

Learning from Com. Niyogi in the struggle for socialism in the 21st century

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Com. Niyogi as a highly original political activist: How to understand his contributions

- While he was a staunch Marxist, Comrade Shankar Guha Niyogi cannot be easily slotted into specific ideological categories of the Left. It will not be possible to evaluate his highly original political approach, by reducing our view of him through use of a single, narrow ideological lens. Niyogi was undoubtedly an original; others have already written about this, hence I will not repeat what is already well known. While specific labels like 'Marxist' are applicable as starting points, these alone would be inadequate for capturing the richness of his perspective and contributions. The implication of this 'unconventionality' of Niyogi which derived from his deeply original political approach is that we cannot understand his legacy through set formulas and categories; we must be willing to look beyond conventional frameworks if we seek to learn from him meaningfully.
- Niyogi's perspective was manifested more through his work than through his writing. Hence trying to assess his approach solely by examining his written outputs is insufficient; deep appreciation of the concrete social processes which he led and shaped is essential to fully understand his innovative contributions. This may be one reason why activists who have not directly worked with or interacted with Niyogi might need some exposure to the nuances and features of the diverse movements and initiatives which he led in his lifetime, to fully grasp and appreciate his legacy.
- As a trade union leader, Niyogi focussed primarily on organising mine workers, industrial contract workers and other masses of workers (mostly contractual and informal sector workers), combined with efforts at alliance building with peasants and other sections of working people in Chhattisgarh. However his political perspective transcended trade unionism, and was much broader and national in scope. There was a *powerful dialectic between his very concrete and grounded work as a mass organiser, and his expansive, futuristic vision as a Marxist revolutionary*. This creative dialectic, which has been beautifully summarised through the caption 'ज़मीन पर खड़े होकर, जिन्होंने छुआ आसमान' needs to be grasped in entirety to appreciate Niyogi's contributions. Focussing on only one or the other aspect of this dialectical relationship would be insufficient.
- As we know, Niyogi's life was tragically cut short in 1991 by a mercenary assassin who was hired by Bhilai industrialists, backed by their reactionary political henchmen. From various sources we know that during this period he had initiated dialogue with diverse movements across the country, to explore development of an alternative socio-political process. Hence while we can only imagine the further directions which this work might have taken if his remarkable life would have continued, we also now have the collective task of piecing together the larger political implications of his unfinished work.
- Now 30 years have passed since Niyogi's life was brutally snuffed out by class enemies, and as we know these three decades have drastically reshaped India at all levels. The

Neoliberal policy framework was recently initiated in 1991 and working people had just begun to grapple with this highly predatory phase of capitalism, when Niyogi was snatched from us. In the subsequent 30 years this exceptionally exploitative and corrosive avatar of capitalism has not only been imposed across the country in all sectors and at all levels, since 2014 this has assumed an especially aggressive and destructive form. This is characterised by violent imposition of neofascist hegemony over society and polity, combined with ruthless drive for corporate capture of all sectors of the economy. Given this situation, while soundly basing ourselves on Niyogi's approach developed mostly during the 1980s and early 1990s (which was evolving and incipient), we now face the challenge of developing the myriad implications of this approach in the current, significantly changed setting of the early 21st century, thirty years down the line.

Today it appears definitely necessary to reiterate what Niyogi wrote, and to recall the remarkable social actions that he led, but this may not be sufficient to move forward. We must now also take up the challenge of collectively continuing his legacy of innovative revolutionary thinking, which can inform transformative action. Such a task, which is both demanding and exciting, falls upon all of us who seek to carry forward Niyogi's political heritage.

