

Remembering the Tiananmen Democrats (1989-2009)*

Paresh Chattopadhyay

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This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the great movement of the Chinese students centred on Beijing's Tiananmen square and the bloody suppression of this non-violent, democratic movement by the Chinese state power.

Between the first—"May Fourth"—movement, 1919, till the last—"Democracy Movement" of 1989—there had been several popular movements in China with mass participation of and often leadership by the students— the most important being the 1976—"April Fifth"—Movement at the funeral of Zhou Enlai, 1978 'Xidan Democracy Wall Movement during which the big character posters appeared often criticising public officials and public policies, student demonstrations in the winter of 1986-87, and finally, the "Democracy Movement" in 1989, starting on April 16, on the occasion of the death of the former general secretary of the communist party of China, Hu Yaobang, when the students and teachers of the various Beijing universities began putting up posters in memory of Hu Yaobang, and ending with its bloody suppression on June 3-4.

During the 1986-87 Movement demands were made by the students for better conditions for them, and for the country as a whole, democracy and freedom, honest elections, freedom of press, price controls and solidarity with student protesters across the country. The party accused the students of "raising the red flag to attack the red flag" and the student movement as that of "bourgeois liberalisation" which must be opposed. Those who from within the party sympathised with the movement—like the physicist Fang Lizhi—were expelled from the party. The general secretary of the party, Hu Yaobang had to give up his post for his positive attitude to the movement. Historically the majority of the Chinese intellectuals have submitted to the state, but the circumstances have evolved to a point where they were placed in opposition to the old men standing guard over the monopoly of power which they called "socialism." When Hu died on April 15, 1989, the

commemorative activities ignited the prairie fire of student revolt. This ex-general secretary was one of the very, very few who was open to the students' demand for democracy and liberty. A student activist later observed: "The mood was that something ought to be done in the year marking the seventieth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, the bicentennial of the great French Revolution and the fortieth anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China."

The four modernisations—those of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defense—initiated by Zhou Enlai and adopted by Deng Xiaoping had initially considerable support both inside and outside the Party as an alternative to the years of deprivation of the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976). Secondly, as economic reforms required relative independence of the scientists and artists, they were freer than during the Cultural Revolution years. (It should be noted in passing that the Maoist rhetoric particularly during the days of the Cultural Revolution *sounded* libertarian and many socialists and sympathisers of socialism around the world accepted it uncritically, genuinely believing that Mao was successfully building a self-managed socialist society). However, the Party's hierarchical and oppressive rules continued. Exactly as it had happened in other "socialist" lands since 1917, state machinery, the army, trade unions and other mass organisations continued to be subjected to the Party's absolute rule and the (in)famous principle of "democratic centralism"—individual obeying the organisation, minority obeying the majority, the subordinate obeying the superior and the whole Party obeying the Central Committee—continued to prevail. As regards the economy, the coexistence of market and the bureaucratic economy created a system of dual pricing—free market prices and the prices set by the state. This differential price system enabled the bureaucrats with power and influence to make substantial profit by simply diverting the state resources to the free market. Such activities accentuated the already existing shortages and inflation. Price increases adversely affected particularly the urban population which demanded higher wages accentuating further the ongoing inflationary process. The 1989 Democracy Movement of the students thus erupted within this context of rampant inflation, official profiteering and authoritarian Party rule. The most remarkable factor was the official corruption and bureaucratic privilege that had been a constant characteristic of the "socialist" regime for many, many years. An important aspect of this process was the use of public funds for practising nepotism as a means of establishing a *de facto* system of inheritance. As the economy opened up in 1980s new opportunities arose for these people.

Many bureaucrats and their families were involved in business and trading using their power and influence for personal profit. But they could not be touched. On the other hand, they put people in prison without trial and the torture of prisoners was endemic.

Controlling the media allowed the authorities to suppress the truth and generate false impressions, denying criticisms and preventing those in opposition.

Although freedom of speech is proclaimed in the Chinese Constitution it was clearly being violated. A participant of the Movement held that the suppression of the opposite voices was based on the logic: “Truth equals the world view of the proletariat, which equals Marxism, which equals world view of the CCP, which equals proclamations of the Party Organs, which equals views of the Party Leadership”, and then cited Marx: “freedom of speech, association, assembly is like soil, air and space.” According to the participants the Cultural Revolution and many other campaigns initiated by the CCP were clearly violations of the constitutional norms set by the same rulers. The civil rights of more than a billion people were denied for a long time. Several million people who were in the reform movements, Party and non-Party members, were persecuted and/or executed. “That is the CCP’s unforgettable crime against the Chinese people.”

