

FEBRUARY 2024

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Modi Govt Conspires to 'Export' Indian Workers to Israel

Aishik Saha

Israel's proposition to 'import' Indian workers is akin to indentured slavery. The Indian working class must rebuff all such attempts

As Israel continues to escalate its genocidal war against the Palestinian people, it is finding itself increasingly isolated from the rest of the world. All its attempts at 'normalisation', painstakingly built through supporting authoritarian reactionary rulers from Morocco to Bahrain over the decades, has now been undone. The massive upsurge of the youth and the working class against the Israeli occupation of Palestine means that Israel is unsure of its long-term dependence on the West.

Apart from the Ansarallah/Houthi militias threatening to disrupt Israeli commerce in the Red Sea, the war has taken a very heavy toll on the Israeli economy. It is estimated that the war is costing Israel \$220 million USD (₹1,831 crore INR) every day. Gross domestic product will fall — from forecasts of 3 percent growth in 2023 to 1 percent in 2024, according to the Bank of Israel. Some economists predict contraction.

Mobilisation of 220,000 IDF reservists have weakened major sectors of Israel's economy especially in tech, agriculture, finance, navigation, and pharmaceuticals. Tourism has ended and Israeli exports of gas from its Mediterranean gas fields has also stopped. Crucially, Israel has withdrawn the work permits of 100,000 Palestinians, mainly employed in the construction sector. In order to replace them, Haim Feiglin, vice president of the Israel Builders' Association, told Voice of America in early November, that they were negotiating with India to import workers.

Reinventing Indentured Slavery

In May, 2023, during the visit of the Israeli foreign minister Eli Cohen to New Delhi, both countries signed an agreement for 42,000 Indian workers in Israel, out of which 34,000 were to be brought into the construction industry. Such treatment of Indian workers by the government as an exportable commodity is reprehensible in itself, but the further implication that they can 'replace' Palestinians is even more dehumanising.

A 2015 report by Human Rights Watch pointed out that Thai agricultural workers faced low pay, excessive working hours, hazardous working conditions, and poor housing. Another report from February 2023 demonstrates how foreign caregivers are trapped in Israel through debt incurred on recruitment fees. Many of these

workers have remained trapped in Israel, an active warzone, because they have essentially become trapped by debt. What guarantees are there that Indian workers will not be subject to the same conditions?

The use of Indian indentured workers in colonial economies is not new. From 1834 to the end of the WWI, Britain had transported about 2 million Indian indentured workers to 19 colonies including Fiji, Mauritius, Ceylon, Trinidad, Guyana, Malaysia, Uganda, Kenya and South Africa. The BJP government is taking Indians down the same path of colonial subservience.

The proposed deal with Israel isn't the only such deal being made by the BJP. In December 2023, the Union Cabinet approved the Migration and Mobility Agreement between India and Italy according to which India will send 12,000 non-seasonal workers and 8,000 seasonal workers to Italy every year. Naturally, this brings into focus the Modi government's failure to ensure employment of Indians in India.

Recent reports have suggested that the Haryana and Uttar Pradesh governments have initiated a recruitment drive through the National Skill Development Corporation for skilled professionals such as carpenters, masons, electricians, plumbers, and welders. The Modi government had launched the 'Skill India' project with much fanfare in 2015 with an aim to train 30 crore workers for India's growing economy. Nothing could speak more about the abject failure of the project than the use of the same portal to export Indian workers today. According to promotional documents reviewed by The Hindu, the workers will not receive medical coverage or employment guarantees, protections that the government offers to Indians going to most Gulf nations for employment. Neither will they be able to register on the External Affairs Ministry's e-Migrate portal, which was introduced by the Centre in 2015 to streamline guarantees for workers. Instead they will have to pay ₹10,000 as facilitation fees to NSDC! Has the Government of India been reduced to the role of a glorified labour contractor?

The greatest draw for workers is the rumoured promise of a monthly salary of 6,100 shekels (₹ 1.37 lakhs) which undoubtedly is a high salary by Indian standards. However, it needs to be borne in mind that the cost of living in Israel is the highest in all of Middle East as well. According to Numbeo, a website that estimates living costs around the world, a basic cost of living in Tel Aviv, i.e., without any recreation, rent, or insurance, is 2,754 shekels a month. For a quick comparison,

one kilogram of rice is 10.68 shekels (more than ₹ 270). In fact, rent in Israel is so incredibly high that it has become a major reason why many Israelis have left their country to settle in the Palestinian territory of West Bank. There is simply no way to live as a migrant worker with in less than 5,000 shekels. Workers will even have to pay for their own flight fares as suggested by reports.

Perhaps the greatest lie being told to workers is that Israel is 'safe' for workers. Israel is a relatively small country, and the coastal plains of Israel which is the most densely populated part of the country, is barely 10 km wide. In Northern Israel, shelling between IDF and Hezbollah in Lebanon has forced Israelis to abandon villages. In Golan Heights (occupied from Syria), the IDF is fighting Syrian forces. The south of Israel is occupied by the Negev desert, which borders the Sinai (where Netanyahu is proposing to resettle Palestinians from Gaza). In every Israeli city, the government forces are battling Israeli citizens who are fed up with the corrupt and totalitarian regime. How is the government assuring that the workers will be safe? Even the airport in Tel Aviv has been forced to cancel flights as the airlines feel it is unsafe to operate. The truth is there is no safety or peace on the occupied land.

Trade Unions Warn Govt to Desist from Endangering Lives of Indian Workers

All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU) and other trade unions in India have condemned the Indian government's move to send Indian workers to Israel. Terming the move as pushing the Indian workers into harm's way, AICCTU said that nothing could be more immoral and disastrous for India than the said "export" of workers to Israel. Furthermore, such step will amount to complicity on India's part with Israel's ongoing genocidal war against Palestinians and will naturally have adverse implications for Indian workers in the entire region.

The All India Construction Workers Federation (AICWF) protesting against the move of the government, said that the Modi government has completely failed to provide employment and livelihood for the workers. The government is destroying employment guarantee schemes like MGNREGA that had been a stop gap livelihood support for millions of workers in India. The government wants to convert workers into mere commodity with no rights and support system.