Part – I: Elaborating upon some of Com. Niyogi's contributions in the Indian context

Moving ahead with this brief background, here an attempt is made to elaborate upon some of the key political concepts which could be interpreted from Niyogi's legacy. This is a small addition to an already existing significant body of writing on Niyogi's work and ideas, since much has already been written about Niyogi's legacy by senior activists in the last few decades. There are *two major risks in attempting to comment on Niyogi's political legacy*. The first risk in dealing with this legacy is that of being repetitive, of restating what has already been written by others, who have perhaps made these points already, perhaps even in more articulate form. I hope I will be forgiven for this, yet it may be accepted that there is some value in reiterating important ideas, if they continue to remain relevant. The second risk is that one may be accused of 'transgressing' the legacy – of reading too much into ideas which were expressed perhaps in summary or evolving form in the past, and are today open to diverse interpretations. There is a risk of being accused of 'inserting' interpretations, which might be contested by others. I fully accept both the 'risk of saying too little that is new' and the 'risk of saying too much that is new'. However in the interests of taking forward Niyogi's highly creative legacy, I propose that the following interpretations be placed for discussion, in the spirit of taking forward broader debate and development of such a discourse.

- **Unpacking and expanding 'Sangharsh aur Nirman' – forging comprehensive counter-hegemony of working people**

I will argue that this widely appreciated and well-known slogan, which has frequently been used as an encapsulated representation of Niyogi's politics, is an extremely rich concept which is pregnant with deeper meanings which we need to further unpack and elaborate. The conventional interpretation (which is of course entirely valid at certain level) is that mass

movements should combine their ongoing struggles with development of people-based alternative initiatives in various sectors (like health care, education, environment etc.). The work of CMSS in the 1980s was of course an outstanding example of this approach. A very wide range of activists and ordinary people have been positively inspired by not only the historic mass struggles conducted by CMSS and related unions under the CMM banner, but also the remarkable, diverse creative initiatives like Shaheed hospital.

Moving further, I feel that these visible manifestations of 'Sangharsh aur Nirman', important as they are, also reflect a deeper and broader political perspective which was central to Niyogi's politics. Even though this was perhaps not articulated in these terms, there was a ***vision of comprehensive counter-hegemony of organised working people, linked with progressive development of parallel people's power***, which inspired the combination of 'Sangharsh aur Nirman'. In my opinion it is of secondary relevance whether Niyogi ever read or quoted from Gramsci or not. Because his version of counter-hegemonic politics encompassing all spheres of social life emerged primarily from his own unique, practically rooted political trajectory and experiences, and was not dependent on textual references.

While saying this, we need not pigeon-hole Niyogi purely as a 'Gramscian' since there were many other aspects of his praxis (some of which I have attempted to outline below) which all together contributed to his incredibly rich and deeply grounded political perspective. However, we might acknowledge that 'Sangharsh aur Nirman' was more than a tactical combination of mass struggles and creative alternatives; *it was an approach for developing an alternative politics based on effectively challenging and undermining ruling class hegemony, making simultaneous inroads on the fronts of both coercion and consent. This politics was centred on developing the power of working people, which would be concretely reflected through escalating mass struggles, combined with building a range of alternative institutions, both of which would be collectively controlled by working people.* Both fronts of action would complement and strengthen each other and would be organically interlinked.

The objective of developing these alternatives was not just to provide some relief to people through delivery of services etc., although this was an important positive outcome. Rather the underlying political goal was to collectively empower working people, preparing them for their role as a future ruling class and sending a wider message to society. The goal was to enable working people to organise their own health care, education etc. in embryonic form, so that *the sway of ruling class hegemony would be majorly undermined and progressively replaced by counter-hegemony of the working people across multiple sectors.* We can view the series of people-centred alternatives which were developed under the banner of CMSS and CMM as a *chain of 'potentially revolutionary reforms' which would help to create spaces for people's counter-power*, given Niyogi's overall political direction which inspired and informed this process. This was not an exercise in 'reformism' as mistakenly alleged by some Leftists, who displayed a very narrow understanding of this remarkable movement. Rather this was the *emergence of a new kind of politics which had a much deeper grasp of hegemony* compared to conventional Left parties. The latter have focussed mostly on the capitalist economy and state, but largely failed to build alternatives having roots in social and cultural levels of society.

