

Calcutta Notebook

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TWO FASCINATING BOOKS before me—*Ei Samayer Dolil O Anyanyo and Haate Khori*. The books published from Kolkata in 2011, are written by Ashim Chattopadhyay. The first is a collection of newspaper post-edits mainly on political subjects, ranging in time from 1993 to 2011. The second is an autobiographical sketch of boyhood. Here, today, there will only be space enough to talk about the first.

Ashim Chattopadhyay, Kaka, is well-known as a firebrand leader of the Naxalite movement and the CPI(ML) of the sixties. The post-edit series in question brings to the fore his command over language, written and spoken. His Bangla prose is flowing and resonant, uncluttered by too much ornament, yet facile and crystalline.

The times were turbulent in the east. The old communist movement renounced and again embraced by Kaka was floundering with its capitalist baggage, and the CPI(M), the focus of his attention after the Naxalite episode, had initiated a characteristically arrogant and overbearing programme of snatching land, even prime agricultural land bearing three to four crops a year, from farmers, for industrial use. While this was a predictable outcome of some 30 years in government by *sarkari* communists, the Naxalite policy of individual killing of "class enemies", opponents and competitors had fractured and almost decimated the party of revolution in Bengal. The basic revolutionary ideas thrown up by Naxalbari had, however, entered the universe of discourse of the people, and from the struggles of the forest-dwellers and peasants in Andhra, Chattisgarh, Dandakaranya, Bihar and Jharkhand, emerged the CPI(Maoist) as a successor to the CPI(ML).

In the mean-time, in the name of globalization and reform, the Congress had taken up a policy of selling the country's wealth of water, forests, land and minerals to domestic and foreign monopolists. Its national competitor, the BJP and, in fact, all electoral parties of the "Left", Right, and Centre were in general agreement about the inevitability of this loot. In Bengal, however, Mamata Banerji was building a strongly populist party, the Trinamul Congress, and she bid for and won the leadership of the struggle to overthrow the fascist misrule of the CPI(M). Because of its constancy of orientation in this regard, the TMC rapidly grew from a break-away splinter of the Congress to the major opposition party and finally formed the government in Bengal, trouncing in the elections both the CPI(M) axis and the Congress, an electoral ally of the TMC.

After his release from prison, Kaka gravitated towards and finally joined the left front, for building, as he said, a front against communalism and authoritarianism. There followed a period of a love-hate relationship, till he came round to the view that the democratic left he wanted could only flourish after defeat of regimented party rule, by which he understood the so-called democratic centralism practised within parties like the CPI(M). This regimentation,

Kaka concluded, not only prevented clear-sighted and down to earth decision making within the party, but led also to a high-handed rule by fiat of the party, the people being treated as slaves to carry out party commands.

Intimately connected to this alienation from the people was the question of class struggle. From 1977 to 1985, according to our protagonist, when some good programmes like land reform, operation barga, and panchayati raj were undertaken, class struggle remained relevant. After 1987-88, class struggle was buried and the politics of the CPI(M) party became oriented towards electoral adjustment. While he felt that the content of class struggle in the countryside was shifting from wage increases and increases in cultivator's share of harvest to a new agenda, signified by a clamour for access of the poor to improved public works like health, education, roads, he underlines the importance of grasping the class question firmly when setting out on the democratic path.

Ever ready to practice what he preached, Ashim Chattopadhyay, after his disillusionment with the CPI(M)-led "Left Front", even fought (and lost) an election with the electoral symbol of the TMC! Of course, Mamata Banerji's policy of complete personal control over the party, with assimilation and desiccation of once independent leaders, soon catapulted Kaka out of her environs.

Summing up this ephemeral affair, he writes. "It is my clear stand that narrow partisan control arising from regimentation of the party, wrong ideas on development and such subjects are important in the agenda of elections to the state assembly. For this reason, many democratic leftists took a stand in favour of the TMC in the assembly elections of 2006, and will again do the same in the polls of 2011 with the aim of bringing about a political changeover in West Bengal." (ABP, 7.4.09) A democratic left alternative demands the ouster of the regimented (ruling) party from power. We united with Mamata Debi in 2006 from the realisation that a small party like ours could not remove a regimented party on our own. The condition set by Mamata Debi for this unity was that I should contest the elections from the Beliaghata centre. In accordance with fulfilling our own targets, I stood from Beliaghata centre as a CRLI candidate put up by the TMC." (ABP, 18.11.10.)

