

No Way to Unite Theory and Practice Ismail Chaudhury

Labour is not on the Maoist agenda. The Maoist project is essentially a peasant project and their new democratic revolution is basically aimed at empowering peasants by way of making them land-owners, rather small peasant owners and allowing them to decide their destiny through village-level peasant committees under the exclusive sway of party. Incidentally, in today's Indian context these peasants—the chief constituency of the Maoists—are tribals and some non-tribal communities having close organic and cultural bonds with the tribals. The mahatots of junglemahal are not tribals but they have no problem in identifying their interests with the tribals. The Maoist apathy towards existing institutions, including labour management institutions has been an area of criticism for long yet nothing has changed in their strategy since the seventies. Legalism is forbidden in their revolutionary dictionary. For one thing one of the constituents of the CPI (Maoist) in pre-merger days—MCC—never tried to organise legal trade unions even when there was no ban on their outfit. They used to participate in some trade union activities without bothering about registration and other related legal matters. Their plan was to recruit some cadres from advanced workers and send them to villages to organise agrarian revolution. CPI (ML) gave the call to boycott trade unions but MCC boycotted them much earlier. In a sense they banned themselves right from the beginning while moving in a conspirational way and advocating ultra-secrecy.

But even the peasant question as presented by the Maoists sometimes betrays the Indian reality. Too much dependence on guns coupled with blind imitation of the Chinese model of the 1920s and '30s seems to have complicated the situation much to the disadvantage of the toilers. Not that all states in India have 3-tier panchayet system but where it is working the Maoists look disinterested to effectively utilise panchayets even tactically. Corruption is endemic in this system and there is no guarantee that in a new democratic system there would be no corruption and nepotism. As the Maoist party has decided to remain underground throughout the new democratic revolution period, it cannot function openly among workers. Nor can it build trade unions under the party-centric central trade unions as most parties do. Strange it may seem, one of the top MCC leaders in the seventies even preferred guerilla action to open mass activities by students because of mounting state repression. In truth what is said about working class leadership and worker-peasant alliance in their programme cannot be translated into action, so long as they remain totally underground. It's an academic formulation borrowed from Marxist text. Without a common enemy and common programme of action the possibility of worker-peasant alliance developing as a pivot of new democratic revolution seems remote. Also, Indian working class is a complex entity, with multi-layered class and sub-class differentiation within its own ranks. As it is not homogeneous labour organising always remains difficult because copy-book style doesn't work and it demands innovative approach all the time. All the established central trade unions are interested in wage-bargaining and that too not in its totality. Their charter of demands is so stereotyped that it can hardly motivate workers for a bigger action. Not that they don't educate workers politically. They do, occasionally, in their own

fashion and limitation. But their efforts are aimed at educating them as to how to maintain the status quo. They discourage workers to question the all pervasive authority of multinational companies. Even they don't ask workers to become nationalist when multinationals do everything against national interests. Of course there is electoral politics. In many cases workers show utter opportunism as they change political allegiance and trade union affiliation as well with the change in the ruling dispensation. Educating workers from outside which the Maoists are trying to do, is a meaningless exercise. Unless their demands and agitation are articulated in a constructive way, incorporating aspirations and practical need beyond wage revision and enhanced dearness allowance, the vanguard syndrome will remain a concept as it has been all through the communist movement.

The Chinese Revolution too was essentially a peasant revolution—it was peasant power. The progressive and leadership role of workers has all along been emphasised in party literature and deliberations in party congresses, not in the fields and factories. And in India despite advancement of industrial activities on a bigger scale compared to other backward countries, workers in their traditional mould, have very little role to play in furthering revolution, democratic or otherwise. Here all communist parties, including the Maoist outfits, are middle class parties preaching classical Marxist idea of egalitarian society, rather socialist society, according to their own sectarian world outlook and belief and group interests. True, Maoists are better ideological dreamers but then real world politics is something different.

