

Vinayak Purohit (1927-2009) - Veteran Indian Socialist and Prolific Intellectual

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I have received belated news that Dr. Vinayak Purohit, the veteran Indian socialist intellectual, died last December in Pune at the age of 82. Vinayak had been involved in the left movement since 1942, when at age 15 he joined an underground Trotskyist group fighting the British. In 1948 he went into the Socialist Party of India along with his Trotskyist comrades in what turned out to be a fruitless effort to steer that party to the left.

In 1956 Vinayak joined the new, militant Socialist Party that Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia launched to revitalize the movement. In 1962 Vinayak played a key role in bringing a historic motion of no confidence in the Nehru government to the vote in Parliament. After Lohia died in 1967, his Socialist Party disintegrated, leaving Vinayak adrift. He became an independent political journalist, well known for his biting attacks on just about every politician and party.

But Vinayak Purohit was not a man who lived by politics alone. He steeped himself in the rich culture of India. He became a music, drama, art, architecture, and film critic. In mid-life he earned a PhD in art history. He also wrote plays, made a film, and designed an immense architectural monument, the Gitai Mandir in Wardha. He wrote fluently in English, Gujarati, Hindi, and Marathi.

I interviewed Vinayak once, in 1974, when I was starting to research the history of the Trotskyist movement in India. I renewed contact with him in 2004, as I was finishing my book, *Tomorrow is Ours: The Trotskyist Movement in India and Ceylon, 1935-48*. His politics had changed dramatically (and in my opinion, for the worse). Having “moved through Marxism and Trotskyism,” as he put it, he evolved his own very nationalistic brand of what he called “revolutionary democratic-socialism.”

In 2005 Vinayak published, in pamphlet format, the first chapter of what he envisioned to be an open-ended autobiography, which he aptly titled “A Life of Surfeit and Overflow.” He published two more chapters in 2006 and 2008. He died while preparing the fourth. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes in this article are taken from these pamphlets.

Family Background and Upbringing

Vinayak Purohit was born in Calcutta in 1927. His father, Kailashnath Jagannath Purohit, was a wealthy, London-educated Gujarati businessman who ran a successful auditing firm. He was a deeply cultured man whose interests ranged across history, literature, classical Indian music, art, and politics. He was also a nationalist who surreptitiously contributed money to the clandestine Bengali revolutionary groups who terrorized the British officialdom in those days.

A child of affluence, Vinayak grew up with servants in a bungalow on Ray Street in Bhowanipore, which then was a posh residential area of South Calcutta. A stone's throw away was the ancestral home of the nationalist leader, Subhas Chandra Bose. Vinayak was privately schooled at Bhowanipore Gujarati Shala, which his parents had founded, and then at St. Xavier's Collegiate School, a prestigious Jesuit institution. Driven by curiosity even as a boy, he read books from his father's vast library, including studies of the Irish, Turkish, Persian, and Chinese nationalist movements and Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution.

In 1938, after his father died prematurely, the family moved to Bombay. Vinayak attended a progressive Montessori school in Vile Parle from 1939 to 1942 and then entered Elphinstone College, which was like the Harvard of India.

In August 1942, as Japanese forces pushed through Burma, Gandhi called upon the Indian people to commence a non-violent mass struggle to force the British to "quit India." The panic-stricken British government arrested Gandhi and the top-echelon Congress leaders. Vinayak, who was then 15 years old, went to a protest demonstration in Shivaji Park. A policeman clubbed him and left him on the ground with a fractured skull. As he joked later, "the hole in the skull allowed my brain scope for expansion."

Vinayak threw himself into the tumult of the Quit India revolt. In December 1942 he was arrested for "attempting to burn a policeman alive" while leading a torchlight procession.

Recruitment to the Revolution

As the protests subsided, Vinayak joined an underground cell of militants who were trying to keep the movement going. One of them recognized that this young hothead had real potential. He arranged for Vinayak to meet two Trotskyists, introduced as "Comrade Rup Singh" and "Comrade Dias." Only later did he learn that they were actually Philip Gunawardena and Colvin R. de Silva, the two main leaders of the Trotskyist party in Ceylon (Lanka Sama Samaja Party) who had come up to India to help build a Trotskyist party, the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI).

