



By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA

Goa has lost a leading light in the death of Thälmann Pereira, advocate and trade unionist, and State Secretary of the Goa Unit of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Thälmann was born in 1962 into a communist household. His parents led the party in Goa and were intimately involved with it. This probably is why he was named after the founder of the Communist Party in Germany, Ernst Thälmann. Yet despite this proximate connection, he did not, unlike many Communist leaders, wear this legacy on his sleeve. So much so that even his wife, Rita Dey Pereira, said that she did not, during their courtship, have an idea of the amount of space the red (meaning Communist) flag occupied in his life. It began unfurling during the course of their married life, to use her own words.

Thälmann formally entered political work through the foundation of Student Federation of India, the student wing of the CPI (M), in Goa. Right from the moment of his entry into adulthood, Thälmann was faced with the challenge of aspiring to the stature of his father. Gerald Pereira, despite dying relatively young, had created ripples in Goa especially through his efforts, including meticulous research, to advance the cause of workers and the trade union movement in Goa. There were many who revered Gerald Pereira and Thälmann drew on his father's legacy to provoke them to expand their concerns to respond to the calls of the present times, especially the challenges posed by fascism, communalism, and the shrinking of democracy.



Thälmann packed a huge amount of work into his life. As a member of the Party, Thälmann led the CITU, the trade union wing of the CPI(M), was the vice president of Goa Mine Workers Union, Waterfront Workers Union, and many other unions in Goa, and the General Secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha, Goa Unit. Besides this, he also engaged with the unorganized sector, as, for instance, with street vendors in Ponda, and the slum-dwellers at Baina and Vasco. He had a knack of articulation which resulted in a better appreciation of the concerns of marginalized sections in society and facilitated some measure of change. Apart from this, he was also a founding member of the All India Lawyers Union (AILU) and worked actively to build it in Goa and the Western India region.

Under the aegis of the AILU, there were several major seminars and workshops organized around themes of contemporary concern, such as for instance, 'Special Status for Goa', 'Hijacking Land Grab for Development', 'Interference with the Independence of the Judiciary'. The object of these seminars was directed towards his conviction that along with

the need to create a space for, and deepen debate, there was also a need to expand access to information, a critical component of debate. Along with this was the task of mentoring of many lawyers that he took up with great seriousness, having elaborate meetings with them, besides using the social media with elan.

While once having been quite actively associated with the State's D.D.Kosambi Memorial lectures held periodically at Kala Academy, he then took the initiative with others to found the D. D. Kosambi Study Circle, and even attended its last major public meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2017, barely two days before his health collapsed following a galloping lung infection. Others present there did remark that he looked very tired and did not speak much.

Thälmann was once also associated with the Samata Andolan, a broad front of people who presented themselves as secular and condemned the demolition of Babri Masjid. I myself was also on its fringes. My mind goes back to a discussion that we had just prior to a march organized by the Samata Andolan to protest the demolition of the Babri Masjid. One of the demands posited by the Samata Andolan was Uniform Civil Code. I had shared with Thälmann my opinion that it was absurd to affirm the Uniform Civil Code as an antidote to what was happening at that point in time, when those who were in the forefront of the Babri Masjid demolition and the movement for building a Ram temple its place, were, simultaneously, also advocating Uniform Civil Code. He wasn't able to appreciate my argument then, probably because his party was also for UCC then. But unlike many who blindly toe the party line, Thälmann wasn't afraid to question. I imagine he must have been paying attention to the nuance of the discussion, because while the others kept talking of UCC, he got back in a couple of months and said, 'I've been thinking about it and now see your point'.

This is an attitude that characterized Thälmann's journey all along. He was willing to revisit, rethink, and review positions. Which doesn't mean his stands on issues were fragile. It was simply that he was genuinely interested in finding solutions, was not rigid, and employed a dialectical approach. Sometimes, when I would tease him that party members have to follow the party line and he will also end up doing so, he would remark that party discipline is important, but so is engaging more meaningfully and appropriately with people on matters that concern them. This said something of a person who came from the traditional Left in Goa, or in India, which is known for finding it very difficult to budge from official positions, even when the situation clearly warrants revisiting. His was the kind of intellectual honesty that is increasingly difficult to find.