Right now Indian mining industry is under fire as it cannot make its gigantic leap despite massive inflow of foreign investments without displacing thousands of poor tribals and scheduled caste people who are again marginal peasants and forest dwellers. They are resisting the onslaught of mining barrons, sometimes violently under the influence of the Maoists without having any sympathetic and solidarity support from the miners toiling in no less oppressive conditions elsewhere. Old mining centres in Jharkhand and Chattisgarh (formerly part of undivided Madhya Pradesh) are as old as the early phase of British rule. But workers in these mines are under the sway of reactionary trade unions controlled by ruling and opposition parties. At no stage of multinational onslaught they showed any moral conscience to oppose new mining deals. If the Maoists think they could win the hearts and minds of these workers simply by exhibiting fire power they will soon discover to their dismay how their approach missing the target.

The late Shankar Guha Niyogi became a legend during his life time because of his alternative model of labour organising. The miners of Dalli-Rajhara today look reluctant about the struggle by their fellow tribals in Dantewada and elsewhere. They don't think it is their own struggle. Jharkhand is one troubled region where Maoists have been carrying on their violent campaign for almost three decades without having any appreciable impact on workers working in dozens of big and small mines in Noamundi, Jamda, Gua, Kiriburu, Barabil areas. They are under sway of different central trade unions affiliated to different mainstream parties. In effect the Maoist movement in Jharkhand and Chattisgarh is against opening new mines while workers in the running mines do not feel the same way. All central trade unions are in the mining sector and they have nothing to say about the government's mining policy and selling out of natural resources at throwaway prices. But in the yester years, more precisely in the fifties the miners of the same Jharkhand region (undivided Singhbhum District) showed exemplary political acumen in defeating the employers' machinations to destroy labour organising.

In many ways what Shankar Guha Niyogi tried to implement was partially implemented by Purnendu Mazoomder in organising Gua-Jamda miners by bringing in social aspects in trade union movement.

Organised sector workers are too conservative to protect their sectional interests, despite emerging threat to their job security, which is being multiplied with every passing day because of bankruptcy of the unions they belong to. In recent times they are too defensive to lose whatever remains of their bargaining power. Then the Maoists have failed to devise any suitable organisational framework to organise the unorganised millions. What sporadically sprouts here and there in the shape of “struggle committee” is too localised and issue-based to deliver the goods.

Indian Trade Unions, irrespective of their party affiliation and political colour are so bureaucratised that leadership works as a brake on workers’ militancy as it was nakedly exposed in case of Bombay textile workers’ strike in the eighties. Objective conditions created new leadership and new unions. True, the ever changing pattern of industrial landscape is not conducive to old methods of collective bargaining and unions in traditional industries have lost much of their biting power as they used to have even in the sixties. Yet some of traditional industries like railways, Port & Dock, airways, tele-communications remain the vital key sectors, despite dwindling workforce, that could paralyse the economy at a short notice. Without their active support no revolution can be successful. So long as workers in vital areas remain under the sway of rightist ideology, the Maoists have no chance to make their presence felt in urban areas. Too much dependence on middle class youth back-fired in the seventies. If the same tradition continues unabated industrialists have nothing to worry about. In those turbulent days even Birla expressed sympathy for the naxalite youths.

Effectiveness of labour organising through TU is directly proportional to production loss and less profit. Factory owners only understand the language of production and profit. If they cannot openly organise labour with a Maoist tag, they can always do it without flaunting a Maoist banner. Not that naxalities who have said ‘farewell to arms’ are not trying to penetrate labour movement. But they have been trying to imitate the culture and style of established TUs only to find workers’ inertia to desert old unions. CPI(ML) Liberation has a central trade union with very little mass appeal among workers even at regional level—it is not growing horizontally either. If anything Indian workers are abysmally apolitical, they only react during elections. Though they are part of society and in most cases they have peasant background, and yet they seldom take to streets denouncing an end to police brutality in villages which still serve as shock absorbers when they face lock-out and retrenchment.

What is urgently needed is to evolve and offer an alternative model of labour organising. After Shankar Guha Niyogi in Central India and Datta Samant in Western India nothing new emerged on the labour front. It is the same story of replicating the old form only to get further marginalised in the process. □