

One who combined Marxist temper with rarely independent mind

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Professor Narahari Kaviraj (17 February 1917 – 28 December 2011) waged a life-long war against many obstacles in the pursuit of his conscientious commitment to independent thinking in the frame of his Marxist temper. For that he had to confront many odds, for his independent thinking. If any single person who helped Kaviraj imbibe this temper, following Engels' famous advice to regard Marxism, "not as a dogma, but a guide to action" – it was Dr Bhupendranath Dutt, youngest brother of Swami Vivekananda. Kaviraj was the last living link to the galaxy of exemplary Marxists who emerged from the freedom struggle. Among them were Bankim Mukherjee, Somnath Lahiri, Benoy Choudhuri, Saroj Mukherjee, Syed Mansur Habibullah, Syed Shahedulla and last but not the least Satyendra Narayan Mazumdar whom Jolly Mohan Kaul considers as more original than E M S Namboodiripad. Kaul is the only member of national council of undivided CPI, elected at its Fifth Congress (Amritsar, 1958) in the study of national and linguistic questions among Marxist scholars.

But Dr Dutt didn't join the CPI due to habitual slander-mongering and parochial dogmatism of Muzaffar Ahmed aka Kakababu. Which was why he told his followers to join and work under CPI or its mass fronts, but without submitting to honcho-ism of leaders like Ahmed. He asked them not to address him as Bhupenda or sir, but Dr Dutt.

Kaviraj had first asserted his independent thinking in 1942, by deferring his membership of CPI. "I was then a junior lecturer at the Suri Vidyasagar College. Students used to confirm their presence at the class saying Jai Hind instead of 'yes sir' or 'present, please'. They said, when I asked, that it was a kind of a protest against communists' opposition to the Quit India Movement. They knew that I was a communist. I decided to be a friend of CPI but refused to join the party. Ultimately joined, but five years later", he told this writer.

However, he had to express dissent within two years to protest against the disastrous essay by Bhowani Sen under the pen name Rabindra Gupta who dismissed the cultural lineage from Raja Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore as out- and- out reactionary and dustbin-waste. Sen's ludicrous and puerile understanding of Tagore was replete in his article, published in the Bengali periodical Marxvadi. He discovered class divide between Amit and Labanya in the novel Seshar Kabita, as if Amit's rich filial background clashed with his fiancé Labanya's middle class roots. Therefore, Sen, then a polit bureau member and second to B T Ranadive, the author of adventurist and sectarian line at the CPI's Second Congress (Calcutta, 1948), concluded that an escapist Rabindranath Tagore was reactionary and an agent of imperialism. Sen's sidekick, Pradyot Guha whose pseudonyms were Prakash Roy and Urmila Guha chided Kaviraj for his essay – Vivekanandar mat o path (Views and path of Vivekananda- published Parichay, in CPI's literary journal), for "carrying garbage of bourgeois tradition that the working class were unwilling to do as its place is in the dustbin of history. He parroted Sen to assert that the 'bourgeois tradition' from Rammohun to Rabindranath was nothing but garbage. . However, Kaviraj didn't remain quite. He and Prof Nirendranath Roy, one of the most outstanding teachers on Shakespeare of those days, wrote separately to the then central committee of CPI against that infantile and profoundly erroneous understanding of tradition. They stated ingenuously that it sent a misleading and destructive message to the people. The party endorsed the two dissenting intellectuals' stand.

Kaviraj considered the 20th Congress (1956) of the now-defunct Communist Party of Soviet Union as a turning point of history in insulation from the Stalinist dogma. He was distinctively different from cowardish dogma of overwhelming majority of CPI(M) and Naxalites and even a sizable section of CPI ,who looked down upon Khrushchev's secret speech as distorted and motivated. Truth for him was as dazzling as lightening. Going a bit adrift, Prof Murzban Jal described Stalin era in a paper - In Defence of Leninism in Economic and Political weekly, January 1, 2011) as a period of "Stalinist counter-revolution" .If you ask the central committee members of CPI and CPI(M-L) Liberation as also NC members of CPI, you should not be astonished to know that 80 per cent of them do not know that the wordage of secret speech which exposed Stalin's limitless personality cult is 33,000-plus.

Kaviraj was arguably one of the best Marxist scholars on the national liberation movement . His first imprint of scholarship was his study, Swadhinatar Sangrame Bangla. " I decided to do a research on the 19th Century Bengal after the infamous thesis of Rabindra Gupta. On the other side, there was a section of Marxist intellectuals who overestimated the strength of Bengal renaissance. In quest of a dispassionate and bias-free viewpoint, I did the research with the consent of the party and in the mid-1950s, it was published by the National Book Agency, a pro-CPI publishing company. But suddenly, it was withdrawn upon objection from Muzaffar Ahmed who thought a very small portion of it was against party line. Jyoti Basu, then state party secretary at that time, intervened and brought it back to sale through book-sellers after incorporation of views of Kakababu", he told me. It was published in Russian and other languages too.

