

PURNENDU MAZOOMDER

Looking Back—The Gua Mines Conspiracy Case Sankar Ray

It was a sultry summer afternoon 52 years ago before the Tatanagar main jail gate. Several hundred Adivasis—almost all belonging to the ‘Ho’ tribe—were rushing in a highly-tensed up state of mind, as reflected in their face, towards the jail-gate. There were many women. Everyone took a small bunch of oleander flowers. A short-built, sun-burnt prisoner-on-trial was on the other side of the prison bar, one for whom were they worried about. “They believe if they could touch their favourite leader with the oleander blossoms, the enemies can’t do harm to the man whom god will save”, wrote communist historian, the late Gautam Chattopadhyay who was on the spot. Chattopadhyay, former editor, CPI Bengali morning paper, *Kalantar*, reminisced his enviably rare experience of encounter with a very different communist organiser. He was invited to speak at a cultural function commemorating the 98th birth anniversary at Tatanagar. The under-trial prisoner was their endearing leader and path-finder Purnendu Mazoomder, whom the media ignored. For, he showed the way of combining the struggle for better wages with the battle against social oppression, let loose on them by the corporate giants who influenced both the ‘jhoot press’ and bourgeois politics.

The meeting between Chattopadhyay and Mazoomder was a chance event. Barin Dey, communist trade union leader, associated with the pro-CPI union at the Tata Iron and Steel Company, suggested Chattopadhyay that he make an attempt to meet Mazoomder, falsely implicated in a criminal case—*Gua Mines Conspiracy Case*, as the police and district administration was not allowing anyone to meet him. The professor, taking advantage of being an academic, managed to meet Mazoomder but only for a few minutes. “Come to Tatanagar main jail gate tomorrow”. There he was a witness of solidarity of Ho sympathisers, determined to snatch him from those who were hell-bent to hang Mazoomder to death.

Mazoomder was a victim of conspiracy under the diktat of the then supremo of Indian Iron and Steel Company Limited, Sir Biren Mookerjee. Gua iron ore mines, not far away from Tata’s Noamundi iron ore mines, was owned by IISCO. After all, he stirred the hornet’s nest as he rose as the key man to organise the contract workers who were incredibly low-paid, let alone additional cut from their daily wage by goons, employed by the management so that they never dream of talking of trade union and social justice. They were regularly intimidated and tortured by the IISCO management who stopped at nothing in oppressing the Adivasis, particularly women. Purnendu Mazoomder began organising them in a trade union and argued with the subalterns that the struggle for better wage ought to go hand in hand with the battle for social and democratic rights.

“You can’t name any precious ore which is not available in Singhbhum belt (now Jharkhand-SR): iron, manganese, copper, mica, uranium, asbestos, china clay and what not”. Like ferocious tigers, plutocrats like the Tatas, Birlas, Dharamchand Jain, Karamchand Thapar and owners of Martin Burn (then managing agent of IISCO-SR) had grabbed them. The mines were in dense forests where those fabulously rich clamped

their jungle-regime. Anyone who protested were brutally killed—cut into pieces—had one's torso in the forest. "Young communist Purnendu Mazoomder was up against the medieval terror", wrote Chattopadhyay, several years after Purnendu Mazoomder's death on 22 April 1991, 122nd birth anniversary of one of his inspiring path-finders, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

It was no easy task to take on the extremely hostile situation. Purnendu Mazoomder plunged into trade unionism in 1952 straight from the student front of AITUC. He was then twenty-eight. He was appalled by the medieval barbarism—almost like slavery—in which the Ho, Munda, Oraon and other Santhal ethnic sub-nationalities had to live from hand to mouth. He decided to organise them primarily for their social identity and rights alongside the trade union task. Oppressors on the other side of the barricade saw the red and struck back with all their might, skullduggery and falsities. The Gua Mines Conspiracy Case was the expression of vengeance. Mazoomder's defence lawyer was intrepid Nageswar Prasad. He did not take a single rupee. "I am defending my son. How do you expect I shall charge fees on him", shot back Prasad at Chattopadhyay in 1958. The false criminal case did not hold water as Patna High Court acquitted him. Enthused by the moral triumph, Purnendu Mazoomder—people used to call him Mazoomder affectionately—set up the United Mineral Workers' Union(UMWU) under the All India Trade Union Congress with headquarters at Chakradharpur with branches at Gua, Chiria and Manoharpur—the region that has the best and the largest deposit of iron ores.