- **Imagining an 'Indianised' version of Marxism**

There is no doubt that Niyogi was a Marxist to the core, which is evident from all his writings and actions. However, he stood out as distinct from traditional Marxist parties – whether 'revisionist' or 'radical'. As Com. A K Roy noted, he was initiating a '*Fourth stream*' of Marxism in India, which was qualitatively different from existing CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(ML). It would require a separate huge exercise to dissect the various ways in which Niyogi's Marxism was discrete from these existing major Left formations. And we are well aware of the pitfalls of trying to emulate 'Russian model' or 'Chinese model' or any other such model to promote revolutionary change in the Indian context. Further as AK Roy noted, what is distinctive is that *Niyogi was developing an 'Indianised' version of Marxism*, which combined the extremely powerful universal insights of Marxism - which are applicable to capitalist socio-economic formations in any context - with highly creative adaptation of these insights based on a deep understanding and intense engagement with Indian social, cultural, political and economic reality, specifically rooted in his remarkable, in-depth and sustained immersion in the struggles and lives of diverse sections of working people in Chhattisgarh over two and half decades.

As noted by Teodor Shanin and others, a unique positive synergy is created when Marxism is integrated with 'vernacular' revolutionary traditions, which are uniquely specific to any particular country and society. This synergy can lead to combining of the universal Marxist critique of capitalism especially at the economic and political levels, with alternative socially and culturally grounded radical visions, drawing upon the rich heritage of indigenous struggles against oppression. Mechanical application of general Marxist concepts without deep engagement with our own indigenous social – cultural reality can lead to Leftism isolated from the masses. This may degenerate into sterile economism on one hand, and ultra-radical but socially detached slogans on the other hand (such as 'China's Chairman is our Chairman') which lack roots among large masses of ordinary people.

The objective behind Niyogi's searching out and highlighting Veer Narayan Singh as a historic, locally grounded people's leader in Chhattisgarh who revolted against exploitative British rule in mid-19th century, was precisely such an attempt to embed current working class struggles in a deeper cultural – social context. Of course, Niyogi was not the first progressive leader to have attempted such a synthesis in India, but we need to appreciate his systematic efforts to knead Marxism into Chhattisgarhi soil, which sprouted in the form of a unique movement which tens of thousands of working people ultimately embraced whole heartedly as their own. Niyogi's pathbreaking synthesis has pointed out a horizon, towards which we can still continue to walk.

- **Creating a social-class alliance based on working people**

While Niyogi's politics was firmly rooted in working class struggles, he was constantly striving to build wider alliances at two levels. One was of course alliances with major sections of working people such as the peasantry – there are innumerable examples of related initiatives, and as we know the 'Red – Green flag' (लाल हरा झण्डा) was emblematic of the aspiration to build such a worker- peasant alliance. However in my understanding Niyogi was not just

striving for a 'two-class alliance' or 'three class alliance' or purely class based politics, even though class struggle remained firmly at its core.

The entire conception of Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha was based on the idea of a wider 'social-class alliance' – attempting to unite wide diversity of subaltern social sections, including not just workers and peasants but also other social sections in Chhattisgarh who were not part of the ruling class, including adivasis, women, students, middle-class sections etc. around a combined alternative developmental programme. The slogan 'सेठ बनियों की जागीर नहीं, छत्तीसगढ़ हमारा है' reflected such a social-class perspective, offering an alternative future not just for workers, but for the wide diversity of ordinary Chhattisgarhi people. This was not a sectional 'class vs. class' type of struggle, rather it sought to unite the widest possible spectrum of people under a counter-hegemonic programme, while also addressing 'non-class' issues like environmental destruction and the exploitation, subordinated mal-development of Chhattisgarh as a region.

Today we need to revisit, and perhaps reinvent such progressive social-class perspectives in the current Indian context. As Neo-fascism and Predatory corporate capitalism aggressively alienate and marginalise ever wider sections of people both on class and social basis, the potential has been created for forging new kind of social-class alliances based on unity of diverse working people and oppressed sections of society.

