

Shankar Guha Niyogi
and the
Chattisgarh Peoples Movement

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On 3 June 1977, barely three months after the emergency was lifted, the struggle of Dalli-Rajhara miners and the name of Shankar Guha Niyogi became known to the world outside Chattisgarh. The previous night Niyogi had been arrested provoking thousands of workers to demonstrate at the police station and practically lay siege to it. Police opened fire, killing twelve people including a woman. That particular incident of firing was the first of its kind under the new Janata regime that had come to power in March at the center. It was described as the "second dawn of independence". And the workers of Dalli-Rajhara were amongst the first to make everyone realize that the second dawn was going to be no different from the first.

Earlier in February-March while the emergency was still formally on, workers had come out and struck work spontaneously. Subsequently an organized union called Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS) came into existence under the leadership of Niyogi. Two days before the firing incident, 10,000 workers held a rally. They were demanding bonus, fallback wages (for the period of enforced idleness at work sites) and pre-monsoon allowance for repair of their huts. The iron-ore mines in Dalli-Rajhara are captive units of the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) which assigns them to contractors. Following the rally, described as the largest rally by far in the region, Niyogi was arrested on the night 2-3 June, 1977

under Section 151 Cr.P.C. ("Arrest to prevent the Commission of a Cognisable Offense"). Later the sessions judge held his detention illegal, and he was released after 35 days of detention in Balod and Durg jails. It was not the first time that he had been in jail during his long lifetime of struggle. Nor as it to be the last.

Shankar Guha Niyogi was born in Asansol on 14 February, 1943. Most of his childhood was spent in the forests of Upper Assam. He had his schooling in Calcutta, and later in Jalpaiguri. It was here that he became attracted to left politics in the late fifties. For a while he was also the Joint Secretary of the local unit of All India Students' Federation of India, the student wing of the then undivided Communist Party. Later, in the early sixties, he shifted to Bhilai, then a budding township in the heart of Chattisgarh region, his adopted homeland. While working in the Bhilai Steel Plant as a skilled worker he acquired B.Sc. and AMIE degrees. By 1964-65, he had become a union organizer, and was Secretary of the Blast Furnace Action Committee. He and his union played a major role in the anti-communal front subsequent to the Baria riots. His innovative methods and abilities, while endearing him to the workers, alienated him from the union leaders. By 1967, the "year of the spring thunder" he had become attracted to revolutionary politics, He became associated with the Co-ordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries, the precursor of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). Soon he lost his job. Then he edited and published a Hindi journal *Sfulling*. Around this time he was arrested, probably for the first time. Subsequently he became more closely associated with the CPI (ML), and went underground. In this period he worked in the central forest region on the border of Maharashtra and Bastar. Sometime in the

seventies he left the organisation and was on his own. For over five to six years his nomadic existence took him to many occupations and struggles, all within the Chattisgarh region. Forest work in north Bastar, catching and selling fish in Durg district, agricultural labour in Keri Jungata, shepherding goat in interior Rajnandgaon, were some of the occupations he was involved in. Everywhere he was involved in local struggles. The struggle of adivasis in Bastar, agitation against Mongra reservoir in Rajnandgaon, and the Daihand people's struggle for water were some of the struggles from which he learnt his early lessons in mass organization. Eventually he settled at Dhanitola working in the quartzite mines, where his long interaction with mining and miners began. During the emergency he was detained under Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), and was in prison for thirteen months. Subsequent to his release he shifted to Dalli-Rajhara where CMSS was born in 1977.

The Union became the most popular union in the iron-ore mines within two months. Hundreds and thousands of miners joined the union although it was not accorded recognition. The May 31 rally and gheraos were its major show of strength. The rally sent shock waves among recognised union leaders, contractors, and the public sector bureaucrats, the triumvirate that rule most of the mining areas in our country. The combine reacted in panic, and got Niyogi arrested. But it only strengthened the workers' resolve to struggle. Within a fortnight of the firing, even before Niyogi was released, the management signed an agreement with the still unrecognised union. Both bonus and pre-monsoon allowance were conceded, to be shared equally by the contractors and the Steel Plant. After his release the union was recognised, and it spread from the iron-ore mines of Dalli-Rajhara to the limestone mines in Danitola and Nandini, and the **dolomite** mines in Hirri.