Expressing steadfast solidarity with the Palestinian workers and their struggles, the trade unions have said that Indian working class will strongly resist the government's export move that brutally exploits the desperate livelihood situation of Indian workers and push them into harm's way. ■



New Series Vol. 29 No. 10

FEBRUARY 2024

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Editor-in-chief

Dipankar Bhattacharya

Editor

Arindam Sen

Editorial Board

V. Shankar

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Sucheta De

Ajit Patil

Clifton D' Rozario

Maitreyi Krishnan

Akash Bhattacharya

Editors' e-mail:

liberation@cpiml.org

Art: V Arun Kumar

Manager: Prabhat Kumar

Phone: 704287713

Website: liberation.org.in

E-mail: manager.liberation@gmail.com

36 pages including covers

Annual Subscription Rates

India Rs. 300

Abroad US\$ 60

Digital Subscription Rs. 200

Online Payment: liberation.org.in

Pay By Bank transfer:

Account Name: Liberation Publications

Account No.: 90502010091855

IFSC Code: CNRB0019050

MICR Code.: 110015388

Bank: Canara Bank

Ayodhya: When a Temple in Ram's Name Becomes a Modi Monument to Advance the RSS Agenda



India had got a rude shock three decades ago when the historic Babri Masjid was demolished by the Sangh brigade in broad daylight. But despite the violence of this act and the hundreds of lives lost as a result, many Indians continued to view it in terms of a mosque versus temple dispute. Till recently the Supreme Court held the demolition as a crime, an egregious violation of the rule of law, but strangely awarded the perpetrators of the crime the title of the land while a plot was allotted elsewhere in the town for relocation of the mosque. The spectacle now being unleashed around the yet to be completed temple in Ayodhya should however make it clear to one and all what the battle really entailed all along. It was never only about replacing a mosque with a temple, it was about reshaping India according to the RSS vision of Hindu Rashtra.

The signs of the emerging order are becoming crystal clear with every passing day. The inauguration or consecration of the temple has become a massive state event. The amalgamation of religion and governance is now near-complete. While the inauguration of the new parliament building was made into a religious event with priests vesting the PM with the 'Sengol', a monarchical relic from Tamil Nadu, the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya became an out and out state-sponsored political event. To 'prepare' himself for the 'consecration ceremony' of the idol in the new temple, the Prime Minister undertook a grand temple tour across the country, with even members of his security staff wearing traditional religious attire. To top it all, the inauguration was marked by a half-day

public holiday in all government offices and establishments, even many hospitals!

Ayodhya is now not just home to yet another temple in the name of Ram, it epitomises the ongoing reshaping of India on the basis of a growing fusion of state power, Hinduism and corporate interests. India's most prominent corporate faces were present in the event along with the entire BJP-RSS leadership and individuals in top constitutional positions. The Prime Minister who earlier used to describe himself as 'prime servant' of the people now routinely calls himself God's chosen representative even as his bhakts have started projecting him as an incarnation or avatar of God. The idea of modern India as a secular democratic republic is fast being obliterated with the republic virtually metamorphosing into a corporate-backed monarchy packaged as a divinely ordained order.

The temple is not yet fully ready (a reason why the Shankaracharyas are calling the consecration scripturally flawed), but the entire town has become a centre of massive construction and beautification activities coupled with large-scale eviction of people and demolition of houses, shops and even places of worship. Three main roads have been renamed Ram Path, Bhakti Path and Ram Janmabhoomi Path and are being widened and beautified reportedly at a staggering cost of 30,000 crore rupees. The construction of Ram Path has reportedly entailed the destruction of a whopping 2,200 shops, 800 houses, 30 temples, 9 mosques and 6 tombs. The drive for developing Ayodhya as a world-class tourist destination has also meant the arrival of the Adani group, the rise of a lucrative land market at the cost of local farmers and farming, and environmentally hazardous construction in the eco-sensitive zone on the bank of river Saryu.

The coalescence of religion, state power and big business is also taking religion away from the private domain of individuals into the vortex of big business and big spectacle. The corridors being built in Varanasi, Mathura and now Ayodhya have led to extensive demolition of old buildings, shops and even small temples. Like corporate takeover of small farming and small trade, a similar phenomenon of

centralisation and concentration is being witnessed in the arena of religion too. And the politicisation of Ram, especially in the context of the impending Lok Sabha elections, has even blurred the distinction between a Ram Mandir and a Modi monument. Huge cutouts of Modi in Ayodhya have overshadowed even Ram. Promotion of the personality cult of the supreme leader is exploiting many common people's devotion to Ram to the hilt.

Desperate to hold on to power in the coming elections after ten years of communal hatemongering and deceitful populism, the Modi government seeks to use the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya as an electoral trump card. It is also the most explicit symbol of the Sangh brigade's Hindu supremacist vision of India to the outside world. The Ramayana is undoubtedly one of the most popular epics, but true to India's cultural diversity the Ramayana too has several versions and diverse interpretations. Any attempt to bulldoze India's diverse identity to impose a majoritarian uniformity - whether in matters of religion, language, cuisine or any other sphere of culture - can only prove disastrous for the very existence of India as a united country. A secular and diverse democracy can be the only vibrant mode of existence for the world's most populous and diverse country.

Incidentally, the intervening night of 22/23 January 2024 also marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the horrific lynching of the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his sons Philip (aged 10) and Timothy (aged 6) by a mob instigated by Bajrang Dal leader Dara Singh. The Sangh brigade which uses the "Jai Shri Ram" chant to express allegiance to Ram also invokes it as a battlecry to perpetrate and celebrate acts of brutal communal violence. It is common to see the Sangh brigade defend and celebrate perpetrators of such terror even after they are convicted. For the Sangh brigade which celebrates December 6 as a "day of valour", January 22 would virtually become its new "Republic Day". We the people of India whose predecessors had adopted the Constitution to proclaim India as a secular democratic republic will have to fight harder than ever to defend the Constitution and the Republic against the fascists' vicious agenda. ■

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A Humble Appeal to ‘We, the People of India’

Dear Friends,

This year our Republic enters the 75th year of its existence. As we begin the new year, we are aware that we are only a few weeks away from the decisive 2024 elections. Ten years ago Narendra Modi had come to power with the promise of ushering in *Achhe Din* or better days, bringing back all black money and creating two crore jobs every year. Many Indians gave him a second chance in 2019 when he promised to double farmers' income and ensure a pucca house for every family by 2022. Now ahead of the 2024 elections, when every promise made to the people has turned into a brazen mockery, a cruel insult to the people, the BJP and RSS are busy showcasing the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya as their biggest achievement and seeking your votes yet again in the name of Ram.

