

Calcutta Notebook DRC

Kolkata might have shown more satisfaction in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize (tainted as it is by association with names like George Bush and Henry Kissinger) to Liu Xiao-Bo, who dedicated it to the Tien An Men martyrs, from his Chinese prison. A participant in the Tien An Men demonstrations, Liu was an author of 'Charter '08', a charter of demands for human rights in China, published on December 10, 2008, the sixtieth anniversary of the declaration of universal human rights by the UN. This was his crime, styled 'spreading subversion against the state power'.

This correspondent is reminded of 1989 and his attendance of the only demonstration in Kolkata against the Tien An Men square massacres, a small street meeting at Sealdah station, organized by Gautam Sen and other friends.

When Charu Mazumdar said that all subsequent revolutions in the world would be part of the Cultural Revolution—most of his followers and critics failed to understand him. Apart from Charu Mazumdar, Indian communists, by and large, have refused to acknowledge that the Cultural Revolution calls for a change in communist practice, today and everywhere. The unilateral concept of the party leading the people was first put into a dialectical form in the Cultural Revolution by making it confront its opposite, —the party as an instrument of the people in making revolution (with the people's right to cleanse the instrument if it accumulated grease and grime). No wonder all bureaucratic parties oppose the Cultural Revolution.

For Mao ZeDong and the Chinese Left, this dialectics was a life and death issue, though it had visited Lenin, too, and cast a shadow over his final years, as he lost his health. This is the unlikely theme of "Sreenwantu (Hearken) comrades", a recent stage production in Bangla, directed by Bibhas Chakraborty, on the basis of the Russian play *Blue Horses on Red Grass* (Mikhail Shatrov, 1979). The director has shown an advanced mastery over the dramatic form and stage-craft to deliver a play whose entire content is ideological-political and yet which builds up a tension which never slackens, thereby keeping a stranglehold on the viewer's attention. The artist in the director carefully controls the ideology to ensure that the play never becomes didactic or preachy. A tour de force.

The acting is very good and Shyamal Chakraborty brings off an impressive performance as Lenin in 1920, health slowly running down after the poisoned bullet he stopped in 1918. The civil war is drawing to a close, and negotiations are on with the government of Poland after the Polish aggression.

Apart from some light-hearted, but politically correct, banter about sex and marriage, during a family scene with friend Clara Zetkin, wife Nadya Krupskaya, and sister Maria Ulyanova, there are three separate but closely related political strands in the play—

*Bureaucratic bossing over art and culture and the freedom of the artist,
Bureaucratization of the Soviets and the party cadre, even old bolsheviks,
The unity and conflict between the workers and the peasants.*

The first problem is highlighted through an orientation meeting of young hopefuls of the cultural set and a party expert on culture. The expert's opinions are rigid and even crude, as in his criticism of Anna Akhmatova.

The third problem is expounded through the earthy comments of a peasant in conversation with Lenin. The avoidance of a relation of tribute in the form of a compulsory mopping up of the peasant's surplus (or even more) for the sake of the townsfolk makes the peasant think, 'the workers (and communists) are not such bad people after all'. Lenin tries to convince a "Left-wing" journalist that it would be risky for Soviet power, which is founded on the unity of workers and peasants, to squeeze the peasants in favour of the workers.

But, the main concern of the play is the second problem, the bureaucratization of the Soviets and the party. A party member is found to have conspired with his department to prevent streamlining of jobs, as advised by the central leadership of the party, by concocting reports. Not only is the official clearly involved in a scam, Lenin has a hard time convincing him that, objectively, this was what the mess created by him and his colleagues amounted to, the official failing to understand what was wrong in their lies and misdirection regarding data and its interpretation in order to preserve the numerical strength of the department.

Then, there was the new recruit to the bureaucracy, the girl who knew parts of political tracts, including some speeches of Lenin, by heart, but who thought that the death of a peasant's horse was a matter of no consequence.

At the beginning of the play, Lenin is shown turning down an invitation to address the conference of the communist Youth League, but as he encounters and sees the process of alienation of the Soviets and the party from the people, he starts worrying and, at the end of the play, one finds him addressing the young people with passion and force. In the play, nobody hears what he says to them, but history recorded his speech, which, however, reflects nothing more fundamental than worries and criticism, for he didn't believe at the time that, with a party leadership committed to the proletarian revolution, there was still a real danger of capitalist restoration and, so, he did not elaborate his worries and criticism into a political line which could bring back the people into the reckoning of power. □□□