What thinks Kaka about revolution nowadays? His position can be well understood from his critique of Kanu Sanyal on the one hand and the Maoists on the other, 'in my opinion the (present) crisis is a crisis of theory... Without a theoretical solution of the problems on the question of socialism, on questions of revolutionary strategy and tactics, on questions of party structure, communist revolutionaries cannot be united.... Kanu-da believed that Naxalbari has solved basically the problems of strategy and tactics of the revolution. So, his slogan was "Build more Naxalbaris." "Build bigger Naxalbaris--so that the lighting force can be shifted if necessary. I could not agree....

....Confidence of the people in the parliamentary system after winning success against Indira's authoritarianism using the electoral platform, increased continually, till the parliamentary fight became so important that parties without parliamentary relevance lost the

trust of the people. Kanu-da had no problem in utilising the parliamentary fight if necessary, but he could not sanction any programme for expanding the mass base using the parliamentary system or its possibilities.”

He agrees with Kanu Sanyal’s criticism of the maoist movement on the following points ;

Side-lining the class struggle and the agrarian programme, while declaring war directly against the state without taking the responsibility of developing class struggle ;

Reliance on terrain (say, forests), and modern weapons ;

Unrestrained killing in the name of class struggle ;

Murder of poor adivasi or dalit members of the CPI(M) in the name of fighting revisionism, after marking them as police spies.

Ashim Chattopadhyay’s critique of the maoist position can be summarized under three heads :

Lack of a democratic outlook—the success of a people’s war depends on freeing the shackles on people’s self-activity, initiative and creativity, —such liberation is inseparable from a democratic outlook and pluralism.

Rejection of the parliamentary system—people have repeatedly demonstrated change of government by voting them out—call it confidence in voting if you like it, illusion if you don’t, but how will you integrate with the people if you reject as useless something they are already using?

Copying of Chinese history instead of analyzing Indian reality. Base areas of red political power in China were a phenomenon closely linked to semi-colonial territory division and re-division among warlords allied to different imperialists. The question of base areas in India needs analysis and is not a given.

What few people of the left will find palatable is the presentation of Jyoti Basu and Subhash Chakaborti as icons of the new democratic left to be. It is difficult to overlook Jyoti Basu’s single-minded fight inside the party for replacing the basic aim of social transformation through class struggle by the formation of a coalition government at the centre through electoral class collaboration. The growing subservience of the CPI(M) to big capital received momentum from Jyoyi Basu’s pitiful faith in the never forthcoming jobs from investment of big capital. Jyoti Basu and his followers, like their economists, never understood modern capitalism and jobless investment.

Kaka is, no doubt, aware that a democratic left alternative sans class struggle is just a camp follower of big capital, as has been shown again and again in the European labour movement. There the democratic left was led by the labour aristocracy. Nearar home people witnessed an Indian version of the democratic left—Lohia socialism, led by caste overlords, a ferocious cross-breed of the kulak and the jotedar. The million rupee question is which class will lead the democratic left? Subhash Chakraborti had an unequivocally frank answer—the ‘modhyabitto’—middle class. However different may their styles of functioning seem, ideologically, Subhash Chakra-borti and Mamata Banerji were brother and sister under the skin. A democratic left led

by the working class? Now that would be a formidable opponent of big capital. Neither Jyoti Basu nor Subhash Chakraborti, in spite of their posts in the CITU, would have liked to be associated with such a beast.

All men and women are strange mixtures of opposites which propel them on their life-path. Kaka, the votary of democratic leftism, worried about how to increase democracy inside left parties, and how to use the parliamentary system to increase the mass base of the left, cannot help worrying also about red bases and whether a country-wide flood-tide of political struggle and a sweeping breadth of workers' and peasants' movements may create a situation where red bases may survive. Or, as capitalist relations proliferate, what will be the issues on which the peasantry will join the revolution?

A great historical accident in favour of the CCP was that it never split before the revolution, so that, nobody's words and nobody's experience could be dismissed as alien or extra-mural—external to the movement and the party! □