On March 30, 1979, Deng Xiaoping announced four “Cardinal Principles” defining four limits of opposition,” Activities against Socialism, against Proletarian Dictatorship, against the leadership of the Party, against Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought prohibited according to law and will be prosecuted.” Following the participants of the Democracy Movement, Chinese politics reflects “eight-in-one” principle: “party and power as one, party and government as one, party and legal system as one, party and state as one, party and armed forces as one, party and people as one, party and economy as one, party and culture as one.” Theoretically all power belongs to the people and their representatives in the National People’s Congress since October 1, 1949. But the political programme of the CCP is not supported by a nation-wide general election, nor is the party’s will produced by the NPC. As a participant put it,” the fundamental shortcoming of all socialist countries is a political system that replaces people with bureaucrats as masters of society. The leader enjoys life long tenure of office with enough power even to appoint his own successor. Such a practice runs counter to the principles of republic and carries rather the characteristics of a monarchy. That is why socialist countries are republics in name only, and monarchies in reality. China’s socialism has been a feudalistic socialism which is the socialism of the Stalinist model. Stalin was a typical tyrant whose regime was a socialist monarchy, and that of Mao Zedong was of the same kind.” The participant asserted “I believe in communist blueprint outlined by Marx.” The dissident physicist Fang Lizhi (expelled from the Party for his sympathy with the Democracy Movement) observed: “Cultural Revolution movement was initiated by the leadership at the top downwards. From the first big character poster CR was a manipulation of the masses by the leaders. CR was a movement in which leaders hoodwinked the masses. (In

contrast) the Student Movement this time is a spontaneous one that grounds itself in the independent judgment of a large number of people. The Movement moves upwards from the base, urging leaders to change and make reforms.”

The participants of the Democratic Movement fought magnificently and completely non-violently for fifty days. “As a dynamic and peaceful movement it was unprecedented in Chinese history,” said Su Shaozhi, the ex-director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, dismissed during the “anti-bourgeois Liberalization” campaign in 1987. Tens of thousands stayed on in Beijing to carry on prolonged demonstrations, hunger strike and sit-in. They considered their Movement as an anti-patriarchal, anti-feudal and anti-authoritarian pro-socialist struggle. In course of the movement there appeared the demands “Overthrow the Autocracy”, “Down with Dictatorship.” The New China News Agency reported that people were shouting “Down with the Communist Party. “Slogans like “Long live Democracy, Human Rights, and Freedom” became loud and frequent. The *Internationale* was sung repeatedly with new meaning and significance. (This reminds one of the famous 1921 slogan of the Kronstadt sailors and toilers, “all power to the Soviets and not to Parties,” when they became completely disillusioned with the Bolsheviks, who ultimately massacred thousands of them on totally trumped up charges.) Finally,” the so-called People’s Liberation Army suppressed the students’ and citizens’ completely peaceful Democratic Movement with armed force, with a massacre followed by mass arrests and executions producing shocked criticisms around the world” (Su Shaozhi).

This ultimate act of the Chinese rulers, however, did not shock every body in India, certainly not everybody on the Left. Not to speak of the CPM members, we know also independent Marxists outside the Party who were not at all unhappy at this spectacle and even justified it on the ground that the participants in the Democracy Movement in their opposition to Chinese “socialism” with their demand for democracy and individual liberty were at least inspired by “American imperialism.” On the other hand, however shocking, this event should not surprise any one who has even a moderate knowledge of “socialism” in power in the twentieth century. Socialism, Chinese style, has been well within world “socialist” tradition inaugurated by the Bolshevik regime starting in 1917 *mutatis mutandis*. Victor Serge, Leninist till the end and a member of the executive committee of the Comintern—who was saved from execution or at least perpetual internment in a labour camp by the direct intervention of Romain Rolland with Stalin—wrote in his *Memoires* two decades after October, 1917: “The Russian Marxism, formed at the school of despotism, did not dare to show itself as libertarians or, rather, it did so only for a very short period of soviet democracy from October 1917 to the summer of 1918. Afterwards it

resolutely placed itself on the road of the old authoritarianism and, soon, totalitarian statism. It lacked the spirit of freedom. The fear of freedom, which is really the fear of the masses, characterizes almost the whole development of the Russian Revolution. The only problem that the revolutionary Russia of 1917-1923 could not pose is that of freedom, the only declaration which it was necessary to make and which it did not make is that of human rights.” Speaking particularly of the Stalin period Serge observed: “The soviet secret police “Tcheka” judged the accused without hearing or seeing them, that is, without giving the accused any possibility of self-defense, pronounced their arrest in secret and proceeded to their execution in the same way. The ultimate consequence was the extermination of a whole generation of Bolshevik revolutionaries.”

*We have liberally drawn on the excellent book(of collection of documents): *Voices from Tiananmen Square* edited by Mok Chiu and J. Frank Harrison (1990).