

Che-ism in Sri Lanka and India

Parimal Dasgupta

Introduction

Che's thoughts, practices, the cult of Che was hardly ever referred to as an "ism" in the then Kolkata and Bengal left political circles. Marx, Lenin, Stalin had that stature and their praxis had become 'ism'. Even Mao Thought was always referred to as Mao Tse Tung Thought – it also had not reached the status of an "ism". Thus when literally translating from Bangla to English, the very coinage in Bengali, as PDG uses it, needs to be put in perspective.

The readers, I think, should be made aware of one thing. It is possibly PDG's reading of the imprints of Che's practice in Charu Majumdar's theory and practice, that is of primary polemical significance (and of course in its wider ramification). That is what I felt. What else? I tried to recall during our days which were spent only in changing the world – college politics in Kolkata – 1983-85-86; getting into an underground party, yes we did read Che; but I never ever remember discussing Che in any party meeting or even in passing. Yes we did buy the book which was easily available – the one PDG has referred (I. Lavretsky 'Ernesto Che Guevara' Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973); it was Mao, Lenin, Marx, Stalin, Charu Majumder, Vinod Mishra -I was a member of the ML Party then led by VM. I talked to my seniors; even the first generation Naxalites from the armed squads of College Street in 1967-69-70 days; did they discuss much of Che as strategy? Not really. It was all Mao. Then it was Vietnam – Ho Chi Minh. Not that this realization means that I am in any way undermining PDG's views. They are extremely important, possibly quite correct.

Avijit Wasi

The Cuban revolution is the womb of Che-ism. It was through the success of the 1959 Cuban revolution that Che-ism become popular and spread. The reason being when the Mexican based, educated and organized army of Cuban revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro, broke into small groups entered Cuba, and leading simultaneous attacks at different points in the capital and the country which deposed the tyrant Batista from power, other than Che Guevara's leading role in action, his thought imprint was very big. Fidel Castro was his comrade and co-traveler. Based on experiences in Cuba, in the days to come, Che Guevara became the spokesman of guerilla warfare theory, as 'the' strategy or path to the completion of socialist revolution. Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and some others claim (that): "After the Chinese revolution, the Cuban revolution has presented a new strategy of proletarian revolution and in the present age, Mao Tse Tung's revolutionary strategy as a strategic extension / development is old and obsolete; even the ultra-revolutionary strategy of Trotskyites is obsolete. The theorist Regis Debray advocates that for revolution in the present age, while on the one hand the working class has to be liberated from the Stalinist influence, on the other hand, he castigates the aggressive ultra- revolutionary ism of Trotskyites as 'revisionism':

"The Trotskyist conception of insurrection resembles self-defence". The proponents of self defence (in practice) and Trotskyists (in theory and practices) consider the trade unions to be the

organizational base and motive force of class struggle. Herein lies the explanation of a surprising coincidence. We have been told that Trotskyists are ultra-leftists. Nothing is further from truth. Trotskyism and reformism join in condemning guerilla warfare, in hampering or sabotaging it” [as quoted in English in the original Bengali article written by PDG]. Based on this line of thought, the crux of new revolutionary thinking represented by Che-the-ory, is:

“To complete revolution in the present age the only programme is of aggressive ‘actions’ by guerilla groups and these actions are above politics; meaning actions will not be carried out under political leadership or direction; rather action will determine politics”. This may be described as Ultra-Trotskyism. The primary thought process runs thus: Terrorism is always aggressive and unebbing or relentless. Thus at present the different ‘red-brigades’ or red-terrorists groups in different countries are the latest disciples of Che-theory. Organizations based on Che theory are built along terrorist lines – always and in all situations, conspiratorial.

Che-theory can be defined in another way as, guerilla-ism, which is opposed to the politics and practice of Marxist-Leninism. Because the Marxist-Leninist thought of revolutionary war is not just limited to military action; rather it is a holistic political process and work continuous which, in its goal to establish a new social order, aims to awaken a wide section of the oppressed masses and make them prepared for a wider struggle against the oppressive ruling classes. Trying to awaken the masses through ‘action(s)’ is middle class adventurism.