The Ramayana has been close to the hearts of millions of Indians across generations. Ramrajya has often been invoked as a popular Indian metaphor for a reign of truth, justice and universal well-being. Is the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya the gateway to a modern 21st Century Ramrajya premised on divisiveness, hate and violence? Let the dazzling spectacle of the Ram Mandir inauguration not blind us to the reality of the all-round crisis that ten years of Modi government have pushed us into. Let us not ignore the growing signs of daily mockery of the constitutional promises of a modern secular democracy for the world's most populous country.

The Supreme Court verdict of 2019 had termed the 6 December 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid an egregious violation of the Constitution. Yet the apex court awarded the title suit to the Ram Mandir trust hoping it would end all disputes over places of worship and usher in a period of peace and harmony. But the Sangh brigade



now wants to expand such conflicts across the country and repeal the 1991 Places of Worship Act that guaranteed the permanence of the nature of all places of worship as on 15 August 1947. And the Supreme Court certainly did not ask the Modi government to make the Ayodhya temple a priority agenda of the state the way it is being done.

The Modi government is privatising, whether wholesale or bit by bit, everything that should be essentially public - be it public transport, public sector industries, or essential public services like education and health-care. And something like religion, religious faith or sentiment, which is entirely a citizen's private domain has been completely taken over by the government. The Prime Minister of an elected government now behaves like a priest and presents himself as a divinely chosen representative not answerable to the people and their Parliament. This is a complete negation of the very idea of a modern republic that free India had proclaimed itself on 26 January 1950.

From universities to railway stations, everywhere we now see Modi selfie points at public expense. Propaganda of the government is the only permanent theme while everything else works on contract basis. The idea of permanent jobs has been taken away

from India's youth - the former chief of the Indian Army now tells us how the Agniveer scheme was imposed without the Army's knowledge. Exactly the same way as 500 and 1000 rupee notes, and subsequently even the 2,000-rupee notes launched after demonetisation were banned, without any consultation even with India's bankers and economists.

All these years the government told us about foreigners trying to illegally migrate to India. Now frequently we hear about Indians being identified as illegal immigrants and sent back from foreign countries. The other day an entire plane carrying Indian passengers, many of them from Gujarat, was grounded in France and passengers sent back to India. Rich Indians are giving up Indian citizenship to become citizens of USA, UK, Australia and many western countries. Several Indian capitalists have fled the country after taking huge loans from Indian banks. Meanwhile, the government keeps writing off the loans of the rich while increasingly exporting Indian workers abroad. BJP governments are eager to send Indian workers even to risk their lives and go and work in Israel.

Life for large sections of India's citizens is becoming increasingly insecure. Incidents of Muslims

facing lynch mobs and bulldozers have become routine. The poor are facing large scale eviction from cities. Perpetrators of atrocities on Dalits and Adivasis are hardly ever punished even as the incidence of such cases has increased remarkably. Perpetrators of anti-women violence are promoted and protected by the BJP at all levels from IT cells to state Assemblies and Parliament.

The Constitution promised us justice - social, economic and political. Yet people demanding justice are today being implicated in false cases and dumped in jails. After using farm laws and labour codes to deprive farmers and workers of their rights, the Modi government is now changing the entire set of criminal laws to turn India into a veritable police state. Every dissent and agitation against the government is now liable to be treated as an act of terror and subjected to brutal repression under draconian anti-terror laws.

These are not signs of India becoming a developed country and a robust democracy. These are signs of fascism, a permanent and institutionalised reign of terror and repression. When we read the Preamble to our Constitution and look at our own conditions of life as individual citizens and collectively as a Republic, we can see how the country is daily being pushed in a direction opposite to the constitutional goals and commitments.

Ten years of Modi government have already pushed us into a state of opposition-free parliament where members of parliament are being expelled and suspended at the will of the government. Instead of the Union of states described in the Constitution, India increasingly looks like an extended Delhi Darbar where governors prevail over elected governments, where Jammu and Kashmir is stripped of its constitutional rights and bifurcated into two Union Territories, where

Manipur continues to burn for months on end with the Prime Minister hardly bothering to mention a word about the state in Parliament let alone visit the state for a day.

The whole world is today concerned about the daily massacre of Palestinian children in Gaza by Israel. In this war on humanity, Israel has the fullest backing of the United States, the biggest imperialist power of the world, and the UK, the former colonial ruler of India. As a country which experienced a series of Jallianwala Bagh type massacres during colonial rule, India should have stood by the beleaguered Palestinians demanding not just immediate ceasefire in Gaza but action against the war crimes of Israel. We can see South Africa, the country from where Gandhi had launched his historic battle against racism and colonialism and which eventually defeated the cruel reign of apartheid towards the end of the 20th Century, today demanding action against Israel in the International Court of Justice. But under the Modi government, India stands isolated from the global voice of justice, freedom and peace, closely allied with the US-Israel war machine.

India cannot afford to have another five years of the disastrous Modi regime. Bhagat Singh had warned us against brown sahibs usurping power in free India. Ambedkar had told us that bhakti in politics, which necessarily happens if religion and governance are amalgamated, can only pave the way for dictatorship. As we observe the 74th anniversary of our Republic, these warnings ring truer than ever.

It is therefore time we resolved to reclaim the Republic. The real producers of India - the workers and peasants - must get their due. Young India must have a secure future. India's women and oppressed and deprived bahujans must get full freedom, justice and dignity. The minorities, religious or linguistic, must get equal rights and opportunities to prosper and India's

rich diversity must not be bulldozed in the name of uniformity.

We still have the Constitution which came out of our freedom movement and proclaimed India as a sovereign democratic republic with universal adult franchise. Today many in the Modi regime have openly started describing the Constitution drafted under the leadership of Ambedkar as a colonial constitution. Like the laws being rewritten, there is a clamour in the Sangh brigade and Modi camp for a new constitution to turn India's Parliamentary Democracy into a presidential tyranny. We must not forget the age-old RSS design of having Manusmriti, the code of slavery for India's oppressed people and women, as the Constitution of modern India.