During the fissile years of CPI after the Sino-Indian border clash on 22 October 1962), he drafted the On Some Questions Concerning Ideological Controversy Within the International Communist Movement sometime in 1963. He wrote it at the instance of Basu inside the Dum Dum Jail when they could not accept Kakababu's endorsement of Stalin's characterization of Indian bourgeoisie at the sixth conference of Comintern (1929). Comintern, disregarding the reality of freedom movement, led by the 'native' bourgeoisie through the Indian National Congress, stated that the Indian bourgeoisie had no future and had gone over to the side of imperialism. Kakababu didn't budge an inch from that position when Kaviraj asked whether Georgy Dimitrov thesis at the seventh conference of Comintern (1939) that communists should work within the Congress against fascism. The Kaviraj document criticized the both CPSU and the Chinese Communist Party and urged them not to split the international communist movement. The final document, with a few words added to the draft, was circulated among those who supported the independent position. Basu apart, Majumdar, Saroj Mukherjee, Niranjana Sengupta etc agreed with the document. The tragedy of it was that historically\, Kaviraj did not remain even one of the authors of it as Basu left the group which opposed both the Soviet and the Chinese communists to join the new party, CPI(M), at Tenali convention (8-9 July,1964) and circulated it. " How can I be a signatory of document that was circulated among members of a party which I did not join in? But I certainly drafted it", Kaviraj told me.

His last assertion of independent thinking was pertaining to the concept of merger of CPI and CPI(M) , initiated by the CPI leadership under A B Bardhan. He wrote in the Mainstream weekly in 2005 that from its birth CPI-M has been " aloof from the mainstream of the communist movement, pursuing an independent line of its own, mainly based on the resolutions adopted by its own party Congresses." After the split, it took a negative view of the 20th Congress (of Soviet Union- SR) and

its decisions” , an aberration from the stand of undivided CPI “around the question of de-Stalinisation. Over these two issues, as the years rolled on, the gulf between the CPI and CPI-M became wider and wider. All this is now a part of history. I do not want to say that the CPI-M must give up its own position and return to the parent party. If they think they can better serve the people by adhering to an independent line, they are free to do so. My point is this: the CPI must not, in any circumstances, submit to that position. However, on the issue of joint action, he said, “I strongly support the effort of the CPI to forge unity with the CPI-M on all issues of common interest. But I am firmly opposed to any sort of merger”.

Kaviraj and Mazumdar edited a high class Bengali periodical, Mulyayan, brought out in 1964 when hundreds of comrades knew not whether to remain in the CPI or join the splitters for a new party. Jyoti Basu was the first signatory of the declaration on the bi-monthly. When Kaviraj, Majumdar, Nirmalya Bagchi, Saroj Roy, Ranadhir Dasgupta and other leading comrades agreed to re-join the CPI after a dialogue with Bhowani Sen, secretary of West Bengal state council after the split, they were permitted to carry on the periodical which expressed differences with the official CPI line like the concept of ‘joint leadership’ in the national democratic revolution. Kaviraj Mulyayan-comrades refused to include any section of ‘non-monopoly bourgeoisie’ in the leadership – a position endorsed by the Soviet theoreticians.

Never hankering for academic careerism and queuing up for doctorate diploma, Kaviraj had an irrepressible yearning to scoop out facts and data from primary sources in his research. He used to spend almost every holiday at the National Library in Kolkata – periodically at the National Archives, Delhi. One of his original contributions was Narahari Kaviraj was A peasant uprising in Bengal, 1783, published in 1972. It was , the first peasant upheaval against the colonial rule in the eastern India. The Zamindars and riots jointly rebelled against Devi Singh, the ijaradar of Rangpur in 1783. It happened during the period of Warren Hastings. Kaviraj found that the protesters were up against the Ijaradari system that farmed out land to the highest bidder, for one to five years.

Some other notable titles are October Revolution and National Liberation Movement of a New Type (1978), Wahabi and Farazi Rebels of Bengal (1982), Gandhi-Nehru through Marxist Eyes (1988), Santal Village Community and the Santal Rebellion Of 1855 (2001) and What is Postmodernism? (2005). Among his important Bengali titles were Swadhinatar Sangrame Bangla (Bengal in Freedom Struggle and Asamapta Biplab, Apurna Akanaksha (Unfinished Revolution, unfulfilled desire) , apart from the ones he edited like Banglar Jagaran – Tarka O Bitarka (Bengal Renaissance – a debate).

Imagine that his last title , What is Post Modernism, was written by Kaviraj when he was 87. Prof Benoy Bhushan Chowdhury telephoned Kaviraj praising him. “ Benoy Chowdhury telephoned me and said, ‘ This will be very helpful for the students as there is no textbook on post-modernism”, Kaviraj told me.

Works of Kaviraj (also of Mazumdar) are more powerful than Kalashnikovs, let alone their Marxist temper. His party, CPI, seemed to have realized his worth after he became a nonagenarian, But there was not a single article on him as a tribute to his contribution to ideological orientation of hundreds of comrades until the early 1980s. He was the principal of CPI’s institution for Marxist education, Lenin School of Marxist Studies for two decades.

As a humble follower and a student in politics, I can only say that it may take years for another Narahari Kaviraj.