Guerilla-ism like the one now based on the Guevara theory, is not a new phenomenon. It has surfaced many a time during earlier revolutionary battles and struggles. During the Japanese aggression in China when Mao Tse Tung studied the past history of people’s guerilla method strategies resistance in countries attacked by powerful external enemy country and thus conceived and presented the theory of guerilla warfare (to the CPC), then also, within the CPC, a trend of guerilla-ism had raised its head. The proponents of the then guerilla-ism claimed: “for the oppressed masses guerilla strategy is the only possible strategy” (Kao Kang); “guerilla warfare is the key strategy of people’s liberation struggle (Chang-so-Hua). Commenting on these thoughts, Mao-Tse-Tung said, “To agree with their thoughts is equivalent to giving excessive importance to guerilla warfare and not looking at it, in its objectivity and thus in its correct perspective.” And regarding the success of the revolutionary national liberation war he said, “In a vast country like ours, it is impossible to win the national war without a deep and wide political unity” (Mao-Tse-Tung, ‘Selected Works’, Peking, Vol.2, Pg 154) Che Guevara theory is opposed to the above-mentioned Chinese thought on guerilla warfare.

After the Cuban revolution, the experiences and application of Che Guevara’s guerilla-ism began under his direct leadership in some places in Latin America, especially in Bolivia. Che’s efforts to organise a revolution based on guerilla warfare was defeated by the US military’s guerilla counter attacks; encircled by them, Che’s life ended with a bullet ridden body. But at present Che’s idea of guerilla (-ism) war is an international phenomenon, transformed into a reaction. Imperialism is also one of its spokespersons and because this stream of guerilla-ism has been or by being deified, defined and propagated as an independent revolutionary stream and thought-process, it is creating confusion in the ranks of revolutionary communist politics. Imperialism, on the one hand, glorifies such guerilla action while at the same time incorporates a counter guerilla warfare strategy in their military offensives and is using it successfully to smash such ‘actions’

(and their 'actors'). Gradually, the Che Guevara brand of guerilla action is bound to deteriorate into different form of terrorism. And through this, obstacles will be created for a unified organised advancement of true revolutionary forces. It will help counter revolution and in the current historical situation, play a similar role like Trotskyism.

The entry and expression of Che-ism in South East Asia is a recent phenomenon and it happened during 1970-71 in Sri Lanka and India. Both these countries were existing under a neo-imperialistic condition as it prevailed during the time of the Second World War. In Sri Lanka Che-ism entered directly by announcing itself as Che-ism, while in India it entered through the proclamation of Mao Tse Tung Thought. The practice of Che-ism in Sri Lanka was publicly criticized by the CPC (Communist Party of China); in the case of India, it (the CPC) critiques happened privately or in closed quarters, because in India in 1969, revolutionary politics accepted peasant revolution as the primary task (which was absent in the case of Sri Lanka). The CPC hoped that the revolutionary politics will take the path guided by Mao Tse Tung Thought. But in reality it did not happen. In this matter it may be possible that the then internal contradiction within the CPC may have been a reason why an objectively correct analyses of Indian revolutionary politics could not be done by them. In both the countries, India and Sri Lanka, no doubt the primary practice of Che-ism/thought continued to be terrorist in its efforts to hasten the completion of revolution, but there were some clear differences in thought and practice. In the days to come, for revolutionary politics to advance along correct paths, it is important to throw some light on this matter.

