

A Meeting with Che Guevara

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Che Guevara; "an inspiration for every human being who loves freedom" –Nelson Mandela.

Che Guevara is "not only an intellectual but also the most complete human being of our age"—Jean-Paul Sartre.

"The first thing to note is that in my son's veins flowed the blood of the Irish rebels, the Spanish conquistadores and the Argentinean patriots. Evidently Che inherited some of the features of our restless ancestors. There was something in his nature which drew him to distant wanderings, dangerous adventures and new ideas. " — Ernesto Guevara Lynch, Che's Father

1965 was a very eventful year in Algeria . Jammu and Kashmir leader Sheikh Abdullah, who had been released from prison in India , under the pretext of seeing Algerian Revolutionary leader and President Ben Bella turned up in Algiers and met with Chinese Prime Minister Chou en Lai, also visiting Algeria . Soon after, President Ben Bella himself, residing at the People's Palace, just across my flat on Rue Franklin Roosevelt, was overthrown in a peaceful coup d'état by Houari Boumedienne, the military chief of the Algerian Liberation Army. Twice, preparatory meetings for the Second Afro-Asian Summit failed to agree on an agenda or the date or even the venue.

But it is the 80th anniversary of Che Guevara's birth on 14 June and the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution which Che helped plan and execute with Fidel Castro, which brought back memories of the visit to Algeria of that legendary revolutionary icon of 1960s and beyond.

Having won its independence from France three years earlier after a bloody 8 year long guerrilla war, in which a million Algerians out of eleven million population were sacrificed, Algeria was then at the forefront of struggle against colonialism and imperialism. Its capital Algiers was a thriving hub for freedom movements and revolutionary groups from all over Africa, Asia and elsewhere. Every week there were seminars, meetings and summits for Arab, Afro-Asian and Third World solidarity and struggle. It was for one such seminar in February 1965 that Che Guevara himself, then Minister of Industry in the Cuban government turned up. He was indisputably the dazzling star of the show. After the meeting people queued up to shake his hand and so did I, then posted as a young diplomat at Algiers . I said hello and perhaps added how are you. It was like getting an autograph of a celebrity.

With only a few years into the diplomatic service after an engineering degree from Banaras I was still reading up on history and international relations and was not fully cognizant of the

Che Guevara phenomenon and his revolutionary past. But the man had a charismatic presence in green olive fatigues and black beret at a rakish angle. The very best of the Hollywood and Bollywood stars all rolled into one; say our Ajit, Raj Kumar, Dharmendra, Errol Flynn et al. Later when I recounted my meeting and shaking hands with Che, many students, leftists and ladies would shake my hand to partake some of that revolutionary 'barkat' which might still be lingering in my fingers.

Later I learnt more about Che (so nicknamed because of his constant use of Che – dear), his full name being Ernesto Guevara de la Serna. Born in 1928 in a well educated middle class Argentine family, he was the eldest of five siblings. He played excellent chess as a child and was an aggressive rugby player. During adolescence and later he remained passionate about poetry, especially that of Neruda, Keats, Machado, Lorca, Mistral, Vallejo and Whitman. He could also recite Kipling and Hernandez from memory. A home library of more than 3,000 books, allowed him to be an enthusiastic and eclectic reader of philosophers and poets, even writings of Jawahar Lal Nehru (with whom Che had lunch during the visit to New Delhi), apart from Marxist and existentialist writers.

He had a brilliant medical academic career and was an exceptional athlete in spite of asthma. But his motorcycle trips across Latin America, where he encountered American imperialism at first hand changed his vision of the world. A bloody revolution was necessary to throw out capitalism and imperialism.

"After graduation, due to special circumstances and perhaps also to my character, I began to travel throughout America, and I became acquainted with all of it. Except for Haiti and Santo Domingo, I have visited, to some extent, all the other Latin American countries. Because of the circumstances in which I traveled, first as a student and later as a doctor, I came into close contact with poverty, hunger and disease; with the inability to treat a child because of lack of money; with the stupefaction provoked by the continual hunger and punishment, to the point that a father can accept the loss of a son as an unimportant accident, as occurs often in the downtrodden classes of our American homeland. And I began to realize at that time that there were things that were almost as important to me as becoming famous for making a significant contribution to medical science: I wanted to help those people." — Che Guevara in 1960.