Let every vote of ours therefore ensure the defeat of the disastrous Modi regime in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. CPI(ML) has all along championed the cause of broadest opposition unity against the fascist Modi government. As a constituent of the INDIA alliance we will perhaps be contesting very few seats in the coming elections, but we will work everywhere for the victory of our INDIA allies. Let freedom and justice prevail over the forces of corporate loot, communal hate and social slavery.

The people of India who have historically defeated all forces of injustice and oppression, from the British colonial rule to the zamindari system and Brahminical-feudal domination, must emerge victorious in the battle for democracy against fascism. Most recently the successful farmers' movement showed us the power of united and determined struggle of the people. Unitedly we can surely also defeat the Sanghi fascists.

We shall fight, we shall win!

- Central Committee,
CPI(ML) Liberation ■

Peoples' Struggles Steadfastly Intensifying Across the Country

As we near the 2024 General Elections, Modi regime wants to use Ram Mandir and the RSS's idea of 'Hindutva triumph' to alter the democratic and constitutional moorings of the country towards a Hindu Rashtra. The issues of people's rights and livelihood are being made secondary in this plot. Amid this diversionary tactics by BJP-RSS forces to aggressively mask the burning issues faced by the people under the drape of Ram Mandir, the ranks and file of CPI(ML) and mass organisations in tandem with civil society has been steadfastly intensifying the struggle on-ground to foil this nefarious agenda.

With the clarion call to save the democracy and constitution, strengthening social justice, people's rights and livelihood, and ensuring 'jobs-healthcare-education-living wages for all', mass campaigns and struggles are being organised across the country.

'Save Constitution - Save Democracy' Rally in Bihar

The CPIML's call of 'Save Constitution - Save Democracy, Oust BJP - Save the Country' was carried forward with the statewide Jan Sankalp Abhiyan *padyatra* (march) from Karpurigram in Samastipur, the birthplace of eminent social justice crusader and ex-CM of Bihar Karpuri Thakur, on 24 January 2024. This campaign was inaugurated by party's General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya. He addressed the huge mass gathering assembled at Samastipur bus stand along with many other leaders. Hundreds of people marched on foot from Samastipur to Karpurigram where floral tributes were offered on the statue of Karpuri Thakur.

Comrade Dipankar said that this Jan Sankalp Abhiyan is being launched to

uphold the idea of a secular democratic republic which is the basic spirit of our constitution and this very idea is today under attack of fascist forces. Karpuri Thakur had little time to implement his idea of social justice as chief minister, but he used it very efficiently. We know him today for his efforts made to uplift the downtrodden, deprived castes, and release of political prisoners. He had been a very powerful and effective leader in the opposition for a very long time. We know that politics of the poor don't go along with those in power, instead it is strengthened with people's struggles. Karpuri Thakur is also remembered for his honesty and simplicity in politics, he added. He is now being awarded with the Bharat Ratna which had for a very long time been a demand from socialist and communists in the country. We must also not forget that casteist, communal feudal forces in Bihar have always opposed Karpuri Thakur's politics of reservation and social justice, and that these feudal communal forces are backed by BJP-RSS. People of Bihar will never forgive or forget the crimes perpetrated by them.

Among other prominent leaders present on the occasion were CPIML's Bihar state secretary Kunal, Dharendra Jha, Mina Tiwari, Shashi Yadav, KD Yadav, Mahboob Alam, Satyadev Ram, Sandip Saurav and ex-MLA Manju Prakash.

The Jan Sankalp Abhiyan will conclude on 30 January, the martyrdom day of Mahatma Gandhi who fell to the bullets of first terrorist of independent India and Hindutva proponent Nathuram Godse on this day.

Anti-Fascist Convention in Kolkata

On 22 January 2024, as the BJP-RSS combine sought to ignite the nation into a fascist frenzy, students, youth,

and the working class in West Bengal assembled in Kolkata to resist. The Fasciad-Birodhi Mohasommelon (Grand Convention Against Fascism) was organised by over 200 socio-political and mass organisations from all over West Bengal.

The program started with a mass rally from Subodh Mallick Square to the Netaji Indoor Stadium, where the convention was held. The event was attended by noted human rights activist Teesta Setalvad, former justice BG Kolse Patil, anti-communalism campaigner Harsh Mander, scientist and poet Gauhar Raza, historian Maroona Murmu, civil society activist Sujato Bhadra, and CPIML General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya among many others.

Speaking at the convention comrade Dipankar Bhattacharya noted that the issue of debate is not between a Mandir or a Masjid, but the use of religion to fundamentally transform the democratic nature of the state. He noted that while the state is withdrawing from its responsibilities for providing education, healthcare, or employment, it is increasing control over the private and personal lives of citizens by intervening in religions. Narendra Modi is subverting the constitutional order and creating a proto-monarchical system where he claims to be divinely ordained in his role.

Prof. Maroona Murmu reminded the convention of the prophetic words of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on how 'Hindu Raj' would be catastrophic for the Dalit and Adivasi people of the country. Harsh Mander spoke on Mahatma Gandhi's own struggle to establish communal peace in Kolkata during partition. Teesta Setalvaad said that the ruling dispensation has declared a war on the working class, peasantry, and minorities. The cruel policies taken up by the government has killed hundreds of farmers and workers. The use of state institutions

and laws are being used to subvert the constitutional rights of the people. She urged the people to reject the BJP-RSS regime from the gram panchayat to the Lok Sabha.

West Bengal education minister Bratya Basu, TMC Rajya Sabha MP Samirul Islam, and Party of Democratic Socialism leader Samir Putatunda expressed their solidarity with the convention as well. The convention will continue its programme till 25th January at Subodh Mallick Square.