- **Confronting hegemonic 'nationalism' through sub-national strategies, and developing counter-identities of working people**

In the current political climate where Neo-fascist 'pseudo-nationalism' is being aggressively thrust down the throats of people across the country, it is worthwhile to recall how Niyogi dealt with hegemonic 'nationalism' in his time. We can discern two important strands in his approach which remain highly relevant today. Firstly, Niyogi astutely recognised that in the Indian context, ***cultural-social hegemony is primarily organised at sub-national level*** (broadly linked with various provinces, linguistic communities and regions), which have massive diversity across the country. Hence there cannot be a single standard formula for developing revolutionary counter hegemony, which would be applied as a straitjacket in different social-cultural contexts. Popular counter-hegemony needs to be creatively crafted and evolved in consonance with diverse economic – political configurations in each state / region, even though the Indian capitalist class + Indian state obviously has certain overarching uniform features across the country. The highly uneven capitalist development across the country is one important reason for this differentiation, however extremely diverse social-cultural configurations, which have evolved over many centuries in unique forms in each region, also demand such an approach. The set of socio-political strategies which are appropriate for Punjab will be completely inappropriate for Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand, and the counter-hegemonic approaches relevant for Maharashtra would flounder if applied in West Bengal or Tamil Nadu. However, systematic alliances would definitely need to be built across diverse regions around common enemies (Pan-Indian capitalist class and state), as well as around common goals of revolutionary transformation at national level.

Capitalist rule (especially in its neofascist phase) perpetuates a monolithic form of 'nationalist' hegemony. However counter-hegemonic initiatives based on alliances of working people

need to strongly base themselves in *regionally grounded social-cultural formations and relations*, which would assume quite diverse forms from state to state. **Counter-hegemony must be creatively constructed from the bottom up in each state / region and then consolidated at national level, not top-down.** Those who are in search of a 'revolutionary formula' to be applied mechanically across the country may be in for disappointments. Of course building regional counter-hegemony must be combined with full cognisance of the global and national features of capitalism, and should also actively seek to forge 'federated' solidarity among progressive movements across various regions, to confront the hegemonic Indian state. The slogan 'नए भारत के लिए नया छत्तीसगढ़' encapsulated such an approach, which envisaged sub-nationally organised, socio-culturally grounded unity of working people in Chhattisgarh region, while building alliances with progressive movements in various other regions to mount a powerful challenge and alternative to the capitalist system at national level.

Secondly and linked with this, we should also note that **Niyogi attempted to deal with the complex issue of 'Identity' in context of working people's movements in an innovative manner.** It seems that while emphasising a person's identity as 'worker' was necessary for developing trade union consciousness, this was not sufficient to catalyse socially transformative, broader revolutionary consciousness. Hence CMM sought to forge a larger identity of 'Chhattisgarhi' working people, which had a progressive social-class content. Here again, by identifying and publicising people's heroes such as Veer Narayan Singh, Niyogi sought to promote people's identification with an outstanding local figure who represented anti-colonial popular struggles. There was recognition that while economic struggles form an essential starting point and basis for mobilisation, people also need a broader progressive world view, historically grounded narrative of change, and grounded collective identity, which draws upon their deeply felt social-cultural reality.

Today with the ferocious onslaught of Hindutva, the need to forge such progressive, culturally rooted collective identities which can bind together diverse sections of working people and oppressed groups has become an urgent necessity. This does not constitute any kind of concession to 'identity politics', but recognises that people are powerfully inspired not just by economic demands, but also yearn for culturally rooted common identities; people live not by bread alone, but need both bread and belonging. If the latter is not fulfilled by progressive forces, then reactionary forces will step into the vacuum and manipulate this in the most divisive, distorted and destructive manner that can be imagined, as we are witnessing today.

