alternative development movement but worked as a trade union leader in order to be able to implement his ideas in practical ways.

Responding to another need of the times when various secessionist and disruptive forces have been raising their heads in the country, Niyogi's movement provided a model of how poor people from an exploited backward region could be organised for real socio-economic change without any encouragement of separatist or divisive ideas or forces. There has never been any contradiction in this movement between the people's love of and pride in their region (Chattisgarh) and their feelings for their country.

At a time when it was being increasingly said by pessimists that in the prevailing atmosphere mass movements for genuine change would not be free of contamination from various ugly distortions, Shankar Guha Niyogi succeeded in sustaining such a movement for 14 years from 1977 till his death a few days ago. It is now for all of us to ensure that his dreams are not destroyed and his lamp continues to light the darkness.