

July 26, 2026

Shankar Guha Niyogi's Red-Green Politics

By: Amita Baviskar

A new biography of Shankar Guha Niyogi valuably maps his fusion of Marxist and Gandhian thought, foregrounding the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha's distinctive politics. However, it fails to explore the tensions between Niyogi's ecological sensibility and pro-extraction stance.

In the winter of 1990-91, the Narmada Bachao Andolan set off on a long march from Nimar in Madhya Pradesh (MP) to the site of the Sardar Sarovar dam in Gujarat to stop its construction. The caravan included not only thousands of farmers protesting against a project that would displace them and shatter their lives, but also hundreds of supporters from across the country who recognised in this struggle a broader vision that social and ecological justice should not be sacrificed in the name of "development".

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Among those accompanying the villagers was a large contingent from the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM), a trade union of miners, industrial workers, and farmers from the far eastern part of MP, men and women proudly waving their red and green flags, chanting slogans as they walked in step with their comrades.

At that time, and for that matter even today, activists trying to forge a progressive politics around ecological questions hit a brick wall with ideologues from organised Left parties who refused to entertain environmental concerns as valid working-class issues. Thus, the presence of the CMM was a heartwarming affirmation that a new way of seeing the world was possible.

Here was an organisation with a grounded critique of capitalist industrialisation that focused not only on wages and other conditions of work for labourers but also fought against industrial pollution, deforestation, depletion of rivers and ponds, and loss of local crop diversity. Instead of confining itself to the workplace, its politics embraced the lifeworld of workers, acknowledging that they were also small farmers, adivasis who depended on forest produce, and women who struggled to run households while their husbands spent their earnings getting drunk.

While deeply grounded in its locale, the CMM also had a wider perspective. It allied with like-minded individuals, organisations, and social movements to craft an alternative plan for sustainable regional development, based on the principle of decentralising power over resources.

This was not pie in the sky. The CMM had sustained itself for decades, successfully negotiating with mine and factory managements. In his definitive 2019 study *Classes of Labour: Work and Life in a Central Indian Steel Town* (in collaboration with Ajay T.G.), Jonathan Parry notes that "over a decade [the CMM] achieved a more than six-fold increase in the daily wage of contract workers" (p. 290). Equally remarkably, the organisation reached a scale that enabled one of its leaders to be elected to the MP state legislature. No wonder then that its founder Shankar Guha Niyogi was regarded as a legend in his lifetime.

On 28 September 1991, Niyogi was assassinated, shot dead by gunmen hired by local industrialists. A man of exemplary courage, independent thought, and untiring action was no more. In the more than 30 years that have passed since this grievous blow, the CMM has suffered further losses and fragmentation. Sudha Bharadwaj, one of its leaders and a close associate of Niyogi, was jailed without a trial for more than three years in the Bhima-Koregaon case. Niyogi himself has faded from memory.

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Radhika Krishnan's intellectual biography of Niyogi is therefore a valuable contribution to progressive politics in India at a time when it is more beleaguered than before. It is a reminder of a rich legacy of struggle that is all the more relevant today when precarity has become the entrenched norm for workers and ecological security has been thrown to the winds.

If particular, the CMM's insistence on bridging the industrial and agrarian worlds, appraising technologies from the point of view of labour and indigenous knowledge, while also addressing gender inequalities, re-affirms principles that other trade unions tend to ignore. Krishnan's work thus brings to the fore key debates on development, workers' rights, technology, and ecology that were at risk of being forgotten, even as the issues they address are more alive than ever.

Krishnan deftly delineates how Dhiresh Guha Niyogi, the son of a small-time contractor, came of age in the political ferment of Bengal in the 1950s, organising community libraries and joining Left-led student protests. He came to Bhilai as a 19-year-old in 1961 and soon set up a union in the coke ovens of the Bhilai Steel Plant. The rise of Naxalism in the late 1960s drew him to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), leading to his being sacked from his job.

In a manner vividly described by Dilip Simeon in his 2010 novel *Revolution Highway* (New Delhi: Penguin), Niyogi abandoned his (relative) class privilege to work among the oppressed and mobilise them politically. He went from village to village selling garments; he grazed and sold goats; he fished for a living. Krishnan points out that these years gave Shankar (the name Niyogi adopted to elude the police) a deep understanding of local life, which informed his politics.

If Niyogi became a counter-hegemonic organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense, his philosophy of praxis was based on rigorously working through Marxist theories as espoused by different Left parties, even as he drew on Gandhian critiques of economism, gigantism, and scientism that had inspired diverse experiments in alternative farming, artisanal work, and local government across the country. For the latter, Krishnan fruitfully draws on Ramachandra Guha's landmark 1988 essay on the ideological streams in Indian environmentalism. Yet, the precise differences between Marxists of various hues are not discussed even though they were key to the CMM's distinct vision as well as its activism on the ground where it was sometimes in conflict with other Left unions.

