

The liberty, equality & fraternity embodied by Shankar Guha Niyogi

Red and green

POLITICS AND PLAY

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The history of independent India is peppered with the violent deaths of prominent politicians. Indira Gandhi was murdered in her late sixties, Rajiv Gandhi in his mid-forties, Pramod Mahajan in his mid-fifties. Now add those whose lives were cut off in mid-stream by plane or road accidents — Sanjay Gandhi, Rajesh Pilot, Madhavrao Scindia, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy. How might their subsequent careers have turned out had they lived another twenty years?

In my view, the premature death of the remarkable thinker and trade union leader, Shankar Guha Niyogi, arguably hurt India more than any of the deaths of the politicians mentioned in the previous paragraph. It dealt a body blow to the civil society movement in India, from which it has perhaps not yet recovered. Guha Niyogi was murdered in 1991, when he was still in his forties, killed by hired goons of the capitalists who hated him for giving workers self-respect and the belief that they could be equal citizens of the land.

I have written an anecdotal piece about Guha Niyogi in these pages before. I must now write about him again, and in a more analytical vein. This is because the sociologist, Radhika Krishnan, has just published a fine book about what his life and work once meant and might still mean. Entitled *Shankar Guha Niyogi: A Politics in Red and Green*, the book draws extensively on personal interviews as well as on fugitive sources in Hindi.

Born in 1943 in a Bengali home, Guha Niyogi arrived at the age of nineteen to work in the Bhilai Steel Plant, that iconic marker of India's road to modernity. He soon left paid employment to embrace full-time activism. He married an Adivasi lady and started organising mineworkers. He also became interested in issues of environmental justice, seeking to make State water and forest policies more responsive to the needs of local peasant and tribal communities instead of catering narrowly to commercial and industrial interests.

In 1977, Guha Niyogi helped found the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh, its name signalling its primary concern with the rights of mineworkers. Two years later, he catalysed the formation of a more broad-based organisation, the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha. Apart from the trade union, CMSS, the CMM had a women's wing, a youth wing, and a cultural wing. It also came to run a pioneering hospital funded by mineworkers. From then till Guha Niyogi's murder, the CMM

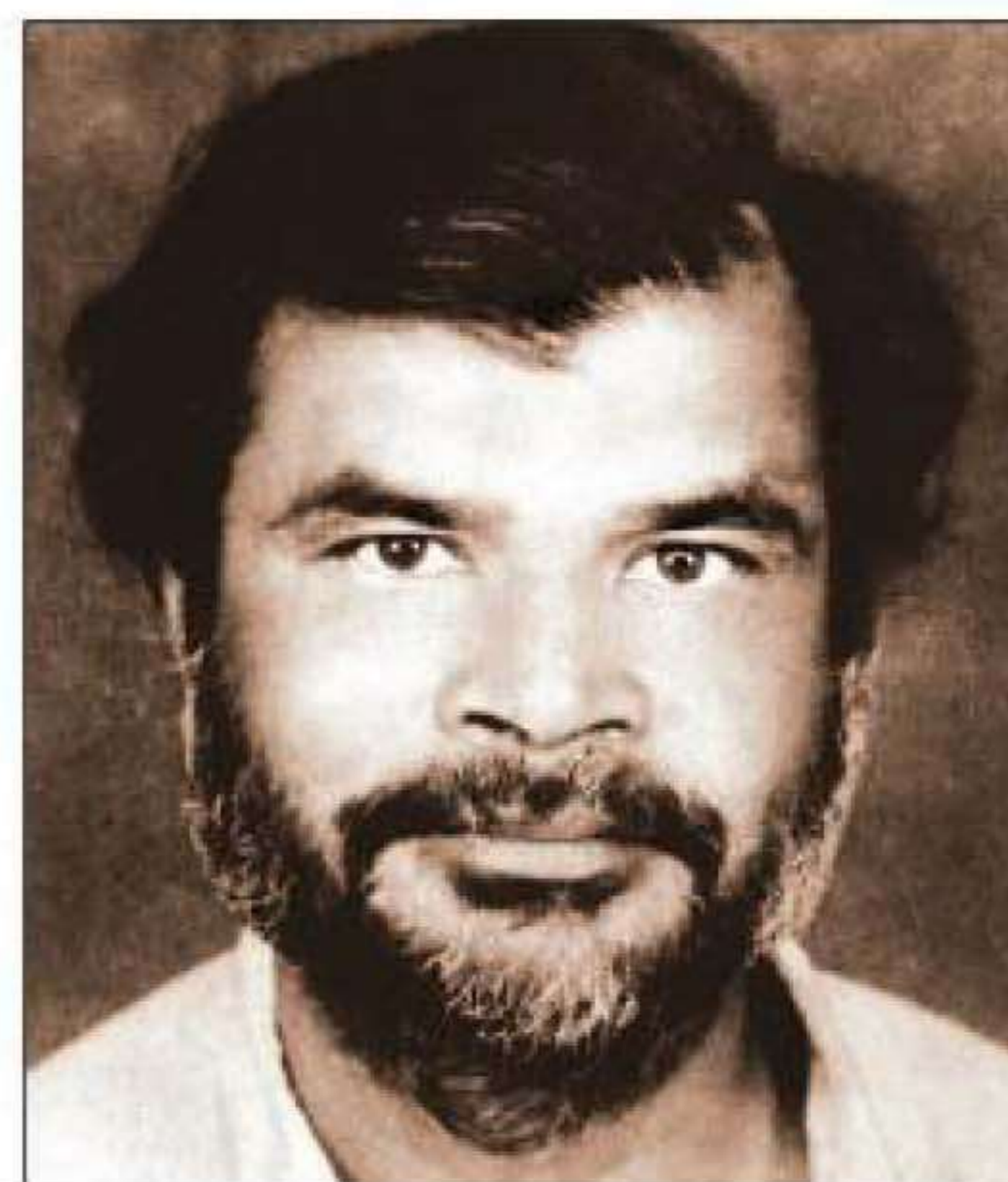
and the CMSS worked tirelessly on behalf of workers' rights, social reform, and environmental sustainability. A stream of idealistic middle-class Indian youths gave up the prospect of comfortable professional careers to join Niyogi and work with his organisations. They included such well-known names as Binayak Sen, a graduate of the Christian Medical College in Vellore, and Sudha Bharadwaj, a graduate of the equally prestigious Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur.