The first major organised action of the CMSS was the indefinite strike in September 1977 demanding increase in wage rate and improved living conditions. The daily wage, on the days on which one got work, was around Rs. 4. The unloading charges for handling ore used to be a meagre 27 paise per tonne. On some days the workers were forced to work almost sixteen continuous hours a day. Much of their wage and service conditions were so poor because of the fact that most of the 8,000 miners were contract labour. In the next phase of the struggle the union took up the issue of contract labour. A steady movement was built up for abolition of contract labour and departmentalisation of the existing work force. Throughout this phase the union faced the wrath of the powerful mining and labour contractors. As the organised efforts of the union became strong, labour co-operatives of the workers gradually replaced the contractors. That was when the BSP managed to step in to crush the union through mechanisation. Since about the early eighties the union began its long drawn out struggle against mechanisation. The first strike on the issue took place in May 1980. As thus far the latest in May 1989.

Meanwhile the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) was posted at the mines, presumably to protect the mines from its own miners. In September 1980 hundreds of workers gheraoed the CISF personnel in protest against a jawan's attempt to rape a fourteen-year-old adivasi girl. Once again tiring took place in which one person was killed and thirty-eight injured. Niyogi and other leaders were arrested. Following widespread protest the government

ordered a judicial enquiry. But it must be added that no meaningful action was taken on the recommendations of Justice M.A. Rajjak enquiry commission appointed over the 1977 firing incident. The fate of the second committee seems to be no different.

As the agitation against mechanisation intensified initially in January 1981 Niyogi, Sahdev Sahu and Janaklai Thakur were served externment orders which were struck down by the courts. A fortnight later, on February 11, Guha, Niyogi, and Sahu were invited for talks by the District Collector, Durg. When they reached the office they were detained under the National Security Act (NSA). Workers went on strike. Two months later they were released by a judicial review committee. Finally the Steel Plant management climbed down and entered into an agreement with the union in the presence of the Chief Labour Commissioner. Partial departmentalisation was agreed upon, and the threat of mechanisation was held in abeyance.

Meanwhile CMSS evolved an innovative plan for semi mechanisation that would have increased production and productivity without resorting to retrenchment. This alternative, in the context of an underdeveloped economy like ours, attracted widespread attention. In November 1983 Niyogi along with a number of fellow activists and workers attended a convention in Delhi on "Mines, Mechanisation and People". The meeting, an attempt to initiate a debate between academics and union activists from different parts of the country was sponsored by the People's Union for Democratic Rights. Eventually, faced with the workers resistance and the credibility gained by their alternative proposal, the Steel Plant management did not pursue its plans. Much later in 1989 the management made another attempt. This time a number of workers, especially women were surreptitiously getting retrenched. The workers went on strike for three weeks in May forcing the authorities to retreat once again.

A regulated militancy apart, one of the inner strengths of the Dalli-Rajhra miners movement has been the involvement of women. In the manual mines of Dalli-Rajhara where CMSS had its original base, women constitute almost half the workforce. This is because the nature of the work makes it convenient to work in pairs (husband and wife teams are common). This is in sharp contrast with mechanised mines where skill and educational requirements have debarred women as they have debarred local Chattisgarhi people. Right from inception women played a significant role in the struggle. Among those killed in the 1977 firing was Anasuya Bai the popular folksinger of the union. From the first executive itself, the CMSS had women in its committee which is rare in Indian Trade Union movement. The active involvement of women has practically eliminated the sexual violation of women by contractors and their henchmen, once the scourge of Dalli-Rajhara mines. The nature and extent of participation of women enabled the movement to grow from the work-site to the homes and houses of workers. One of the first issues to emerge from this was alcoholism.