This lopsidedness may be due to the author's aim of highlighting the "green" politics that set the CMM apart. However, the tensions between Niyogi's ecological sensibility and his Marxist education need further probing. For instance, what does one make of Niyogi's assertions that Chhattisgarh should exploit its minerals more and increase iron ore production (pp. 78, 81)? Krishnan does not examine this apparent contradiction between red and green politics. One wonders how Niyogi would have modified his views on fossil fuel-based production had he lived to experience climate change.

The chapter on labour and technological choice is the most engrossing section of the book. Here, Krishnan takes the reader to the mines and explains why the CMM opposed the full mechanisation of ore extraction.

The reader is also left somewhat puzzled when Krishnan includes a lengthy chapter (almost a quarter of the book) on the formation of Chhattisgarh state in 2000 without clearly explaining why this mattered to Niyogi or the CMM. The author quotes from the 1994 debate on separate statehood in the MP legislature. Tellingly, Janaklal Thakur, the MLA from the CMM, does not appear as a speaker. Nor does the CMM seem to have mobilised around this issue on the ground.

Perhaps Krishnan meant to defend the CMM against the charge of nativism and show how its Chhattisgarhi identity was firmly based on class politics, but the significance of this issue is not clear. The author compares movements for statehood in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Uttarakhand rather cursorily. For instance, there is no mention of how the Uttar Pradesh government's imposition of OBC reservations in 1994 precipitated protests, brutally dealt with by the police in Muzaffarnagar, Dehradun, and Srinagar, that strengthened popular sentiment about statehood.

If Krishnan's intention was to explore the link between environmental politics and the demand for statehood, even though these were not major concerns for Niyogi, Haripriya Rangan's 2000 book *Of Myths and Movements: Rewriting Chipko into Himalayan History* (London: Verso), would have provided a strong analytical counterpoint.

The chapter on labour and technological choice is the most engrossing section of the book. Here, Krishnan takes the reader to the mines and explains why the CMM opposed the full mechanisation of ore extraction. The union argued that mechanisation would not only cost thousands of workers their jobs, but would also lower the quality of the ore and increase costs. Here, Krishnan carefully details the materiality of labour and conditions of work.

This chapter would have been more concise without the concluding excursus into debates about science and technology in India. This chiefly consists of thumbnail sketches of stalwarts like Amulya Reddy, K.R. Datye, Claude Alvares, Vandana Shiva, and Dharampal, without reference to the CMM. How did Niyogi negotiate the radical differences between these thinkers? For instance, did Reddy's

focus on more efficient biomass-based energy influence Niyogi's evaluation of the coal-centric processes he was concerned with? Would he have endorsed the historian Dharampal's implicit celebration of the caste system? If the author had sought out Niyogi's interlocutors outside the CMM such as Dunu Roy, Medha Patkar, Anil Sadgopal, and Alvares, their perspectives on Niyogi's politics and its context would have greatly enriched the analysis.

One also misses hearing the voices of ordinary workers, so expressive in Manjusha Nair's 2016 study of the CMM, *Undervalued Dissent: Informal Workers' Politics in India* (Albany: SUNY Press).

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A Politics in Red and Green draws on Niyogi's writings, newspaper reports, interviews with CMM leaders, and secondary sources. The most often cited is the 1993 tribute anthology *Sangharsh aur Nirmaan: Shankar Guha Niyogi aur Unka Naye Bharat ka Sapna* [Struggle and Creation: Shankar Guha Niyogi and his Dream of a New India] (edited by Anil Sagopal and Shyam Bahadur Namra, New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan).

This volume with almost 700 small-print pages of Niyogi's writings and speeches, as well as reminiscences from his associates and essays on his political significance, was published soon after Niyogi's death. While these sources provide ample material to comment on, they do not offer the critical distance that time affords. Niyogi was, no doubt, a hero but he deprecated being idolised.

One will need another book to examine Niyogi's contested priorities, practical politics, and tactical compromises, as he sought to translate his vision of social and ecological justice into action. Krishnan's work is a timely start in mapping his intellectual genealogy.

I am reluctant to end this review on a negative note but two corrections must be made. The name of the co-editor of *Sangharsh aur Nirmaan* is throughout stated as Shyam Bahadur. His name was Shyam Bahadur Namra. When discussing how the union addressed work conditions in a cotton mill, on page 93, the author states that "the CMM trained workers to make small kits themselves to test humidity and other parameters of pollution and safety". The source cited (Dunu Roy's essay in *Sangharsh aur Nirmaan*) does not make any reference to testing kits but mentions discussions about setting up a laboratory. Catching such an error casts doubt on the accuracy of other citations.

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