

## TOWARDS A REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO HEALTH

Sometime during the last year, some of us working in the field of health realised that there was a need for a separate periodical which would analyse and discuss health issues from a broadly marxist perspective. *Socialist Health Review* (SHR) is being published with a conviction that it would fulfil this need by acting as a platform for discussion and helping the propagation and development of a marxist analysis of health (i. e. determinants and dynamics of health and disease) and medicine (i. e. medical technology as well as systems of medical care).

It may well be asked as to what the necessity is of a separate periodical when there exists a plethora of journals devoted to both marxism as well as health. Since the 70's various groups and individuals with different ideological positions have been working in the field of health. Many health workers, and doctors have, through their exposure to people's struggles to change the oppressive social reality, been attracted to the left movement and specifically to marxism. They have come to realise the need for a substantial, radical critique of health and medicine. Moreover, most marxist doctors, health workers in India are more or less ignorant about marxist analysis of health and medicine. But with the growth of the health and science movements in India, we have all increasingly felt the need to know and to develop a marxist analysis of health and medicine. At the same time, many political activists and social workers too, as a result of their exposure to health problems have realised the relevance of such an exercise. The growth of people's science movements in the country (e. g. Lok Vignyan Sangathana in Maharashtra, Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad, Kerala) has also contributed to this awareness. Activists of these movements have been exposed to, and have also challenged the existing health and medical care system and consequently, have realised the need for analysing them. All these developments have resulted in generating an awareness amongst medicos, social workers and political activists of the relevance of radical health praxis to the left movement.

Such an analysis not only advances the general theory of radical political action — which we believe to be critical for any fundamental change in the health situation — but also provides a specific

theoretical direction for radical health action. As of today, in India, there is little understanding of various theoretical questions related to health and medicine: the political economy; the bourgeois, male dominated ideological positions; underlying positivist outlook etc. As argued earlier, the need to develop such a theory through mutual discussions and debates does exist. Given the geographical distances that separate us, the best solution the situation offers is a periodical.

Now, it could be argued that existing forums like the *Medico Friends Circle Bulletin* could be utilised for this purpose. We feel that periodicals like these have played and will continue to play the very purposeful role of exposing socially conscious individuals to concrete alternatives and in developing a radical democratic critique of health and medicine. But, they have an inherent limitation in that the divergent or sometimes equivocal ideological commitments of their readership makes a discussion from a particular ideological standpoint, especially the marxist one, a futile affair. Even when it does take place, much of the rigour is lost.

Periodicals like the *EPW*, and *Social Scientist*, while publishing marxist analyses of society have an obvious limitation in that they cover a wide field and therefore, they cannot become platforms for continuous debates on health and medicine only.

This in short, is the *raison d'être* of a separate periodical devoted to propagating and developing a marxist theory of health and medical care, a task which SHR proposes to undertake.

### Editorial Policy

As stated earlier SHR will function as a forum for propagating and developing a marxist approach to health and medicine. By a marxist approach we mean that analytical approach which takes a historical materialist and dialectical view of the health of a people and the medical care system in a given social order. From a marxist standpoint, health can be considered as a part and consequence of economic, political and socio-cultural development of society. The problems of health and the health care system reflect the problems of the dialectic of production forces and production relations and the broader social order based on it. They cannot be separated from the problems of this broader social order. As health care and medicine operate today

through public institutions and private clinics, insights into who controls them and how this control operates is significant for such an approach. The role played by these institutions in social control and reinforcement of the existing ideology would be the focus of such an analytical approach.

The editorial policy will aim to present the various currents which have contributed to the development of such an approach to health and medicine. It must be emphasised here that in our opinion, there does not exist one single, marxist analysis — an all correct perfect 'line' so to say, of health and medicine. Only a continuous interaction at the level of praxis amongst the different trends within the marxist movement can lead to the process of distilling the truth. Therefore, SHR will contain articles and viewpoints reflecting this diversity in marxist thought albeit with the limitations spelt out later.

We believe that the women's health movement has added a new dimension to the critique of the organisation and contents of medicine. Therefore, SHR will also contain reflections mainly of the marxist-feminist viewpoint — and sometimes even of the non-marxist ones — directed towards the exposure of the ideological substructure of the developments in medicine.

The Illichian trend is characterised by its criticism of the bureaucratising and centralising tendency of modern health care systems, while overlooking the class basis of these tendencies. It has nevertheless contributed to the critical views on medical care in bourgeois society. This is despite the fact that this criticism arises from within the bourgeois ideological standpoint. Occasionally, this current may, too, find a place in this periodical.

These three points of view have one common direction: they oppose the existing ideological position dominant in the sociology of medicine, one rooted in the structural-functional school. This school assumes the neutrality of medicine (and all sciences) and examines the health care systems without reference to the character of society. It refrains from a political analysis of the medical system and places great emphasis on the social factors affecting health without enquiring into the root cause of their existence, the economic base of society.

It is this commonality that forms the justification for including them together in this periodical.

Of late, there has been a spurt in the literature on the marxist analysis of health and medicine in

the US and other western countries. Many of us are not exposed to these, as not all of us have an easy access to the relevant reading material. Therefore, the periodical will contain reproductions of such articles with introductory comments wherever necessary.

In order to develop a 'concrete analysis of a concrete situation', SHR would encourage publication of original articles pertaining to the Indian situation and debates and comments thereupon. We expect that in a short time, original articles will form the bulk of the periodical.