Launch of Jan Sankalp Abhiyan in Bagodar

On 16th January, 2024 which marked the 19th martyrdom day of popular CPI(ML) leader Comrade Mahendra Singh, the CPI(ML) launched a state wide 'Jan Sankalp Abhiyan' (Mass Pledge Campaign) from Bagodar, Jharkhand with the clarion call to defeat the communal-fascist BJP regime in Elections 2024. The memorial meeting was held in Bagodar at the bus stand near GT Road crossing while dozens of marches were taken out in different parts of the state to pay homage to Comrade Mahendra Singh. Thousands joined the event and steadfastly resolved to carry forward the flame of resistance lit by martyr Comrade Mahendra Singh against BJP-RSS rule of terror.

Addressing the rally, Com. Dipankar, General Secretary of CPI(ML) said that Comrade Mahendra Singh's legacy of people's awakening and assertion against every oppression and injustice remains an enduring source of energy and inspiration in today's battle for justice, democracy and social equality.

Comrade Mahendra Singh was born in 1954 in Khambra village, Bagodar thana of Giridih district, Jharkhand. He was the architect of a social and political experiment of organising various sections of rural society in addition to agrarian labourers. This effort bore results that remains

stable. Even today, not only agrarian labourers, but also a considerable section of the rural lower-middle class, especially minorities and even the poor from upper caste communities, continue to identify with the CPI(ML) movement. In 1990, he was elected as the MLA from the Bagodar Assembly constituency.

On January 16th, 2005 a day after he had filed nominations to contest for a fourth term in the Assembly elections, he was assassinated during the election campaign. His murder has not only robbed the CPI(ML) of an incomparable leader, it has impoverished the entire democratic movement of Jharkhand.

Com. Dipankar added that the Jan Sankalp Abhiyan is a clarion call to defend the democracy and constitution and put the issues of people at the forefront as envisioned by Comrade Mahendra Singh. The BJP regime is running away from all the burning issues faced by the people and instead diverting the focus towards Ram Mandir. Our freedom fighters had envisioned an India where politics and religion will be separate realms, and warned against the attempt to mix both, which would bring disastrous consequences to the integrity and harmony of the Indian society. But this Modi government, jettisoning the ideals and principles of our freedom fighters, has turned the inauguration of Ram Mandir into an aggressive path towards attainment of absolute political power.

Com. Dipankar said that Jan Sankalp Abhiyan is initiated in the backdrop of the upcoming general elections, which is only a few week away. The 2024 elections must be fought on the issues of the people like price rise, unemployment, lack of wages and social security, closing down of small and medium industries, privatization of people's resources and increasing violence against women, Dalits, Adivasis and minorities. BJP wants

to destroy Ambedkar's Constitution and impose the rule of Manusmriti.

"Let us resolve to steadfastly defend our democracy, constitution and people's rights" added Com. Dipankar.

Remembering martyr Comrade Mahendra Singh, CPI(ML) MLA from Bagodar Com. Vinod Singh said that he was widely acknowledged as the bold and assertive parliamentary voice of the streets, leaving an impact on the entire politics of Jharkhand, and emerging as a shining example of how well a revolutionary MLA can use the Assembly in the interests of the proletariat and the masses, and can ruthlessly expose it too.

The rally unanimously passed following three resolutions:

- To protect democracy and the Constitution and for employment for all, the 'BJP Hatao, Desh Bachao' [Remove BJP, Save the Country] Jan Sankalp campaign will be carried out from 16th to 30th January 2024. The campaign will be carried out widely by the rank and file of the party and the message will be taken to every village and every home.
- Condemn the Israel's genocidal war on Gaza and the massacre of children and women. The Modi government must take the initiative against Israel's Netanyahu government in international forums instead of expressing supporting in carrying out the genocide.
- Along with EVM votes, the VVPAT slips should also be counted in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

5-Guarantees Campaign by AIARLA

All India Agricultural and Rural Labourers Association (AIARLA) organised mass campaign and marches across 200 blocks in Bihar on January 18 against the Akshata Bhabhut (the 'sanctified' rice and

ash from Ayodhya being distributed everywhere by BJP-RSS to mark Ram temple inauguration) and demanded for jobs-food-houses for all.

Condemning Modi government's attack on poor and toiling masses, the AIARLA campaign demanded five guarantees from the government, including Proper houses for the poor, free education and health for the poor and 200 days of work and Rs. 600 per day wages under MGNREGA scheme.

The march also warned the government against the intensifying attack on democracy and constitution and said that working class and toiling masses of the country will always be to resist such attacks and steadfast to defend these principles.

Students' Parliament March Against New Education Policy (NEP)

Students across the country under the banner of 'United Students of India' held a parliament march at Delhi's Jantar Mantar on January 12th, 2024. The protest reverberated with the chants rejecting the exclusionary NEP and demanding an end to the anti-student Modi-Shah regime.

Addressing the march, AISA General Secretary Prasenjeet recounted the grand failure of the 10 years of the Modi government and in its response presented 10 questions of the student-youth. He added that under the disastrous Modi government, there is a complete privatization of education under the New Education Policy (NEP) and on the other hand, there is an increasing attack on education, employment, social and gender justice. In every election rally and roadshow, the PM Modi makes endless rhetoric and promises to provide jobs and employment. But after 10 years the facts show how the youth of today are suffering more than ever.

As part of intensifying struggle of

students-youth, AISA has been carrying out country wide campaign - 'Modi Sarkar Ke Das Saal, Young India Ke Das Sawaal' (Ten Years of Modi Government, Ten Questions of Young India). The campaign was launched on December 7, with students across the country raising questions about Modi government's policy of commodification of education. Selling off the education sector to corporates has already led to massive fee hikes, wide-spread exclusion of poor and marginalised and rising employment.

The government has quashed the vision of affordable education by introducing NEP 2020 and setting up institutions like HEFA (Higher Education Financing Agency). Under the garb of "autonomy", the public funded education model (UGC grants) is transitioning to a loan-based model under HEFA. This new model, characterised by a surge in self-financed courses across universities, places an increasing burden on students. Within this HEFA loan-based framework, universities have already incurred substantial loans, to be repaid in the future through increased fees, and we see that in Universities like Osmania (1,000%), Allahabad University (400%), DU PhD (1,800%), there have been massive fee hikes.

Putting forward the clarion call of ousting BJP and saving India from the anti-student and anti-youth Modi regime, the Parliament March resolved to make 2024 as the year where the student and youth will set the agenda of a democratic egalitarian country!

