

MARTYRDOM OF SHANKAR GUHA NIYOGI

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On the night of September-27/28, Shankar Guha Niyogi, the famous labour leader and social activist, was killed in Bilei town of Madhya Pradesh.

This is a terrible blow for the emerging movement against exploitation, inequalities, injustices and distorted, anti-people development policies.

Put differently, this is a big blow for the efforts being made to link the development path to ending the sufferings of the common people.

My first acquaintance with the 14-year movement in Chattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh led by Niyogi took place about 11 years back when I went there as a member of a team sent by a democratic rights organisation to probe the repressive measures against the movement, which included the arrest of Niyogi. What I saw during this introductory visit was enough to beckon me again and again to this region and since then I've visited the region regularly as a journalist to report on the events here.

The main memory of these visits that has remained imprinted in my mind is that of a constant feeling of tension and threat of various kinds. As many as three visits took place at the time of the arrest of Niyogi. At the time of other visits there were cases of indiscriminate arrests and beatings of workers, threat of mass retrenchment (or actual unemployment) of a large number of workers or other repressive measures in one part or the other of the area where the movement had spread. In other words the Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS), the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMH) and other organisation which had been formed in the course of this people's movement were by and large living in a state of constant tension, threats and struggles. The months when they could be more or less free from serious worries were few and far between. Despite this, ^{the} movement recorded several memorable achievements in constructive work.

In the course of these visits and even otherwise I have often wondered how much ^{more} these movements would've achieved if they did not have to live in a state of constant tension, how much more contribution they could've made to the emergence of a new vision of society if they had been spared the day to day threats.

The second question that arises is regarding our role i.e. the role of journalists, writers and social scientists. To what extent are we able to capture and communicate to others the invaluable understanding about social change that emerges from constant inter-action with such issues in the midst of grave tensions. Are we not reduced to asking mundane questions from persons who have much deeper insights to

contribute? And when a person with such understanding and insights is suddenly snatched away from us, then we are left with the feeling of a grave failure at having missed something invaluable, something which cannot be ~~retained~~^{retrieved} now.

In the midst of all the tensions that demanded immediate attention, it was generally not possible to speak to Niyogi for a long stretch undisturbed, even if one managed to reach ^{his} hut in Dalli Rajhara, but from whatever little he spoke it was clear that this man had much to say that was invaluable. The contributions that Niyogi made to public life after 1977 (that is after the formation of CMSS) is well on record, what is not so well known is the process of tremendous questioning and evaluation of the experiences so far in the years preceding it, a process that served him very well indeed in the post-1977^{years} when, at the centre of a big and growing trade-union movement, he seemed to have a grip over the situation, ^{a situation} which appeared very uncertain and confusing to others. This ability, which came from very close inter-action with people in the course of the formative pre- 1977 years, played an important role in retaining and expanding the support base in very adverse conditions during the 14 year period 1977-1991.

The struggle started in the iron ore mines of Dalli Rajhara, located in Durg district of Madhya Pradesh. Contractors, management, politicians, ministers, officials made sustained efforts for the erosion and crumbling of this initial base. The workers had to face bullets, batons, arrests and the threat of large-scale retrenchment, ^{but} with the combined might of all this repression- prolonged over long periods - could not breach this. There were some setbacks, yes, but no final reversal. And while preserving the base the expansion also started.

Workers from several other mining areas of Chattisgarh joined the movement, and so did the workers of many other industries. Transport workers also came. Peasants from a large number of villages joined the movement, and so did a large number of bonded labourers who had been released. Doctors, engineers, artists, writers came from various parts of the country to contribute to this movement.

When such strong efforts were being made to destroy the very base of the movement, ^{it was a great achievement} not only to save the base but also to expand it. The movement continued to extend its support among ~~such~~ a large number of people and in so many new areas. Repression in one support area immediately brought solidarity and support from other support areas. It has been a great effort to sustain all this in the middle of so many adverse efforts. Moreover this ^{was} not just a movement ^{just} for economic rights. In fact while economic ^{gains} ~~gain~~ have been significant, the bigger talking points of this movement have been its anti-liquor campaign under