Keeping in view the development of the marxist movement in general, the following, viewpoint must be strictly observed while writing articles:

1. The central propositions of the article must be worked out logically with supporting evidence.

2. Subsidiary propositions and other statements regarding the economic and political situation, for example, the nature of mode of production in India, strategies of revolution etc. must have a direct bearing on the central propositions. It is an imperative in order to avoid a debate on these issues on the pages of this periodical (though these are obviously essential for political activists) to prevent irrelevant generalisations.

In addition to these main articles, SHR will also contain features like news, book reviews, reports, letters to the editor and so on.

**SHR's relation to the left movement**  
Being a periodical devoted to theoretical aspects of health and medicine does not propose to be an action-oriented periodical in the sense of an organiser of an action group. We believe that the formulation and clarification of these theoretical issues are essential for successful, politically relevant action and in that way, the periodical would facilitate effective health action, in the manner after journals like *Monthly Review* or *Social Scientist*.

We feel that the very fact of the need for a periodical having been felt indicates that the marxist movement within the broad left movement has reached a stage of maturity though not of one necessitating a formal organisation. But, this does not and cannot, preclude the possibility of formation of such an organisation in future.

At present, SHR would contribute to the theoretical fund of marxist analyses which is particularly deficient in this respect in India. We consider

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In order to develop a 'concrete analysis of the concrete situation', SHR would encourage publishing of original articles pertaining to the Indian situation and debates and comments thereupon. We hope that in a short time, original articles will form the bulk of the periodical.

Keeping in view the development of the Indian marxist movement in general, the following, in our view, must be strictly observed while writing original articles:

1. The central propositions of the articles must be worked out logically with supporting empirical evidence.

2. Subsidiary propositions and other general statements regarding the economic and political situation, for example, the nature of mode of production in India, strategies of revolution etc. must have a direct bearing on the central propositions. This is imperative in order to avoid a debate on these issues on the pages of this periodical (though these are obviously essential for political activists) and to prevent irrelevant generalisations.

In addition to these main articles, SHR will also contain features like news, book reviews, field reports, letters to the editor and so on.

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We feel that the very fact of the need for such a periodical having been felt indicates that the health movement within the broad left movement has reached a stage of maturity though not of a level necessitating a formal organisation. But, this does not and cannot, preclude the possibility of formation of such an organisation in future.

At present, SHR would contribute to the general fund of marxist analyses which is particularly deficient in this respect in India. We consider this

deficiency, even mistakes and distortions within the left movement, as our deficiency, mistakes and distortions. And if they have to be criticised — which of course, they need to be — the criticism should be a self-criticism, with a view to improve upon the past and the present so that the movement proceeds with unity, strength and on a politically correct path towards its historical goal. Let me make it clear that we do not stand for a goody-goody, come-what-may-we-shall-stay-united type of left unity but we certainly oppose the kind of sectarianism that leads us to mutual mud-slinging while the enemy without goes unexposed and unchallenged.

### In this issue

To drive home the point made above regarding the relationship of the problems of health and medicine with those of society in general, we open our publication with an overview of Health and Politics.

In any class society, and by the same logic, in bourgeois society, every institution is controlled by a class/classes to further its/their own interests against certain other class/classes. Under the hegemony of the bourgeois, health has become a commodity and consequently, there has been a proliferation of health 'producing' institutions and businesses. And according to the same logic, they are controlled by the bourgeoisie to perpetuate and justify their hegemony. The articles appearing in this inaugural issue set the keynote of the marxist approach to health and medicine.

Howard Waitzkin in his article (a reproduction) *A Marxist View of Medical Care* reviews marxist literature on health and medicine. The article shows how the present health system reflects the class structure of capitalist society and how this class structure manifests itself in various ways: control over health institutions, stratification of health workers, health policy etc. He goes on further to show the penetration of monopoly capital into the 'medical-industrial complex'. The article deals briefly with the concepts of historical materialist epidemiology focussing on the effects of economic cycles, social stress, working conditions and sexism on health.

Amar Jesani and Padma Prakash in their article *Political Economy of Health Care in India* select one aspect of the relationship of health and politics and put it in the Indian perspective. They lucidly trace

the connection between the economic base of Indian society and health system.

Binayak Sen's article focusses on areas which have either been dealt with only superficially in Waitzkin's article or not at all.

Anant Phadke introduces the book *Cultural Crisis of Modern Medicine* edited by John Ehrenreich, with his critical comments thereupon.

From this issue onwards, each issue will be devoted to one aspect of health and medicine.

### An Appeal

Our reader friends would agree that building up a platform for the task envisaged by SHR requires a lot of collective effort. We appeal to our comrades to accept this challenge and extend their fraternal support to this venture. There are several ways in which SHR could be helped:

As with any other publication of this type, SHR too, badly needs financial support. Although several friends have promised to collect funds, the total amount would just be barely sufficient for the first few issues only. Financial support for SHR could be enlisted by either enrolling subscribers or collecting donations.

In case, you are unable to contact a person whom you know would be interested, his/her address could be sent to us. We would send the first issue with an appeal for subscription/donation.

Original articles or reproductions including theoretical analyses, relevant research papers, reports of alternatives in health care, reports of health care in post-revolutionary societies, book reviews etc., could be sent to us for publication. (See back cover).

SHR is a platform of discussion. Hence opinions of the readers regarding the production of the periodical material published and of course, the views presented here are welcome — nay, necessary for the growth of this periodical.

If one goes by the enthusiastic response we have received so far it would not be too much to hope that the Socialist Health Review in a short time, would become a leading theoretical organ of the growing health movement within our country and would contribute significantly to the general fund of marxist literature.

**Dhruv Mankad**