Rural Workers Rally in Punjab Against Modi Govt's Attack on MGNREGA

Thousands of rural workers filled the streets in Punjab's Sangrur on January 5th, 2023 against Modi government

and its anti-labour policies. The rally, organised under the banner of CPI(ML) Liberation and Mazdoor Mukti Morcha, condemned the recent move by BJP-Modi government at the centre to link MGNREGA job card with Aadhaar-based payment system and deletion of job cards of around 8.9 crore workers as an assault on the poor and toiling masses.

Com. Purushottam Sharma, CCM, CPI(ML) in-charge for Punjab and AIKM leader, said that with the deletion of crores of MGNREGA job cards, the Modi government has snatched away the lives and livelihood of workers at the behest of corporate cronies. The regime has smashed every hard earned rights of workers, and pushed the workers and farmers of this country into a state of peril and destitution. Thousands of poor farmers and rural workers are now forced to take loans from micro-finance companies, who are part of the exploitative ecosystem thriving under the Modi regime. Many, unable to pay loans with exorbitant interest rates, are forced to die by suicide.

Addressing the rally, CPI(ML) Punjab State Secretary Com. Gurmeet Singh Bakhatpura asserted the need to unite and organise. He added that when few rich people and their corporate companies can ensure a government for their benefit, then millions of workers and farmers, if united and organised can bring a government that is and for the toiling masses.

In every election rally and roadshow, the PM Modi makes endless rhetoric and promises to provide jobs and employment. But after 10 years the facts show how the youth of today are suffering more than ever.

The rally concluded with the resolve to intensify and steadfastly carry forward the struggle against the anti-labour policies of Modi regime and also force the Punjab government to implement the promises it made to people during the election. ■

Makers Of 'Everyday Communalism'

▲ SOMENATH GUHA

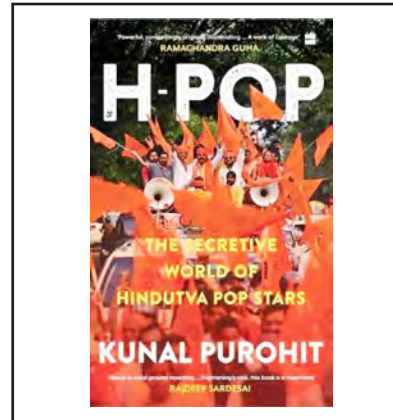
A review of H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars by Kunal Purohit, published by Harper Collins Publishers, 2023

Ever since the advent of DJ music, violence during the Ram Navami celebrations has acquired a new dimension. Kunal Purohit, the author of 'H-POP: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars' was intrigued as to how a peaceful shobhayatra suddenly turns violent when it passes by a mosque. He went into the dusty lanes and by-lanes of nondescript towns and investigated. What he came to know appalled him. On one fateful day he watched as the procession neared the mosque. Suddenly the ear-splitting, metallic music was on belching out filthy, offensive song targeting the 'other' community. The language of the songs were utterly offensive and threatening - 'agar chhua mandir toh tujhe dikha denge', chant 'Vande Mataram or leave the country' or 'throw the skull-cap to the ground' etc. Instantly the peaceful processionists turned into a mob, their body-language became aggressive, they became abusive and unruly attacking the bystanders and the holy building. Listening to the songs Purohit found them utterly humiliating replete with common galis (abusive words) used to demean the minority community.

Welcome to the world of Hindutva Pop which, day in and day out, is being used to inject animosity, prejudice, hate for the 'other' into the society. It has become a part of everyday life and we don't have even an inkling of how it is silently poisoning our society. The caller tune of the author's driver was revealing - har ghar bhagwa chhayega (saffron will reign supreme in every house). This is just an instance of how a particular kind of thinking is becoming omnipresent. The target of

this incessant verbal and visual poison, in the form of music, poetry, books and videos is the 'other'. The 'other', according to Sandeep Deo, author, You Tuber, Hindutvavadi entrepreneur is the Panchmakkar, makkar loosely meaning frauds or tricksters. Sandeep explains that in the eighth century Adi Shankaracharya had waged a battle against Tantric Buddhism which consisted of Panchmakara or five debased elements. Posing as a present-day avatar, Sandeep exclaims that now the society has to be cleansed of contemporary Panchmakkar, that is Masih-waad or missionaries, Marxwaad, Macaulay-waad, Mohammad-waad and Tukde-tukde gangs which include urban-naxals, maobaadi etc.

Sandeep shot into the limelight with his first book, Sajish ki kahani, tathyo ki zubani, which describes the documented evidence of the Gujarat pogroms as a conspiracy against Narendra Modi. Sandeep believes himself to be a warrior fighting against the West, Islam, mainstream media and the likes of Amazon and Netflix which are obstructing or polluting Hindutva. He has his own publishing company, YouTube channel and also a website. Needless to say all these propagate Hindutva views. For instance some of his books and news titles are, Kaun Kehta Hai Akbar Mahan Tha or 'Shocking Ground Stories of Conversion'! His publishing company Kapot sells over 2200 titles and his YouTube channel shows subscription of 3.51 lakhs and is said to be earning Rs 25 lakhs a year. But he is not satisfied. He believes platforms like Amazon and Flipkart by monopolising e-commerce are dictating what Indians should



eat, buy or read. So he has publicly boycotted these 'anti-Hindu' sites and launched his own platform. Gradually it has evolved into a swadeshi site selling Diwali lights and myriad materials required for a Hindu puja. But again this is not enough. He is alarmed by the rising popularity of the OTT platforms which he believes are out to 'corrupt' the Indian family system, claiming that it is due to these OTT that marital rape is becoming an issue in the Supreme Court. So now his aim is to launch a Hindu OTT. But his dream is to take this cultural war offline too. He will open centres in towns and neighbourhoods which will of course sell books and thereby Hindu Shastra but also impart Shastra, the use of weapons. In this way Sandeep has become the archetypal Hindutva man waging a violent cultural war through a gamut of communication channels.

Kavi Singh has become a foot-soldier of the same cultural war through her songs. Her career took off the day forty paramilitary soldiers were ambushed and killed at Pulwama. Her father and guide Ramkesh Jiwampurwala, a popular Haryanvi singer and actor himself, overnight acquired a poem written on the ghastly incident. He composed a tune for it and got it sung and videoed by Kavi in a local studio.