Meeting Purnendu Mazoomder in May 1981, Magsaysay laureate and Jnanpith award-winning fiction-writer Mahasweta Devi, wrote a piece—'Contract Labour or Bonded Labour' in *Economic and Political Weekly* (6-12 June,1981) portraying the dauntless defender of 'the wretched of the earth'. Describing him as "a class all by himself", the civil rights defender-cum-writer reposed great faith in Purnendu Mazoomder. "I am sure there are very few like him anywhere. He is a household name in the poor villages of Tamar, Bundu,Torpa, Khunti, Chakradharpur.. He is with the poor tribals in their struggle to gain forest rights in their fight with the factory and mine owners having prolonged lockouts, in their battle to cling to their land..... Short, animated and simple, this middle-aged man speaks many tribal languages... He starves with the tribals, stays with them, walks hundreds of miles to visit his men when they are in distress."

Little wonder, gun-trotted goons kidnapped Purnendu Mazoomder and dropped him from a road bridge in the mountainous area into the River Koyna. Fortunately, he survived despite serious wounds. But he was back into the battle with renewed vigour.

This writer's meeting with Purnendu Mazoomder was accidental. In the early 1980s, when this correspondent was involved in the reorganisation of the Indian People's Cultural Association, West Bengal branch of the National Committee of Indian People's Theatre Association, the IPCA general secretary of those days, Ratan Basu Majumdar, introduced many leftists with the unassuming man whose identity with the people he worked with was evident in his opening words. Prof Chattopadhyay introduced Purnendu to Ratan who in turn got this writer in touch with him. Every time he came he appealed for fund—whatever was possible and Ratan took initiatives. He used to write in post card. Half of the letter was always on the state of struggle. His knowledge on the Adivasi culture was astounding. Once he brought a three-page note on how the *Paharia* tribe in Purulia was threatened with extinction. When asked, 'Why we should support the demand for Jharkhand statehood when the leadership is with Jharkhand party of one or

the other name, knowing full well their history of betrayals, beginning with Major Jaipal Singh'. Pat came his reply, "I have no illusion about leaders like Shibu Soren although some others in the ultra-Left are enamoured about Shibu. One day I am sure his real character will be exposed. But that has nothing to do with the demand for statehood for Adivasis. It's a legitimate demand and after a long debate inside the CPI, the Bihar state council endorsed this demand." He was indeed prophetic. The CPI(M) never supported statehood-demand anywhere.

He had relations with the late Siddhartha Roy, young journalist and a singer, who had a tragic death. He killed himself in the USA. His wife too committed suicide a few months before his self-annihilation. Purnendu told Siddhartha that he had to rush to Calcutta to see the lawyer who saved him from being hanged to death. He was referring to Nageswarji who was then in the terminal stage of cancer. The tragic similarity was that Purnenduda too died of kidney cancer in 1991.

His comrade-in-arms was Laru Zonko, an illustrious leader who braved all types of repression. She joined the CPI and fought as a CPI candidate from Singhbhum.

The late Somesh Dasgupta, special correspondent, *Business Standard* daily, and one of the first recipients of Statesman Award for Rural Reporting told this writer that Purnendu helped him most importantly in doing a series of expose stories on the plight of Adivasi women in brick kilns even in West Bengal.

Xavier Dias, a civil rights activist in Jharkhand, described Purnendu Mazoomder as "our hero" in an e-mail message. He mentioned about Larudi as Mazoomder's brave partner. When the civil society and Left, outside the moribund politics of official communist parties, are up against the conspiracy against the Adivasis in India in the name of punishing the Maoists, it is time to remember the rare-breed leader of the oppressed Adivasis- one who had envisioned the imperative for a new battle thrust upon eight million people by the neo-liberal global order. Sadly true, very little is written—if at all—about the historic victory of the subalterns among toilers in the Gua Mines Conspiracy Case and its hero. Someday, historians will chronicle the historic legal battle. □□□