Vinayak recalls being "bowled over" by the articulate speech of the duo. They put their brainy 15-year-old recruit through a crash course in Marxism.

"The most memorable lesson that I learnt from Philip [Gunawardena] was his description of the comprador bourgeoisie as a 'squad of Tuppiahs.' This is the Sinhala term meaning the trained monkeys used by coconut growers to climb the tall trees and harvest the monthly crop of coconuts."

This contempt for the Indian elites who aped Western culture or enriched themselves as agents of the imperialists became one of his core values for the rest of his life.

Into the Underground

The clandestine BLPI group in Bombay became his new family. He lived in one of the party's communal flats in Bombay with a half dozen or more other young comrades. That made him prey for the police, who were combing Bombay, looking for the Trotskyists. Before dawn on July 15, 1943 the police raided their hideout and he was jailed in the Worli detention camp.

After his release seven months later, on the basis of his youth, he went back into the underground to continue the struggle. He found shelter in the slums with members of the Forward Bloc (followers of Subhas Chandra Bose), who were very sympathetic to the Trotskyists. He continued to study.

"I remember that I had begun to read the Encyclopedia Britannica in the Mumbai University Library from 1944 as though they were a set of novels, from cover to cover."

Detour into the Socialist Party

In 1948 Vinayak joined the Socialist Party along with the rest of his Trotskyist comrades. The BLPI had made that decision only after a prolonged internal debate. Vinayak had been part of the faction in the BLPI that wanted to merge with the Congress Socialist Party. His rationale was that the BLPI, as a tiny party, new to the scene, would have better prospects as a Trotskyist ginger group within the Socialist Party, which had recently withdrawn from its mother organization, the Indian National Congress, now the ruling party of independent India.

The Socialist Party assigned Vinayak, who was then 21-years-old, to serve as secretary of one of their unions, the Bombay Press Employees' Union. Though a novice to this kind of work, he learned quickly. As he recounted in his memoirs, he earned a reputation as "a fighting firebrand."

However, the entry into the Socialist Party didn't work out as he had expected. The Socialist leaders were too savvy to allow the Trotskyists to recruit to their own ginger group. No factional activity was allowed. As a result, the Trotskyists started to sink into the quicksand of the Socialist Party.

Dead End

In 1952, after their humiliating rout in the General Elections to the first Lok Sabha, the leadership of the Socialist Party decided, on their own, without calling a party conference, to merge with a breakaway group from the ruling Congress Party. Vinayak and his comrades opposed the merger, called a conference of dissidents, and tried to keep the rump Socialist Party going.

While the rump party had pockets of strength in Madras and a few other areas, Vinayak was isolated. In 1952 he "retired hurt from politics" and moved back to Calcutta. One of his father's associates hired him as a clerk at the National Insurance Company. His health deteriorated. He described this period as "my darkest days of political isolation and abject destitution."

The Break with Marxist-Trotskyist Politics

In 1956 Vinayak, eager to end his isolation, joined a new Socialist Party that had just been formed by Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, the veteran freedom fighter and old Socialist warhorse. In joining Lohia's party, Vinayak made a definitive break with the Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist politics of his youth.

Lohia was a radical nationalist who rejected Marxism as a White European ideology that was at best irrelevant to India. But he was a powerful orator, a charismatic personality, and a creative thinker. He gathered around him a team of talented, ambitious socialists, including Vinayak.

Vinayak became a regular contributor to *Mankind*, the journal that Lohia launched in 1956, and through his new trade-union connections, resumed his support work in the powerful Socialist trade unions in Bombay. By the 'sixties the Lohia Socialists (as they were then called) had become the main left opposition to what Vinayak regarded as the "comprador" Nehru government. In 1962 the Socialists tried to topple the Congress government through a no-confidence motion in Parliament. Vinayak played an important, albeit behind-the-scenes role in mustering the support the Socialists needed in Parliament to get the motion on the floor for the vote.

All that came to an abrupt end when Lohia died prematurely in 1967. His Socialist Party quickly disintegrated. Once again, Vinayak was left isolated.

"I would occasionally feel and suffer acutely from this sense of separation and isolation, but on the other hand, I was so absorbed and was in such a headlong rush to develop all sorts of other capabilities and occupations that I hardly had the time to dwell on this loneliness."

