

Remembering Niyogi

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On 28 September 1991, Bhilai, an industrial town in Madhya Pradesh (now in Chhattisgarh), became the focus of attention of the entire country. Shankar Guha Niyogi was fired on and killed by a hired assassin in the early hours of the morning while he was asleep.

At the time of his untimely death, Niyogi was one of the most prominent working class leaders in India and a legend in the people's movement in the Chhattisgarh region. Niyogi was killed hardly a fortnight after a delegation led by him met and submitted a memorandum signed by 50,000 workers to the President of India and the Prime Minister stating that workers and trade unionists in Bhilai and surrounding areas were being subjected to murderous assaults by private armies of industrialists and that their right to life was in jeopardy.

The life of Niyogi is the story of a revolution cut short. He was born in Bengal in 1943 and moved to Bhilai in 1961. He served the Bhilai steel plant as a worker and by 1964-65, became an active trade union organiser as well as the Secretary of the Black Furnace Action Committee. During this period, he established connections with various Leftist movements and revolutionary groups. The growing intensity of the political involvement of Niyogi led to the loss of his job. Subsequently, he left Bhilai and started working in the remote regions of Chhattisgarh. In this wandering phase of his life, Niyogi involved himself in several occupations, including fishery, forestry, cattle rearing, farm work and local struggle. These include the struggle of the Adivasis in Bastar against the Mongra reservoir and the people's struggle in Daihard for water. He became active in local community issues and started working for workers in the mines. Niyogi's work as an organiser of mine workers was bothersome to the establishment and he was arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) and imprisoned for 13 months during the Emergency period.

On his return from jail, Niyogi moved to Dalli Rajhara, founded the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS) and was its Organising Secretary for the last 14 years of his life. The CMSS was mostly engaged in organising contract labourers in over a hundred mines in the Chhattisgarh region and struggled for the implementation of statutory minimum wages and the eradication of contract labour. Niyogi was also actively engaged in the rehabilitation of bonded labourers following the guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court, which eventually led to the formation of the Chhattisgarh Gramin Shramik Sangh (CGSS).

The activities of Niyogi attained a broad base when he formed the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM), which addressed the wider problems of the region, especially those of the Adivasis, linking the exploitation of the region to the suppressed cultural identity of Chhattisgarh. CMM is a registered political party and an umbrella organisation that coordinates several affiliate unions in the entire Chhattisgarh region. The organisation is popularly known as Lal Hara Union (Red Green Union), due to the colours of its flag, that symbolise the partnership of industrial and agricultural labour.

Most of Niyogi's organising activities and struggles were carried out in the interior villages. By 1990, he shifted his area of work to Bhilai, which brought him into direct and sharp confrontation with extremely influential industrialists. In Bhilai, Niyogi focused on organising contract workers, who were facing injustice and acute exploitation from private industrialists. Thousands of workers responded to Niyogi's call and joined CMM and affiliated unions to fight for their cause. These efforts towards unionisation and the assertion of the rights of workers evoked a vindictive response among the industrialists, leading to the brutal murder of Niyogi by the industrial mafia, using a hired assassin.

Niyogi's assassination at a premature age was a major setback to the labour movement in the Chhattisgarh region. The cold-blooded murder sent shock waves throughout the nation. Within hours of his murder, thousands of workers gathered at the hospital where his body was kept. About 1,50,000 persons followed the funeral procession. Across the Chhattisgarh region, more than 2,00,000 workers stopped work that day, bringing about 150 industrial units to a standstill. While paying homage to their favourite leader, the CMM family — comprising workers and peasants — decided that his ashes would be immersed only when his killers were punished. Accordingly, the ashes of the veteran leader were kept at the Dalli Rajhara office of the CMM and a struggle for justice before the courts of law began.

A PROLONGED TRIAL WITH SWINGING VERDICTS

The murder of Niyogi was condemned strongly all over the country and the case was eventually handed over to the CBI for detailed investigation. The initial CBI investigations revealed the involvement of nine persons, including some industrialists of the Bhilai region in the murder. In light of this, after six years of trial, the Sessions Court in Durg awarded the death penalty to the hired assassin and life imprisonment to five others, including the industrialists. This judgment marks a milestone in working class history and the law relating to the labour movement in India, as it is the first time in history that a conspiracy by capitalists to kill a trade union leader was established in a court of law and the capitalists were convicted. Nevertheless, there was an appeal in the High Court against the widely welcomed judgment of the Sessions Court. After, about one year, in June 1998, the High Court exonerated all six accused for lack of evidence. The state government, the CMM and Niyogi's wife appealed against this controversial verdict in the Supreme Court. However, in its 20 January 2005 verdict, the Supreme Court also did not deviate substantially from the judgment of the High Court. The apex court confirmed the acquittal of all accused except for the hired killer, who was awarded life imprisonment. Thus, the 14-year-old struggle of the CMM for justice ended in an unpleasant verdict to those who loved Niyogi.

STRUGGLE WITH CREATION

Labelling Niyogi merely as a trade unionist would be understating his lifelong contribution to alternative politics and the people's movement. Niyogi emphasised the importance of social constructive work, which complements the efforts to improve working conditions. Besides leading thousands of iron-ore miners in the Chhattisgarh region in a struggle to improve their working and living conditions, he also catalysed their participation in a wide spectrum of socially constructive activities such as an anti-liquor campaign, a campaign for

the community arrangement of medical aid and a campaign for the education of children. As part of an extremely successful anti-liquor campaign, which closely involved the women members of CMSS and CMM, liquor shops were picketed and prohibition activities supported. Niyogi was equally concerned about environmental issues. His last article, 'Our Environment', published posthumously, testifies to his interest in and emphasis on the generation of environmental awareness.

Niyogi believed in the principle of *Sangharsh aur Nirman* (Struggle with Creation) and strove for development alternatives with people's participation. He was of the belief that the creation of enabling institutions and structures for enhancing the quality as well as the dignity of working-class communities must go hand in hand with the struggle for better working conditions and rights at the workplace. The influence of this vision is visible in the agenda of the CMM, which continues to run various social institutions such as schools, hospitals, canteens and libraries. A major achievement of the CMM in this direction is the setting up of the Shaheed Hospital at Dalli Rajhara, exclusively through the contributions of workers. The hospital, which has more than 60 beds and is equipped with modern medical facilities, is run by the union with the support of worker families and many professionals who voluntarily contribute their services. The Shaheed hospital also organises several health and medical camps benefiting the worker communities in the region. The school being run by the organisation (the Shaheed School) is also an exemplary initiative where workers' children are provided education and library facilities with the aid of volunteers and members of worker households. At Dalli Rajhara, CMM also runs a canteen throughout the year, which is open for all workers. These activities properly justify the alternative development paradigm and the strategy of the CMM-based on the principle *Virudh nahin vikalp* (Provide alternatives, not opposition).

More than a conventional trade unionist, Niyogi worked towards a new Chhattisgarh, free from starvation and exploitation. Niyogi's vision was not for a 'separate Chhattisgarh', but a 'new Chhattisgarh for a new India' (*Naya Bharat Ke Liye Naya Chhattisgarh*). He put forth the concept of alternative development based on people's participation and worked for a society where the downtrodden and poor labour can also attain a dignified livelihood. The CMM was among the first to voice the demand for a state of Chhattisgarh. It was a moment to be cherished for the followers of Niyogi when, after nine years of their leader's murder, on 1 November 2000, carved out from the tribal regions of Madhya Pradesh, the new state of Chhattisgarh was born. □□□

[Courtesy : Labour File]