In the initial years all the additional increases in wages achieved by the union were being leaked out due to widespread alcoholism among the male workers. The contractors who lost on the wage front were able to siphon off the money through the sale of liquor. According to official figures the consumption of alcohol in Dalli-Rajhara increased one and a half times in 1976-1982 (20,000 to 36,000 proof litres). The license fees for the thekas went in the same period

from Rs 5.5 lakhs to almost Rs 1.4 million. This kind of alcoholism among the male workers also meant the domination of a lumpen-degenerate culture in the streets and wife-beating and destitution in the homes. Often it lead to death and destruction. In a major tragedy in the nearby Mahasumund large number of workers died after consuming adulterated liquor in 1981. It was against this background that the CMSS took up an anti-liquor campaign. The campaign and its effective implementation was made possible by the participation of women workers. Initially the movement faced the wrath of liquor contractors (who were not particularly distinguishable from mining and labour contractors!) and their political patrons. There have been some cases of assault on the activists in this period. But eventually the campaign enhanced the effective income of the workers and made a visible difference to the personal and social life of the township.

There are no such known instances of trade unions taking up a campaign against alcoholism, except the recent campaign undertaken by Singareni Karmika Samakhya in the Singareni Collieries of Telengana region. Later the CMSS took up a campaign for better health and hygiene. It established a hospital with 80 beds at the township. Known as Shahid Hospital in memory of those killed in the 1977 firing, the hospital today stands as a monument to the effort of the peoples' struggle in an otherwise ostensibly welfare state. CMSS also established six schools. It was these experiments of the union that attracted the attention of the liberal intelligentsia to the miners' movement. And they were made possible by the more basic struggle for economic and political rights by the workers. In 1976-77 the working hours used to be almost 16 hours at a stretch. Today they are within the legally stipulated eight hours. In 1976-77 the average daily wages for the piece-rate manual workers was Rs. 4 per day. Today they are Rs. 72 per day. The process by which these achievements were made possible was also the process by which workers were able to assert their "right to live with dignity"; that lofty non-enforceable, non-justiceable goal of the directive principles of our benign constitution. The struggle and stability of the miners' movement gave birth to a larger peoples' movement in the Chattisgarh region.

Chattisgarh is the name given to the seven eastern-most districts of Madhya Pradesh, comprising Raipur, Bilaspur, Durg, Rajnangaon, Raigarh, Sarguja, and Bastar. Chattisgarhi, a derivative of eastern Hindi is the common spoken language of the region, although many of the tribal groups (who constitute 30 to 80 percent of the population in these districts) retain and speak their own language. Geographically, a large part of the region lies in the valley of the Mahanadi and Sheonath rivers. The outlying regions are hilly and in the east form part of the Chotanagpur plateau (Sarguja and Raigarh) and to the south (central and south Bastar) lead on to the Deccan plateau. The valley area grows some of the best rice in the state thus giving the name dhangola (rice bowl) to the region. Rich mineral deposits of the region led to the establishment of public sector giants like Steel Plant (Bhilai), Bharat Aluminium Company and Thermal Power Corporation (Korba). But by its very nature and its requirements this kind of industrialisation led to diverse trends; the demand for educated and skilled labour (most of whom are migrants) and a huge demand for unorganised, casual, and contract labour, most of whom are local adivasis. Lack of irrigation facilities and persistent drought caused those traditionally engaged in agriculture to seek employment in urban areas. Thus they came to form part of the lower rungs

of the exploitative industrial structure in the region. The CMSS gradually took up the issues of these people both in urban and semi-urban settlements, and also in rural areas. Since most of the workers were first generation workers who had live contact with their villages, it was easier for the struggle to spread to the rural areas. Notable among them were she agitations against corruption in the grain bank in Boharbadi, the successful resistance offered to the mahant of Kabirpanthi temple who usurped the community land in Nadia. It was through these struggles that Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha was shaped. The morcha came to represent the aspirations of the people of an underdeveloped sub-region. From about 1979 it also began to celebrate Shahid Veer Narayan Diwas. Veer Narayan Singh was the leader of the first recorded peasant struggle of this region. He was executed by the British on the 19 December, 1857. Overtime the Mukti Morcha became a challenge to the political elite of the region.