After finishing his medical studies, he reached Guatemala in December 1953, where President Jacob Arbenz Guzman heading a democratically elected government, through land reforms and other measures, was attempting to improve the condition of the peasants. Che wanted to settle down in Guatemala, but for the overthrow of the Arbenz government by Washington which confirmed Guevara's view that USA as an imperialist power would oppose and attempt to destroy any regime that sought to redress the socio-economic inequality endemic to Latin America and other developing countries. This strengthened his conviction that Marxism achieved through armed struggle and defended by an armed populace was the only way to rectify such a condition.

Che then shifted to Mexico city in September 1954, and renewed his friendship with the Cuban exiles he had known in Guatemala. In June 1955, he met with Raul Castro and later his older brother, Fidel Castro, the revolutionary leader who was planning to overthrow the dictatorship of US backed Fulgencio Batista in what became hallowed as the Cuban Revolution. Guevara recognized at once that Castro was the cause for which he had been searching for. He joined Castro and was promoted as Commander in Castro's 26 July

Movement, playing a pivotal role in the successful guerrilla campaign to overthrow the Batista. After Castro's army rolled victoriously into Havana the revolutionary government in February, 1969 proclaimed Guevara "a Cuban citizen by birth" in recognition of his role in the triumph.

After the revolution Che served in many prominent governmental positions, including as president of the national bank, minister of industry, and "supreme prosecutor" over the revolutionary tribunals and executions of suspected war criminals from the previous regime. He also went traversing around the globe to meet with an array of world leaders to explain and promote the Cuban socialism. Che was a prolific writer and diarist. One of his most prominent published works includes a manual on the theory and practice of guerrilla warfare.

Time Magazine, which described Che Guevara as one of the hundred most influential persons of the 20th century wrote that ; "Che convinced Castro with competence, diplomacy and patience. When grenades were needed, Che set up a factory to make them. When bread was wanted, Che set up ovens to bake it. When new recruits needed to learn tactics and discipline, Che taught them. When a school was needed to teach peasants to read and write, Che organized it. "

The Cuban revolution, still survives in spite of American endeavours to undermine it and many attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro himself. Cuba remains a beacon and has inspired revolutionaries and leftist regimes around the world especially in Latin America . More so after the collapse of the Soviet Union and ongoing transformation of China into a bourgeoisie state. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela is a most striking example. Many other independent leaders are being elected in Latin America , who are following the pro-people policies of Chavez and trying to extricate their countries from the grip of US and other multinationals.

Che had come to Algeria after visiting many important Afro-Asian nations like China , India , Yugoslavia , Egypt . This visit turned out to be his last public appearance on the international stage. In a speech at the economic seminar on the importance of Afro-Asian solidarity, he specified the moral duty of the socialist countries and accused them of tacit complicity with the exploiting Western countries. He proceeded to outline a number of measures which he said the communist-bloc countries must implement in order to accomplish the defeat of imperialism.

Che appeared closer to Mao's ideology. It was an implicit criticism of the Soviet Union, Cuba 's main support and bulwark against implacable US hostility, which continues to this day. Ideological differences with Castro on USSR 's policies brought some coolness in relations between Castro and Guevara. After Algiers , Che did return to Cuba but left soon after and dropped out of public life and then vanished altogether.

There were many media reports of his appearance with USA 's CIA very much on his trail and keenly interested in his activities. It appears that he first helped Patrice Lumumba's cause in Congo , but did not achieve much success. In late 1966 he went over to Bolivia to set up guerrilla training groups to help dissidents to the regime. US was keeping a watch on his movements but Che was unaware that Washington had sent CIA and other operatives, including one Felix Rodriguez into Bolivia to aid the government forces which had been trained, advised, and supplied by US Army Special Forces trained in jungle warfare.