While Thälmann gave no quarter to communalism, it did not prevent him from aligning with right-wing-party-affiliated trade unions in order to further immediate short-term workers' causes. This included demanding or negotiating wage hikes or better working conditions. All of this while not compromising on his core politics centred around power to the working class. Thälmann was convinced that this was good strategy in so far as his constituency of the working class goes.

His critique was sharp and clearly reflected that his articulations were holistic and from the standpoint of the marginalized sections. Here is an example. There is a tendency when analyzing Goa's politics to lay the blame at the door of one person and demonise him. In 2011, preceding the CCP elections, a then-new formation called Friends of Good Governance (FOGG) had called upon the municipal voters of Panaji to vote for a Parrikar-backed panel under the name of Panaji First. FOGG's assurance was that the members of the panel they had put up, would be under their (FOGG's) control if voted to power, and their primary agenda seemed to be Babush Hatao, Panaji Bachao. Babush of course meant Atanasio Monserrate. Thälmann was quick to point out that "Diagnosing Monserrate as

Panaji's sickness betrays a poor social understanding of the warped pro-rich trend in Goa's development, which is the reason why it costs the *aam admi* Rs 60 to travel 2 km from waterlogged KTC to the stinking sewers at Junta House, even as Rs 100 crore of his money was spent on building a 3-km speedway from Divja Circle (near KTC bus stand) to Kala Academy."

On another occasion, when a series of public lectures called Goa Dakshinayan was being organized in November 2016, purportedly to foster a debate among a galaxy of intellectuals, Thälmann pointed out how the issues of atrocities and discrimination against SC, ST and OBC, as well as issues of anachronistic upper caste domination in public spaces, seemed to be conspicuously absent from the agenda.

In 2011, when the Centre for Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy of Goa University had organized a seminar on Lokpal, at a time when India was bustling with the anti-corruption movement and a series of demonstrations were being held, Thälmann pertinently yet politely questioned the timing of the programme and remarked that "you don't write the history of a war in the midst of a battle" and be that as it may, he still called on the participants to do some empirical research on civil society in Goa and its relation with the State.

Thälmann's positioning was also strategic. For instance, on the mining issue, he was concerned about the state of the mining ban affected workers on the one hand, the consequences of mining for the farmers in the area on the other hand, even as he called for immediate take-over of all mines in Goa by the government in order to run them on a scientific and sustainable basis. He later also supported the Cavrem Villagers' community

initiative for people-controlled mining.

With the rise of social media, Thälmann jumped into it with elan. He could be found engaging in heated discussions on Whatsapp and Facebook into the wee hours of the night, after a full day's work in the courts, in his office, and on the streets.

As a practicing lawyer, Thälmann took up his share of pro bono cases. He also took up social interest litigation at various levels. In recent times, he had taken up cases challenging the non-implementation of reservations at the Goa University. He was professionally sound, thus effectively dislodging the idea that activism is the realm of those unfit to do anything else. At the same time, he was not a desk-thumping lawyer. On the contrary, he addressed issues in his cases strategically, with conceptual clarity, and incisive thinking.

His enthusiasm and never-say-die approach was also witnessed at close quarters by those of us in the Social Justice Action Committee-Goa, an organization founded through his initiative, to take forward the concerns of those marginalized because of caste and ethnicity. Even at the last meeting of the Committee before his death, though he arrived late, after travelling from Margao to Panjim just for the meeting, he immediately plunged into the discussion and enthusiastically agreed to take on much more responsibility than the rest of us.

At the end, and perhaps above all, I would like to retain the memory of his naughty grin as he jovially strove on, carrying multiple struggles lightly on his shoulders, and spending long hours through the day and most of the night as well without sleep, till he was taken away,



creating a void here, which is difficult to fill.

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