Chattisgarh for a long time was part of the unchallenged fiefdom of the Shukla family in Madhya Pradesh politics. But over the years the kind of industrialisation and development that was pursued by the state has bred a new set of elite. Many of these are also tribals, Trade, liquor, mining and labour contractors formed the immediate base of this new generation of politicians. They were patronised by the then Chief Minister Arjun Singh in his factional battle within the Congress, against the Shukla family. Jhamuklal Bedia, a patron of most of the contractors and formerly a minister, used to be the hatchet man of Arjun Singh. This combine was actively engaged in thwarting the union and is believed to be involved in many assaults on the union conducted through private hoodlums or the police. The emergence of the Morcha made them all more insecure. Many attempts were made to ignore or suppress the Veer Narayan Divas, on 19 December, for a number of years. Then suddenly the state bestowed recognition to him. The peasant leader became a "freedom fighter". A great grandson was located and granted a pension. A hastily prepared official biography was published. Veer Narayan Singh's village was adopted for special programmes. Even a stamp was issued in his memory. But these crude attempts to appropriate people's history faced the same fate as the attempts to appropriate their wages. In the next assembly elections, in 1985, the Morcha's candidate won.

The unions affiliated to Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha gradually took roots in the adjoining areas. Among the most notable was the Rajanandagaon Kapada Mazdoor Sangh (RKMS). The textile mill at Rajanandagaon, established in 1896 was the oldest industrial unit in the region. From Shaw Wallace managing agency of the colonial period it changed many hands to eventually become part of the State owned National Textile Corporation (NTC) in 1972. The newly established union took up the issues of parity in wages with other NTC mills and workers participation in management. In July 1984 the workers went on indefinite strike. In a major incident on 12 September, 1984, police opened fire on the workers in which three workers were killed. Curfew was imposed. Large number of women participants were brutally assaulted. At least three women were raped by policemen. A number of union activists, including Niyogi were arrested. The strike continued altogether for over five months. Eventually in December some sort of settlement was arrived at.

The unions affiliated to CMMS in 1989-90 began taking shape in Durg-Bhilai region.

Most of the industrial units in the region are an offshoot of Bhilai Steel Plant. From Rajnandgaon at one end to the newly developed Urla industrial complex at Raipur the belt now has numerous units. The wage and working conditions in this belt are similar to those that prevailed in Dalli-Rajhara in the mid-seventies. Perhaps, even worse than those. For here the units are relatively small, making organisation difficult and the owners are the new generation industrialists making the opposition more intense and violent. The Morcha affiliated unions that took root in this belt include Pragatisheel Engineering Shramik Sangh (PESS), Chattisgarh Shramik Sangh, Chattisgarh Cement Shramik Sangh and Chattisgarh Mill Mazdoor Sangh. A massive rally held on 2 October 1990 was the major turning point in this movement. The union especially PESS, built up a steady demand for implementation of minimum wages, a living wage, adequate work safely and abolition of contract labour. The movement faced intense repression and violence both from the police and the hired hoodlums of the management. The focal point of the struggle in the last few months has been in the units owned by Simplex group. For practically over ten months the workers are on strike. A large number of workers were arrested under section 107 and section 151 CrPC, in blatant violation of law, in much the same way as these sections were used against the miners in 1977 which had eventually led to the firing incident. Finally on 4 February, 1991 Shankar Guha Niyogi himself was arrested under some old cases pending since years. Subsequently he was released on bail.

Sometime after his release Niyogi apprehended danger to his life and on 29 April, lodged a complaint with the police. He launched a complaint yet again on 4 July. No action was taken on these complaints. On the contrary the administration initiated externment proceedings against him under the MP Rajya Suraksha Adhiniyam, 1990 (S.5). The Act is modelled on the lines of notorious colonial law The Central Provinces and Berar Goondas Act, 1946. It violates many fundamental principles of independent India's constitution. A writ challenging the proceedings against Niyogi and the constitutional validity of the act was filed in the Jabalpur High Court. The Court issued a stay on the externment proceedings on 10 August. In the second week of September, Niyogi led a delegation of workers to Delhi where he met among others the President of India, the Prime Minister, leaders of all major political parties. In Bhopal he met the labour minister. After visiting Pipariya, Hoshangabad where activists of Samata Sangathan faced massive repression recently, he returned to Durg on 18 September. Ten days later in the early hours of 28 September, he was shot dead. Some unidentified assailants pumped six bullets through the window of his house in HUDCO colony, Bhilai.