Notably, Guha Niyogi and the CMM went well beyond the traditional trade union focus on fair wages, decent working conditions, adequate leave, and provision of provident fund facilities, though, of course, they made sure that these were properly taken care of too. One key concern was occupational health and safety. The organisation took the help of socially conscious scientists and engineers to set up a laboratory to measure pollution and safety measures at the workplace.

Though Guha Niyogi was a highly original thinker, the conditions of his life meant that he rarely had time to put pen to paper. One of the few extended pieces of writing that he left behind was called *Hamara Paryavaran (Our Environment)*. It has been sensitively translated from Hindi by Rajni Bakshi. Here is a representative passage: "We have no right to destroy the air which our ancestors breathed and the crystal-clear waters with which they quenched their thirst. This river, this air, this mountain, this jungle, these chirping birds — this is our land. We will take the help of science to move our world forward, but we will also ensure that the rivers remain clean and flow freely and there is pure invigorating air. We will always need to hear the melodies of birds which kept our ancestors one with nature."

In her book, Krishnan informs us that in the CMM's policy documents there is much attention to the damage to human life and livelihoods caused by water and air pollution, soil degradation, and overexploitation of natural resources by large industries wanting to make super-normal profits. This environmental abuse was externalised by public and private sector factories, leaving farmers, labourers, women and children to bear the costs.

Guha Niyogi had a keen interest in technologies of production that were better suited to Indian conditions. He



recognised that the unthinking import of large machines from Europe and North America would further polarise society on lines of class and gender. As Krishnan observes, "the CMM also realised through its experiences that the brunt of mechanisation was inevitably borne by women. ... In the manual mines of Dalli, women constituted at least half of the workforce, and yet in the fully mechanised mines they were deemed 'unskilled' and not competent enough to be employed... The CMM saw this loss of employment and economic independence as a systematic assault on the dignity of women." Guha Niyogi and his organisation were working to nurture "an alternative model of production, wherein the emphasis would be on safeguarding livelihoods, cashing in on labour power, and building the purchasing power of labour in order to sustain a thriving economy."

Krishnan also quotes Guha Niyogi as writing: "The Chipko movement enthuses us and we recognize it as a revolutionary movement." Reading her book, I was struck by the parallels between Guha Niyogi and the great Chipko leader, Chandi Prasad Bhatt. Guha Niyogi was a green Marxist, Bhatt (who is happily still with us), a left-wing Gandhian. Both made it their life's work to blend ecology and equity. Both were true grassroots intellectuals, who immersed themselves among workers and peasants, while simultaneously articulating a wider vision for their country and the world.

Krishnan reproduces a CMM song, originally in Chhattisgarhi, which is evocative enough in translation:

"Where there is water to slake every parched throat,

Where every field is irrigated and green,

Where every hand gets work to do,

Where the farmer gets a fair price for his produce,

Where every village has a hospital,

Where every child gets a good education,

Where none is deprived of land and home,

All trace of poverty, oppression, and capitalism removed,

O when will such a Chhattisgarh be?

Where the peasant and worker will rule!"

Guha Niyogi was murdered more than thirty years ago. Yet in at least five major ways his life and work speak powerfully to the India of today:

First, it highlights the precarious plight of unorganised labour (so visible now especially in the construction sector and the gig economy);

Second, it underlines the vital role in sustaining democracy of independent civil society organisations. The need for such organisations is keenly felt in India today, when the Bharatiya Janata Party intimidates and persecutes civil society groups that do not conform to their own *Hindutva* ideology;

Third, it shows the vital importance of integrating environmental sustainability in the development process. The alarming air pollution in our cities, the depletion of aquifers and the pollution of our rivers, the savage attacks on the Himalaya, the Western Ghats, and the Aravallis by infrastructure and mining corporations close to politicians in power — all show how costly it is for present and future generations to ignore the warnings of Shankar Guha Niyogi (and of Chandi Prasad Bhatt too);

Fourth, Guha Niyogi's work offers a pathway for a more meaningful that is to say, less exploitative and less destructive, development model for smaller, resource-rich states, such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Uttarakhand;

Fifth, it warns us not to have an excessively rosy view of the long-term impacts of the 'latest' technologies. Automation and Artificial Intelligence may render millions of Indians jobless, the males then turning to watching porn or hate videos on their phones. Guha Niyogi understood, far better than the boosters of Silicon Valley or Bengaluru, that new technologies, while increasing productivity and profit for private firms on the one hand, could have dangerously divisive and harmful effects for society and nature on the other.

This column is being published on the eve of Republic Day. The timing is not accidental. For few Indians in the history of our Republic have embodied the values of liberty, equality and (especially) fraternity as admirably as Shankar Guha Niyogi.