- **CMM - a mass political organisation?**

The relationship between 'party' and 'mass organisation' has been a continued area of contention within the Left movement, at least since a century. The conventional Left understanding (largely based on a particular reading of Lenin, who was writing in the specific context of early 20th century Russia) has been of the vanguard party providing political leadership, while mass organisations such as trade unions form 'transmission belts' to convey the party's ideology to masses. In the Indian context, this kind of framework has often resulted in bureaucratic, top-down control by Left parties, with limited space for associated

mass organisations to innovate, or to generate new agendas and forms of mobilisation. On the other hand, especially since the 1980s we have seen the emergence of a wide range of 'non-party' mass organisations, often focussed around specific issues (like displacement, land and forest rights, various social sector rights etc.) which kept distance from existing Left parties for valid reasons, but whose ability to politicise their membership often remained limited. On one hand we saw political parties which suffocated the autonomy of mass organisations, and on the other hand we have seen mass organisations which succeeded in issue based mobilisation, but floundered when it came to political action.

In my understanding, Niyogi was grappling with these complex tensions and was attempting to find a way forward through innovative practice. As we know, he clearly did not fit in the existing Left party frameworks, whether CPI / CPI-M or CPI-ML. He launched CMSS as a highly original mass organisation (trade union), followed by several further such mass organisations in various locations across Chhattisgarh, most notably and in the final phase of his life in Bhilai. While the militant struggles waged by these mass organisations were highly remarkable, and these actions enabled tens of thousands of mostly informal sector workers to effectively demand various rights, Niyogi's political horizon did not end here. Unlike say Datta Samant (a contemporary major trade union leader, who was focussed on economic struggles for most of his career), Niyogi clearly had a larger political agenda which is reflected in all his actions and writings. If existing political parties were inappropriate, and mass organisations (like trade unions) were insufficient for the political task, what was the vehicle to politically move forward large masses of working people?

As far as we know Niyogi continued to feel the need for a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party, however he found existing Left parties completely inadequate for the task, and he did not have plans for founding an alternative party in the near future. In the meanwhile, one significant initiative was to form Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (partly inspired by Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, where his political colleague AK Roy had played a critical role in the formative years). CMM was more politically oriented than any issue-based mass organisation, but it was not a full-fledged political party. Of course CMM did contest elections - at Vidhan Sabha level (successfully) as well as Lok Sabha level (unsuccessfully) – but this was not in form of a typical parliamentary party. And as we know, CMM's demand for an independent Chhattisgarh state was ultimately realised, although not in Niyogi's lifetime. So CMM was something more than a mass organisation, but it was not a typical political party.

It is suggested that we might characterise CMM as a 'mass political organisation' – a vehicle to bring together diverse mass organisations and struggles under a common banner, which would have a wider, popular political agenda and appeal. It can be argued that in course of time CMM might have itself become a political party, or would have incubated a more explicitly political formation; we can only speculate about this. Nevertheless I feel that there are a number of strengths that are associated with such an innovative formation, and we need to learn from the CMM experience and consider whether such 'mass political organisations' could be an appropriate organisational form (even if transitional in nature) which could link existing mass struggles with wider political mobilisation, even in other contexts across the country.

- **Proposing alternative development concretely, welded with class struggle**

As we know, today 'Alternative development' is a buzz word in progressive circles, and presently few social activists would contest the need for some form of alternative developmental model to replace the Capitalist system. However this was not the situation in India of the 1980s, hence at that time several initiatives led by Niyogi clearly marked him as being ahead of the times. But moving beyond this, in my opinion certain proposed initiatives like 'Semi-mechanisation' of Iron ore mining in Dalli Rajhara broke fundamentally new ground, and in terms of political direction these remain relevant even today. Much of the discourse around alternative development is often at the level of (entirely valid) detailed critique of the existing model, while posing alternatives mostly at conceptual level. At the same time mass struggles on the ground challenge onslaughts by the existing system (such as opposing displacement by big dams), but are often unable to germinate new concrete, workable alternatives which would have strong mass appeal, and could be implemented in present reality. Hence there remains a gap between the theory of alternative development (which is 'ideal' in content, but somewhat removed from the challenge of driving specific changes on the ground), and the practice of mass organisations (which is mostly focussed on opposing assaults of unhealthy capitalist development, but may not generate workable alternatives).