In Sri Lanka, Che-ism announced its presence through an open political organisation – the JVP – Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front). This organisation was being led by the students and youth. Because of the leadership's open declaration of their faith and political allegiance to Che-ism, JVP came to be seen as a 'Che-Guevara-ist' organisation. In 1970, JVP specially helped Ms. Sirimavo Bandaranaike to win the Sri Lankan General Elections; thus this organisation was pro-election. Truly speaking, Ms. Bandaranaike rode to power on the enthusiastic support of the student and youth of Sri Lanka. During the elections, Ms. Bandaranaike attracted the attention and support of the students – youth by keeping the socialist voice high – highlighting on her commitment to socialist ideals and goals. But just after winning the election, “to protect the promise of a democratic system” she and her government created confusion, convulsion and anti-feeling in the minds of this force (the student youth force in general and particularly those led by JVP). Above all, the Ms. Bandaranaike government during its 10 months term in office despite the umpteen promises made, could not resuscitate the ailing economy of the country. Though a plan was developed to create direct employment for at least one hundred thousand (one lakh as referred to in India – *translator*) unemployed youth aged between 18-39 years, out of the more than three hundred thousand (three lakhs) educated, unemployed youth in Sri Lanka, it essentially remained a plan on paper. The declaration of socialism became meaningless. The government advised the people of the country to instead, “tie belts around their stomachs / hang stones around their stomach” (Translator: for those not familiar with this proverbial expression, it means closely to stating – kill your hunger, contract your hunger).

Thus in April 1971 Sri Lanka witnessed a Che Guevarist student youth armed insurrectionist action but first prior to this, in February, Rohan Wijeweera, the young 27 years old leader, while

addressing a public meeting in Colombo's Hyde Park said, "we helped form the UF Government merely to make the people realize how futile it was to usher in socialism through parliamentary process (originally quoted in English by PDG, written in this "Bengali article" – *translator*).

It is very clear from the above that socialism was the goal of the Che Guevara-ists in Sri Lanka, that is, their revolutionary thought is not oriented towards people's democratic revolution. This happens due to an incorrect analysis of objective condition in neo-colonial countries. Thus the concept and practice of forming and taking concrete programmes and activities to broad base anti-imperialist fronts never is part of them. This becomes the weakest spot of such struggles. Imperialism and its ally states combined their military forces to let loose a dance of death on the youth forces and succeeded in silencing the movement. It is also noticed that though their politics keeps talking about orienting itself around Che-Guevara-ism, the struggles did not become truly guerilla in nature, but became more terrorist-insurrectionist. And most importantly, this struggle was never peasant based. The main reason as to why the struggle became insurrectionist, was that the student-youth force thought that because they had played such an important role in bringing Ms. Bandaranaike to power, that they could also pull down the government very quickly. What this actually led to was middle class adventurism.

Naturally the Trotskyites played their role in stoking, such tendencies. In short, in Sri Lanka Che (Guevara) ism found expression as terrorism-ad- venturism and guerilla-ism played a complementary role.

In India, Che-ism found its way through an underground party, multiple confusion and distortions. But it was not possible for this underground party to announce its allegiance to Che-ism because the political process in which the party was born, carried the ideological contradictions of communist politics and in that contradiction, primary was the question of strategy and tactics of peoples' democratic revolution based on Mao-Tse Tung Thought.

In 1967 the thoughts and consciousness of communist revolutionaries was reverberating with the revolutionary theory brought forth by Mao's Thought, though problems persisted with its 'practice'. It is through the unseen labyrinths of this confusion that Che-ism surfaced. But because the idea of a peoples' democratic revolution was at the forefront and also because the experience of (the Communist Party of India's) 1949 ultra-left politics of ushering in socialism being present, unlike Sri Lanka, here in India, the call for ushering in socialism did not occur. Here, the peasant revolution became primary, and based on this (the peasant revolution axis), with a middle-class revolutionary outlook, what was seen was a 'roving- guerilla-peasant revolutionary' thought and practice. In India, though the goal was people's democratic revolution, there was a particular confusion about the analysis of the primary contraction of the then Indian condition. In the world of Che-ism in the revolutionary politics in Sri Lanka – imperialism was not present whereas in India it became secondary. Also in India in 1967, revolutionary politics, was not based on electoral support to the government elected legally; on the contrary it stood opposed to electoral politics. Thus, unlike as in Sri Lanka, confrontation with the government was nothing new or sudden in India. But even though it was not sudden, the contradiction and friction which arose, could not be resolved by easy and quick revolutionary methods and strategies. But what was put forth was the thought of a "quick revolution", And for this was adopted the modern Che Guevara tactics for 'quick revolution', like: "In the present

