

'RED STAR OVER INDIA'

An Hour with Jan Myrdal

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HE HAS AN EXCRUCIATING sciatic pain, had an open heart surgery and problematic prostate at 85, but all this doesn't stop him moving around to keep his intellectual clock ticking away. His epistemological coverage is spellbinding—politics, linguistics, sexuality and pornography. He wrote several books, covering a diverse area and among those 30-plus books, one is a biography of the famous Swedish playwright Johan August Strindberg.

Little wonder, he has immense knowledge, thanks to his linguistic flexibility.

And that's Jan Myrdal whose life is an epitomisation of what the Latin dramatist and philosopher Terence (born: 195 BC, died 159 BC) *Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto* (I am a man, and reckon nothing human alien to me), rephrasing which Karl Marx famously said, "I am human and nothing humane is alien to me, the crux of his libertarian principles, trampled by all official communist parties from the very beginning of the 20th Century. His father Gunnar was a Nobel laureate in economic sciences and mother Ava got Nobel Peace Prize, Jan joined the Communist Party of Sweden in 1939 but left the party following split in the party.

Flanked by Jnanpeeth laureate Mahasweta Devi and leftist political commentator and author Sumanta Banerjee at an interactive session under the aegis of *Frontier* weekly on 28 January at the Kolkata Book Fair, Jan made no bones of his pessimism about the 'official Left' in Europe. Their influence and 'acceptability' has been waning and they are 'paid and fostered' by the government.

He reiterated what he wrote "India has never been 'non-violent'. Neither from the rulers or the ruled. As a movement against the rulers non-violence gave rise to a library of books but it was not non-violence that forced the British to (partially) leave. The oppressed masses have always been struggling."

While disagreeing with those who think Fascism is lurking within the Indian polity—endorsing the definition on fascism—"open terrorist dictatorship of finance capital" (Georgy Dimitrov), Jan admitted, you have a "complex and very difficult situation" with democratic space intact. But he stated in his treatise in an ingenuous tone, "The rich in India are getting richer. 36 billionaires constitute a third of India's GDP. They are disgustingly rich and behave like other such ruling classes always have. They are morally upset when the oppressed and starving demand their right. They talk with horror in their Parliament and their press if the victims defend themselves when private goondas or regular forces of the ruling class—Salwa Judum and Green Hunt—kill, rape and torch to establish law and order."

Nonetheless, essentially an incorrigible optimist, the Swedish author and activist informed about the new endeavour in the European arena : “We have been trying to build an international movement—a movement of solidarity in Europe. The crisis is deepening in the industrialized countries”.

The previous day Jan released his book, *Red Star Over India*, English translation of the original in Swedish, *Röd stjärna över Indien*, published by Kolkata-based Setu Prakashani. It’s a narrative of his visit to Bastar areas where the class struggle goes on with the cadres of Communist Party of India (Maoist) on the one side and the Chhatisgarh state government on the other side under the rightwing Hindutvavadi Bharatiya Janata Party that has an bonhomie on medieval repression on the oustee Adivasis, caressed by the Maoists in forest areas with the Indian National Congress-led United Progressive Alliance-II government at the centre. He and his Indian friend, a well-known civil rights activist, Gautam Navlakha were invited to Dandakaranya for discussions with the CPI (Maoist) general secretary Ganapathi aka Mupalla Laxman Rao, available polit bureau members and leading cadres who took the two around the Bastar region. They saw how situation “was much different from that of 1980. The party is an All-India party and a revolutionary and democratic state organization, the *Janatana Sarkar*—the people’s power—is step by step supplanting the state organization of the ruling class”. “I have not translated this and so I am unable to judge how good it is but I welcome every criticism, directly written to me or the publisher”, he quipped. “Your crisis is also very deep”, he said addressing the participants both on the 27 and 28 January. He was replying to a question about the future of Left as a sequel to the shrinking strength of industrial workers and swelling of unorganized workers. “You have to have a leadership” with official Left having no role to play, he felt.

He has lived in India, Iran, Afghanistan and the US. His first wife, Nadya, was a Bengali. His latest title reveals how he was maltreated by the British police who refused to let him meet his Bengali wife and parents-in-law Kali and Paula Ghosh in 1950. “My father-in-law was a very renowned journalist and a correspondent of Blitz weekly.”

Jan cautioned again copying the Soviet, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cuban or any model for revolution. Instead of trying to ape the Soviet, Chinese or Latin American model, ‘Develop your own’, he opined. But he suggested that a ‘broad alliance or front’ be formed. “This is the crucial time to emphasize on practice and organization”, he added.

At the interactive session, Mahasweta Devi, reiterated her work among a denotified tribe in the Jangalmahal. The abject poverty and absence of essential amenities like water, healthcare, sanitation and roads, and the hardships they face in their daily life beggar description. “The problems in Jangalmahal cannot be solved from outside. To do so, one needs to integrate with the people,” she said while commenting on the on-going government bid to take on insurgency through firepower on the one hand and development blitzkrieg on the other. □□□