The poem was divisive, laying the blame for the attack squarely on the local Kashmiris:

Is dhoke ke hamle mein jo apno ka kaam nahi hota

Pulwama mein un veeron ka yeh anjaam nahi hota

[If our own hadn't helped carry this attack,

Pulwama wouldn't have seen the blood of our brave hearts spilled.]

The video became viral. There were attacks on Kashmiris in many states. Kavi Singh became a star.

Kavi's hatred is based on myths. No matter what the facts are, she wholeheartedly believes that they want to increase their numbers, kill Hindus and grab everything. So she sings 'Sacche Hindustani --- jansankhya kanoon lao, desh bachao. When Article 370 was abolished, again overnight the father-daughter duo composed a song, got it videoed and once again it was a roaring hit.

Nor will stones be hurled anymore, nor will happiness escape,

In the Kashmir valley, chants of Shri Ram will be heard.

Likewise she rails against Love Jihad, Islamic conspiracy, and campaigns for Yogi Adityanath in elections,

Jo Ram ko laaye hai, hum unko layenge UP mein phir se hum bhagwa lehrayenge

Presently Kavi has over a million subscribers on her YouTube channel. Besides she has eight lakh followers of her Facebook and Instagram accounts.

The third person Purohit highlights in his book is the poet Kamal Agney. The author attends a Kavi Sammelan at Ghaziabad. The event has been organised by Yati Narsinghanand, notorious for his provocative remarks against Muslims. As the 'sant' garlands Kamal, it becomes clear that he is the star attraction of the Sammelan. The year was 2017 and

Pragya Thakur had not yet made her infamous comment about Gandhi's assassin being a patriot. But here was this poet eulogising the great patriot 'Pandit' Godse and blaming Mahatma Gandhi for various ills of the freedom movement. The crowd roared in approval as he thundered, 'Gandhi had eternal love, but only for the crescent and star'. Gandhi's heart was with the Muslims he claimed:

Pakistanis were sending back butchered bodies of Hindus on trains,

His heart felt nothing for the shikha, but for the skullcap it felt pain.

And so Nathu took the ultimate step

-the poet recites delving into Godse's mind -

And pumped a bullet so hard that Gandhi finally remembered Lord Ram.

Kamal finishes off in a flourish as he justifies Godse's actions,

Agar Godse ki goli utri na hoti seene mein Toh har Hindu padhta namaz, Mecca aur Medine mein (had Godse not managed to kill Gandhi, every Hindu would today be offering prayers in Mecca and Madina).

Kavi Sammelans are becoming very popular in the Hindi heartland. There is a channel named 'Namokar Channels Pvt. Ltd' which has over 1.93 million followers. Kamal's poem on Godse was shared online by Namokar. It went viral notching up 4.5 million views on YouTube.

Using books, poetry, music and now videos to propagate a thought, world-view, politics or philosophy has been in vogue for centuries. But using the same for sinister, ulterior motives has been a more recent phenomenon. Such genres are purposefully used to demonise the 'other' and provoke violence. In the West, Hate music is said to have prospered for decades. In the early 1980s there was a band named 'Skrewdriver' in UK which promoted neo-nazi and anti-semitic ideologies through their music. Jonathan Pieslak writes in his book 'Sound Targets:

American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War' how heavy metal and rap music was used to inspire soldiers for combat. The author states how such music prepares a state of mind that was 'necessary for killing'. Hate music which is neo-nazi, white supremacist in content and is racist, anti-migrant and anti-LGBTQ is a global phenomenon. Purohit writes that poetry too has been used to indoctrinate people with extremist ideologies. Even Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri are said to have penned jihadi poetry.

In India blatantly communal propaganda took off during the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement in the early 1990s. "...the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) uses the media in a distinctive way. Political parties and individuals ...used the media for electoral purposes alone... On the other hand, the VHP broadcasts a vision of Indian history extending to the present. Using all the media techniques at its disposal - dramatic sequences, editing, music, commentary, etc. - it tries to project its world-view as the natural source of the country's heritage... The persuasive powers of these media products should not be underestimated." (Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags Tapan Basu, Pradip Dutta, Tanika Sarkar, Sumit Sarkar, Sambuddha Sen, 1993)

It's clear that the likes of Kavi, Kamal and Sandeep are taking the propaganda leviathan of the Sangh Parivar forward. On the one hand the latter is promulgating stringent laws to stifle all channels of communication to shut out any thought or opinion that is not in sync with Hindutva, on the other they themselves are utilising every possible option to propagate their regressive anti-minority, anti-secular views. In the face of this onslaught progressives have only one alternative: to build and promote alternative communication channels; to counter poetry with poetry, music with music, videos with videos and books with more books. ■

Against the Tide

Newspaper Editorials & Op-eds on Ram Mandir Inauguration

Amid the Ram Mandir inauguration in Ayodhya, the Godi Media, along with the state machinery, left no stone unturned to further the BJP-RSS propaganda branding the religious event as ‘civilizational and national triumph’. From 24x7 live coverage of the consecration ceremony, to Ram Mandir themed newspapers, studios and OB vans, the majority of media pulled out all stops to drill Modi regime’s talking points into public consciousness. But some refused to be part of this exercise to erase the history and part of Modi’s push for “Dev se Desh; Ram se Rashtra” (from God to country, and from Ram to nation). In this Liberation issue, we are publishing excerpts from English news editorials and opinions that warn us about the disastrous impact the event of January 22nd, 2024 will have on the future of India, its people and its democratic moorings.

The erasures that made January 22 possible – collective amnesia of December 6, 1992, by Suhas Palshikar (Indian Express, January 23, 2024)

With the inauguration of the new temple at Ayodhya, it is said, historical wrongs have been righted. But more than that, with the new temple, a new Ram is being launched. The talk of the town is not so much about deep devotion or faith, but about the grandiose nature of this moment.