epoch in countries ridden by exploitation, ripened objective revolutionary situation exists permanently, only what is required is revolutionary attack?” This idea of a “quick revolution” was equally present both in Sri Lanka and India.

It is very clear that in India, Che-ism were presented in the cloak of Mao Tse Tung Thought or more correctly voiced as one sided, ultra-militarist ultra-militant, terrorist interpretations of Mao Tse Tung Thought and tenets and strategies and tactics. But these thoughts became subject of discussions, debate and opposition. As a result here (in India), Che-ism theories surfaced through much turbulence and presented itself with many overlapping thoughts and practices. The primary reason for this is an incorrect or distorted understanding of Mao Tse Tung Thought. But gradually what became evident was that Che-ism's theories and tenets were highly present in the overall politics and in all of this, it is the Regis Debray methods, tactics and thoughts which have found prominence. The only thing which got added was the thought and line of individual killing which became the driver of guerilla politics.

It is absolutely essential to study, discuss, debate, understand the huge amount of revolutionary activity going on in Sri Lanka and India for a new consolidation of ideological thought (processes) of the revolutionary forces.

As a proof of the historical success of Che-ism, the Cuban revolution is the referral point or reference-frame and Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, with the experience of the Cuban revolution in hand, presented their understanding, their version of guerilla warfare strategies and tactics, but the analysis that this Cuban revolution succeeded only because of him and his tactics, would not be an objectively correct one.

The success of the Cuban revolution needs to be understood in the context of the then international situation and the Cuban natural political condition. One very special or noteworthy aspect of the then international situation was: that through the 2nd World War, Fascism was destroyed and the balance of political force shared a major tilt towards socialism, which in turn laid the basis for many national liberation struggles to break forth with its euphoria and hope and armed struggle became a major component of most such liberation struggles. In 1959, Algeria liberated itself from the clutches of French imperialism based on an armed national liberation struggle. Cuba happened around the same time. All these (national liberation struggles) had the fullest support of Russia, China and the international communist movement. The document prepared at the 81 Communist Party session in 1960 declared: “This house expresses solidarity to all the brave anti-imperialist struggles being fought by the peoples across Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania ”. “The house expresses deepest respect and support to the brave, struggling people of Algeria for their own liberation and natural independence struggle and calls for an immediate cessation of the aggressive war being fought against Algeria”. The House, calls for the safeguarding of sovereignty, the sovereign rights of Cuba, Congo and other nations and countries who have achieved their independence, from any kind of interference on the sovereign rights of nations like Cuba, Congo and many others who have achieved their independence. “This house considers it its total and complete responsibility, whether moral or material, to support all socialist countries, to all the working class and communist movements, to all the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles of the people to liberate themselves from the tyranny and oppression of imperialism and colonialism.”

Other than the above mentioned open declaration there was special solidarity and support from China and Soviet Union for the Algerian and Cuban (liberation) struggles of these times. Soviet support stood very firmly by the Cuban revolutionary struggle. These solidarity and support provided added strength to these liberation struggles.

And what must be noted is the volcanic nature of overwhelming mass-struggles against the Batista government just prior to the Cuban revolution. The biographer of Che Guevara, L. Lavretsky, in his book on the 1956-1957 years the description for the Cuban situation he has given, is as follows:-

(Translator: quotes in English in the original Bengali article by PDG)

“The terror, arbitrariness, corruption, the embezzling of the state funds and grovelling before American businessman, the Pentagon and the State Department, typical of the Batista regime, provoked the indignation and discontent of the bulk of the island’s population excluding only the ranks of the police and army loyal to the dictator, corrupt bureaucrats, rich sugar industrialists, and that sector of local bourgeoisie which had banked its fortunes on co-operation with American capital.”