In this context ***Niyogi sought to translate generic visions of alternative development into concrete, actionable proposals like semi-mechanisation, which also had a powerful class basis.*** Through such proposals, the perspective of alternative development which was critical of ecologically and socially destructive mechanised mining, and class struggle by mine workers against loss of jobs expected due to mechanisation, could be organically combined. And we know about Niyogi's deep and prescient concern with environmental issues, which was reflected not only through his article on this theme, but was practically translated into the 'Know our Forest' programme, involving planting numerous varieties of trees and plants from across the country in the compound of CMSS office, enabling mine workers and ordinary people to directly relate with the value of conserving diverse forests, demonstrated in a most tangible manner.

- **Shaping new human beings to create a new society**

The anti-alcoholism movement led by CMSS in Dalli Rajhara has been rightly praised by wide variety of social commentators, ranging from Gandhians to Feminists, because of its undoubtedly positive impacts on the lives of thousands of workers and their families. Of course there were very concrete reasons to launch such a movement – to eliminate huge wasteful spending by workers on alcohol, to empower women and drastically improve their lives, and to curb the negative impacts of alcoholism on the health of workers. However in my opinion along with these very tangible and important objectives, there was also a deeper, perhaps implicit objective which prompted Niyogi to launch this unique movement.

As Marx has noted, "production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, is necessary ... the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way ... but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ***ridding itself of all the muck of ages and***

become fitted to found society anew.” In short, the working class internalises all manner of self-destructive features which are induced by capitalism to perpetuate its hegemony. The task of changing society, and the task of collectively transforming human beings who seek to create this new society, are deeply intertwined. Writing in context of the Cuban revolution, similarly Che Guevara talked about need for forming the ‘New man’ (better expressed as ‘New human beings’). In this process, personal and political are thoroughly interrelated, and hence the movement for counter-hegemony is not just against an ‘external’ enemy; it must also revolutionise the consciousness and personal behaviour of working people. This was the meaning of the CMSS motto – ‘we are a trade union of workers, not only for 8 hours of the day, but for 24 hours of the day’.

Further as those who worked with Niyogi can testify, he had a *unique style of work*, which was easy to admire but perhaps more difficult to emulate. In my opinion this style of work organically flowed from his deeper political approach. Niyogi was *utterly nonsectarian*, and when he interacted with activists and intellectuals from extremely diverse and often differing backgrounds, he displayed a level of patience and humility which was extraordinary. This was linked with his effort to reach out to the positive in each and every person, and to see how that person’s contribution, however small, might strengthen the grand people’s movement which was being built. Niyogi’s vision was broad enough to accommodate diverse inputs, yet was strong enough to not be diverted from its direction, despite interaction with differing viewpoints. Niyogi was *relentlessly positive about the future*, despite the hugely powerful forces and complex situations which the movement led by him was pitted against. Even his ‘last message’ which was recorded under the shadow of massive aggression by Bhilai industrialists against the workers movement, and ultimately fatal threats to his own life, contained the inspiring sentences, optimistic about the future – ‘मैं जानता हूँ यह दुनिया बहुत सुंदर है। मैं चाहता हूँ इस दुनिया में ऐसी व्यवस्था कायम करने के लिए, जहां शोषण नहीं रहेगा, जहां मेहनतकश मजदूर किसान शांति से अपना जीवन जीएंगे’।

To conclude, Niyogi was an intensely practical visionary, who paid close attention to ‘internal’ transformations and processes within the movement, while consistently widening and elevating the ‘external’ struggle against an exploitative system. The ‘internal’ revolution was not something to be postponed until achievement of the ‘external’ revolution; in Niyogi’s perspective both of these radical transformations were deeply intertwined.

Some of these interpretations of Com. Niyogi’s political legacy might be contested, and alternative viewpoints might be expressed by other comrades. As long as this helps in taking forward the progressive discourse, I suppose this short piece would have achieved its purpose. Further, this task will remain incomplete unless we link Com. Niyogi’s legacy with the qualitatively new challenges that we face in India of 2021 and beyond. That is a more challenging task, which will be attempted in the second part of this article.

Part II: Taking forward Niyogi’s legacy in the 21st century

(to be added)