A Headlong Rush into the Arts

Like his father, Vinayak was a connoisseur of the arts, especially Indian music. As in politics, so too in music, he was fanatical and a fast learner. In 1956 he became the North Indian Classical Music critic for the premier English-language newspaper in India, the *Times of India*.

In 1971 Vinayak entered the PhD program at Bombay University, supporting himself by running a small advertising agency. Four years later he submitted his dissertation, *The Arts of Transitional India: Twentieth Century*, a 1,600-page tour de force covering history, aesthetics, and philosophy.

In 1971 he wrote his first play in Gujarati, *Steel Frame*, which was an indictment of the corrupt bureaucracy of independent India. (The title is a reference to the well-known phrase that was used to describe the Civil Service in British India.) He followed that with *Tribheto*, which took up the theme of the criminal bourgeois; *Amina ane Teno Zamano*, which deals with the criminalized politician; and *Byalis*, an extended parable of the Quit India movement. He wrote *Sociology of Art and Politics* (1989-92) and *Sociology of Indian Film* (1990).

The Revisionist Historian

Meanwhile, Vinayak was reading deeply in Indian history. He presented a series of papers at the annual sessions of the Indian History Congress from 1979 to 1982. These were provocative broadsides aimed at just about every school of thought – from the old British Imperial historians to the so-called Marxists (the Stalinists).

He started by attacking Marx and his thesis of the "Asiatic Mode of Production." Marx had recognized (in my opinion, correctly) that pre-colonial Indian society seemed to have little in common with the chaotic feudalism of Europe. In order to explain the relative stability of "Asiatic society," he posited that these societies must have been based on self-sufficient villages where private property in land (and hence class differentiation and struggle) hadn't developed. Citing a huge body of historical evidence to the contrary, Vinayak argued that this hypothesis isn't tenable.

But that raises the following question: If pre-British India wasn't like feudal Europe, and if it wasn't

an “Oriental Despotism” based on an Asiatic Mode of Production, then what was it? Vinayak answered that question by reversing the terms of the analogy. In his view, the benchmarks for measuring historical progress were the great civilizations that flourished on the Asian landmass for several millennia, not the poor, backward societies of the peripheral western peninsula of Asia, now called Europe that arose much later. In other words, we shouldn’t be asking if Asia had been feudal like Europe. We should be asking if Europe had been feudal like Asia.

Vinayak developed this seminal insight in the next three papers he presented to the Indian History Congress. In brief, he argued that India had evolved from a hunting-fishing-food-gathering society to a pastoral society in the period 7000BC to 4500BC; that the pastoral (or Vedic) society developed into a feudal society by 700BC; and that this feudal society went through four distinct stages prior to the arrival of the European colonialists.

“We had a feudal period which extended over 2,500 years. Indian feudalism was the most prosperous, the richest in export surpluses, and the most powerful that the world had ever known. It was precisely because it was so overwhelmingly strong that capitalism could not win against such an adversary. Capitalism triumphed in Europe from the 11th century onwards precisely because European feudalism was petty, divided, weak and poverty-stricken. The International Feudal Chain broke at its weakest link in Europe!” (Mankind, May 1999).

On the basis of this line of thinking, Vinayak rejected Marxism as hopelessly Eurocentric. I think he threw the baby out with the bath water. His theory is intriguing and deserves further study. And if it turns out to have merit, then I see no reason why this interpretation couldn’t replace the antiquated theory of the “Asiatic Mode” and thereby strengthen, rather than invalidate, Marxism in its totality.

His Credo

In an article in *Mankind* (October 1997) he wrote the following lines, which seem to me to be a fitting tribute to the man:

“I am an atheist. I do not believe in any god who is going to guide us. I am a humanist. I know that we must be guided by what is essentially human, that is within all of us. We are masters of our destiny. We can do that which is good for all of us. There are thousands of arguments - economic, political, sociological, biological, cultural - in favor of socialism. But the most overwhelming are the arguments based on ethics, morality, decency, fairness, justice, aesthetics and truth! This side of the question can never be lost sight of. The case for socialism is really very simple. It is a moral choice.”

Vinayak made his choice at age 15 and he lived it to the end.

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