“In Cuba, Batista continued his atrocities. The police subjected the opposition to horrifying torture and threw the mutilated bodies onto the streets or into the ocean. The dictator broke off diplomatic ties with Soviet Union and other socialist countries, closed down the Cuban-Soviet Friendship Society, drove underground the Partido Socialista Popular – the party of the Cuban Communist Party and put the trade unions under the control of gangsters hired by industrialists. The American capitalists operated in the country, in the army and CIA in the police. Cuba was flooded with anti-communist and anti-Soviet literature. It had truly been turned into Yankee colony.

But the Cuban people were anything, but despondent. Cuban working people, intellectuals, university and high school students joined in the struggle against the tyrant and his American protectors. The underground press exposed Batista’s regime. Meetings, demonstration and strikes against the regime increased in frequency. The dictator was forced to close down all institutions of higher education in the country”. (I. Lavretsky: Ernesto Che Guevara, page 73 & 82).

In the context of the above-mentioned mass unrest against the Batista regime, occurred the 13th March 1957 armed insurrection led by the Havana based student organisation Directorio Revolucionario. That day the revolutionary students attacked the University, the Radio Station and Batista’s Palace; the aim was to capture Batista alive. But their insurrection failed; Batista’s army was able to crush them. But such was the upsurge of mass sentiment in support of the revolutionaries that within a few days Batista was forced to release all the revolutionaries. Many amongst these revolutionaries escaped to Mexico to draw up fresh plan. In Mexico public opinion was favourable towards the Cuban revolutionaries. Thus a public outrage broke out when Fidel Castro and others were arrested in Mexico. The ex-President of Mexico, Lazaro Cardenas, the ex-Naval Minister Heriberto Jara, Labour leader Lombardo Teledano, famous artist David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera and other famous professors and intellectuals

protested these arrests (of Fidel Castro and other Cuban revolutionaries by the then Mexican government). Under pressure, the Mexican government released Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolutionaries. This created the opportunity for the revolutionaries to undergo military training and plan organizing the next attack.

The above mentioned insurrection may have failed but in various corners of Cuba different revolutionary forces kept up their preparation for their next phase of struggles against Batista. On 5 September, 1957 sailors revolted; though it also failed. During the time, specially in 1958 the Cuban Communist Party decided to lend support to the revolt led by Fidel Castro and started quickly linking up and organizing different sections of revolutionary groups, working class, progressive forces; what was really noteworthy was that the American intelligence agencies and experts were not able to ascertain as to which particular group Fidel Castro and others were linked to i.e. owed allegiance to and they believed that even after Fidel Castro and others were successful in carrying out the revolution, they would be able to ‘negotiate’ with him and reach an agreement; because in the 20th century they had been able to “negotiate” with not less than 80 such ‘revolutions’ in Latin America and based on these agreements, kept their interest intact in these regions. Only this time the Cuban revolutionaries failed them, betrayed than. This was like a losing drama script.

All of the above reasons were responsible for the success of the Cuban revolution; to glorify just the guerilla struggle is to create an unnatural myth. At the time of the successful completion of the Cuban revolution, Che Guevara in an interview to the Pravda journalist Vasilli Chichkov, analyzing the balance of class-forces during revolution, said: “The revolution was carried out by the peasants for the most part. I think that among the rebels 60% were peasants, ten percent workers and 10 percent members of the bourgeoisie. Of course the workers were of immense help to us with their strike movement. But still the basic thrust of the revolution came from the peasantry”. (I. Lavretsky: Ernesto Che Guevara, Page 142) [Translator: English quote used in the original Bengali article]. This is the self-contradictory character of Che-ism.

*Translated from the Bengali by Natasa.
Avijit Wasi introduced and edited the translation.*