In October, 1967, Che's group was attacked by the Bolivian army. Guevara, who was wounded in the attack, was captured, but he died defiantly. A panicky Bolivian regime, afraid of reaction around the world if he were tried and US demands, got him executed. Moments before his execution Che was asked if he was thinking of his own immortality. "No," he replied, "I'm thinking about the immortality of the revolution." A jittery and shaking Bolivian soldier chosen to kill him, had trouble pulling the trigger. Che asked him to steady himself and take a clean aim. He was only 40 years old. Few revolutionaries like Mao and Fidel live to grow old. And Mao's China is far from a revolutionary state now. In July, 1997, Che Guevara's remains though not exhumed were definitely identified by two experts who were "100 percent sure", were discovered in Vallegrande in Bolivia. A 19 July ceremony in Havana, attended by Fidel Castro and other Cuban officials, marked the return of Che's remains to Cuba and in an 17 October, 1997 ceremony attended by Castro and thousands of Cubans, Che Guevara's were reburied in Santa Clara, Cuba

Che's unflinching will, self sacrifice and idealism have given him a saint-like halo and reverence among his followers around the world. His theories and treatises on guerrilla warfare still remain a beacon for the young and the revolutionary as they were for the 1968 students uprising in Paris and elsewhere, for example, among the leftist Marxist students of Turkey in early 1970s, who also studied the Naxabari movement and lapped up theories of Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal from Indian Bengal. But there was also Geetanjali and Geeta along with Marxist literature found with leftist students in Ankara. Soon after 9/11, many Muslim radicals in the Arab world wrongly tried to compare Osama ben Laden with Che.

Che's memories now live on in photos, music, theater pieces, movies, poems, novels, sculptures and scholarly texts. To coincide with his 80th birthday celebrations, a collection of vintage Che Guevara prints are on display in Austria, including the iconic 1960 Alberto Korda portrait of him in a beret. Exhibitions of his photographs including of his visit to India in 1960s is being held in New Delhi. A new statue has been unveiled in his native Argentina. The larger-than-life "Monument to Che" statue weighs three tons and towers 13 feet high, topped off with the revolutionary's famed starred beret. Guevara had left the city in 1953 as a young doctor embarking on a trip throughout Latin America, a journey depicted in the 2004 movie "Motorcycle Diaries."

But the universal consumer society today exploits even Che's fame and name to sell designer clothes, beer, films and books. The "Brand Equity" writers in USA who claimed "End of History" aka triumphalism of US capitalism have said much and written numerous volumes about the failure of socialism in former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe but little about the failure of capitalism for two thirds of humanity, the four billion people that live below the poverty line. Nikolai Ceausescu remains the most important leader in Romania's history according to a recent poll. Russian leader Vladimir Putin, whom US President George Bush once asked to implement democracy as in Iraq (some sick joke) consistently gets over 70% in popularity poll, while Bush's popularity is at an all time low of any US president, touching a low 30%.

The result of globalization, policies of IMF and WTO with consequent increased income inequalities in USA and elsewhere and sliding of the capitalist system towards failure, will only add further misery to poverty ridden masses around the world. The crash of expectations built on rabid and unabashed consumerism and financial speculations based on fiat currency created liquidity leading to high oil prices and scarce and expensive food is already leading to strikes over energy price increase and riots over food shortages around

the world. .

The era immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall would be remembered for the political, social and economic decline in human evolution and condition; in regard to basic rights, equality, fraternity and well being. USA and UK are becoming police states with constant surveillance and spying on its own citizens and abridgment of civil liberties. Corporate media and government controlled BBC churn out spins, half truths and blatant lies. And how to describe US spending on defence (against whom) which is as much as the rest of the world put together. Not to protect USA but to maintain unbridled hegemony as shown in its naked and illegal aggression on Iraq for its oil, followed by rampant and continued looting and destruction of that country. Over a million Iraqis have been killed, millions of children rendered orphans and 4 million Iraqis made refugees in a population of 25 million.

US leaders had the obscenity to describe the March 2003 invasion as 'Operation Iraqi freedom' as part of a so called plan to 'spread democracy' in the Middle East . Now, daily, Iran is being threatened with bombing, even with nuclear weapons by Israel and USA . Where will this unbridled greed, capitalism and globalization would lead to?

But there is some hope. The fierce Iraqi resistance against US military machine now bogged down in a quagmire. Unmasking of aura of invincibility of Israel by Lebanese Hezbollah fighters. Defiance by Iran against US and 3 European powers. The fast changing scene in Latin America favouring pro-people governments and decline of US hegemony. Overthrow of the monarchy in Nepal and Maoist movements in many Indian states ruled by corrupt political elites.

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