The government initially announced a reward for those giving clues. It entrusted the investigation to B.B.S.Thakur, additional S.P.Durg under the overall supervision of A.N.Sinha, DIG. Mr.Thakur has earlier been known to have acted in a partisan manner and the union had complained against him on a number of occasions. And Mr.Sinha's name was explicitly mentioned by Niyogi among those who are possibly involved in the conspiracy to murder him. Niyogi expressed his apprehensions in a tape recorded message that was discovered after his death.

Independently Asha Niyogi, on behalf of the union, lodged a complaint with the

police naming ten people as being responsible for the murder. They include Moolchand Shah, Naveen Shah and Hirabhai Shah (Simplex), B.R.Jain and Arvind Jain (Bhilai Engineering Corporation), H.P.Khetawat (Bhilai Wires), Vijay Gupta and Kulbir Gupta (B .K .Engineering Corporation), Vinay Kedia and Kailashpathi Kedia (Kedia Distlleries). Three of the Simplex group have applied for anticipatory bail. Police have also arrested two local people who they claim were involved in the crime without specifying who commissioned them. Central government recently acceded to the demand for an investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation. Yet so far effectively no meaningful proceedings have been initiated against the main industrialists named in the complaint. Perhaps it may not be out of place here to mention that the BJP government has recently given an award of Rs. one lakh to the distillery owner Kailashpathi Kedia for 'promoting art and literature'!

As the news of Niyogi's assassination spread, thousands of workers gathered at the hospital in sector 9 where his body was kept. Industrial work in over 150 units in the region involving over 2 lakh workers came to a standstill. On 29 December the dead body was taken to Dalli-Rajhara where fourteen years ago, Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh had taken birth. Over one and a half lakh workers paid their homage at the funeral. Now that Niyogi was safely dead major political figures, parties and industrialists paid tribute to him. But sanitised and separated from the larger processes of post colonial development, the life and death of Shankar Guha Niyogi has no meaning and significance.

The post-colonial development in backward regions like Chattisgarh essentially results in the self-sustaining nature of underdevelopment. notwithstanding any development programme. This process continuously throws people out of their traditional occupations. And then they become, as casual and contract labour, the cannon fodder for the industrialisation, whether under the aegis of the public sector or private, under planning or market. And when people began to assert their rights, the economic and political parasites bred by this kind of development attempt to crush it with the help of the state This all too familiar process faced resistance in Chattisgarh. During its course the workers struggle transcended the much narrower traditional boundaries of trade union movement. Wage and working conditions, skills and semi-mechanisation, education health and environment have all become part of their agenda. The innovative features of this militant mass movement are informed by alternative visions of developmental processes. Yet it is confined to the constitutional boundaries imposed by a ruling elite against whom it is fighting. Directive Principles of the Constitution articulated with more clarity and forthrightness are its hallmark. Enforcement of labour legislations is the arena in which the battles are being fought. The movement pursued peaceful methods with remarkable patience in a political environment where violence has become the only language which the rulers can understand. Realisation and appropriation of democratic space within the threshold of the constitution is the essence of the Chattisgarh movement.lt is this process, spread over almost three decades, that changed the life and living of the people of the region.

Thus a young 18 year old migrant worker of Bhilai Steel Plant, thirty years later in that very same steel plant township, received a hero's farewell at the sector 9 hospital on 28 September this year. A sense of identity and a resolve to live life with dignity now mark the lives of

people of Chattisgarh. Shankar Guha Niyogi was a product of this struggle who in turn also shaped it. Arrested under preventive detention law in the seventies, under MISA during the emergency, under NSA in the eighties, under preventive clauses of CrPC time and again, he spent most of his time in jail without facing any formal charge leave alone trial. Even in those petty cases that were foisted on him, he was never convicted by any court of the land for any offence. His real crime was political and in an extended sense philosophical. In a true sense of the term he is "the froth on the waves" of peoples struggle. The way in which he was assassinated and the manner in which his killers are being protected indicates the crisis point at which the ruling elite themselves would negate the rule of law. What it portends about the times to come is a moot point. But democratic forces must realise that a commitment to the struggles of the people is the only way in which mourning for Shankar Guha Niyogi can acquire a meaning

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