This spirit of plurality is actually not being denied. In fact, sometimes it’s trumpeted, superficially but vociferously. Yet, it’s being exorcised. Once this spirit is erased, it becomes easy to create a collective psyche that automatically begins to uphold homogeneity and produces suspicion about the coexistence of difference



and the possibility of syncretism. It is unthinkable today to imagine the acceptance of a critique such as Ambedkar’s The Riddles of Hinduism. We are also a long way away from Gandhi’s Ram. The coexistence of different ideas of religion and god that Gandhi’s Ramdhun proudly propagated is now alien.

The collective amnesia of December 6, 1992: Nobody vandalised a structure that day. The new temple is historic in this respect. It not just absolves the society or any group or party of criminal vandalism, it simply erases that fact from history. Public opinion surveys after 1992 — even up to 1996 — showed that among Hindus, there was a sense of guilt, an admission that something wrong was done, although they would want the Ram Temple at the disputed site. As time passed by, our politics made sure that the guilt was softened and then pardoned. But if there is any single most effective instrument that makes the new temple guilt-free, it is the SC ruling. What was being politically managed, the

Court put a stamp of formal approval to it by granting permission for the temple construction. For today’s supporter of the temple, there is nothing legally wrong with its construction. After all, the highest court has not only allowed it but suggested the mechanism for it — a separate trust.

New chapter: Editorial on impact of the Ram temple consecration on the country (The Telegraph, January 23, 2024)

The attendant social costs — one of which has been the profusion of communal sores on India’s body politic — have, unsurprisingly, left the BJP and the spectre of Hindutva unconcerned. Even the country’s civic life is no longer immune to interventions that would be deemed unwarranted in a constitutional democracy: a consecration ceremony organised by a private trust was declared a public holiday by many states. The sightings of a theocracy, or at least of an elected kingship — the prime minister is the conductor of the national orchestra

— can no longer be dismissed as a chimera. There have been glimpses of what this implies for democracy, pluralism, and the marginalised in India since 2014. Then what of that much-maligned ghost of secularism? This constitutional principle, along with that of pluralism, lies lifeless. Though the hour is dark, it can still be the hour for a reset of India's compact with secularism. Its defenders — they are not negligible numerically — must ponder the potion of its resurrection. But secularism's revival cannot be left to the politicians' whimsical investment in it. In its second coming, it must be a truly public endeavour, powered by the strength of institutional muscle as well as the ingenuity of the people's mind.

To Combat Communal Hysteria, the Idea of Inclusive India Must Be Reinforced; Ram Puniyani (The Wire, January 23, 2024)

What accompanied the 'idea of India' was a coming together of different sections of society to fight the colonial powers, striving to establish liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice for all. This massive movement had the overarching 'idea of India', which culminated in the values of the Indian constitution. The only ray of hope for the 'idea of India' is the same classes of society who ushered in the Idea of India during the freedom movement to come together. It is their collective movement; the overarching effort to undermine the forces which gloat over the birth-based hierarchical values in the name of religion, those who uphold the Holy Scriptures in contrast to the Indian constitution. Their movements have been scattered. Their group interests may be different but their interests in protecting the Indian constitution and Idea of India which emerged during freedom movements do need a collective expression, cutting across the groups-party lines. ■

Displacement and Exclusion in Ayodhya Redevelopment Plan



Ayodhya is experiencing an intense land acquisition spree for the last couple of years following the Supreme verdict in 2019 in spite of people's oppositions and protests along with a visible stock market boom in shares of companies who have invested in real estate, hotels, tourism etc in Ayodhya. These stocks have swung up by 20% to more than 50% much above the average stocks' tally. The ongoing large-scale, apparently mutual, corporate purchase of lands is taking place after forcing farmers under distress that they are left with no better option than to sell their meagre possession to the sole bidder. This is tacitly encouraged by administrative understanding in favour of big land grabbers.

The government has acquired lands with, or even without, a meagre compensation amount for many of the projects under Ayodhya Master Plan that includes an airport and building/widening of roads. This accompanies large scale displacement and repeated violations of court orders regarding proper compensation and rehabilitation of evictees. The Allahabad High Court had instructed the UP government in 2020 to follow the due procedure as per the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act of 2013. The Land Conflict Watch claims 4000 homes and shops demolished by 2023 affecting 40000 people. The compensation given to some but was highly inadequate. Many small shopkeepers got only Rs. one lakh for their decades old rented shops and now they are told to buy new shops at distant locations for Rs. 30 lakhs which they are unable to pay.

In the countryside private real estate agents are exploiting the fear of farmers of land acquisition by the government at much cheaper rates and offering them somewhat higher prices which are much below the prevailing market sentiment.

The Ayodhya redevelopment project costing rupees 28000 crores undermines the concerns of citizens of Ayodhya. This is expressed in Ayodhya traders' union leader Nandu Gupta's worries that this kind of development is bound to displace a large number of locals whose interest and welfare should have been given a centre stage.

The local population at lower rungs of the economic spectrum who earlier saw better economic opportunities in the development of Ayodhya town are now apprehensive and hopeless. The Ayodhya pilgrimage was a major means of livelihood for most of its residents who in turn provided affordable services to pilgrims. The planned entry of big capital is bound to change this scenario by excluding the locals from the developmental matrix and making Ayodhya tourism costlier for its visitors. ■

The Ram Temple Inauguration Sets a Dangerous Precedent for Minorities in India

▲ STATEMENT BY INDIAN DIASPORA GROUPS

22nd January 2024

We the undersigned diaspora organisations are extremely concerned about the dangerous precedent set by the inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to mark the beginning of India's general elections, taking place in April – May 2024. This is clearly the beginning of the BJP's election campaign. Taking place four days before Republic Day, it is also an attempt to sideline and replace India's secular Constitution which was drafted by Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

The Ram Temple has been built on the ruins of the 16th century Babri Masjid Mosque, destroyed by Hindu supremacists in 1992. In 2019, the Indian Supreme Court ruled in favour of Hindu supremacists' claim to the land to authorize the construction of the temple, despite deeming the destruction of Babri Masjid Mosque as a criminal act. The ruling did not go as far as to condemn the cultural erasure of a historic Muslim site, however, nor did it seek to address the subsequent violent communal clashes in the country arising from its destruction.

The planned 'consecration' of the temple by Prime Minister Modi and other members of the ruling BJP party and RSS stalwarts is a signal that India has moved to the brink of implementing the long-term RSS goals of making India a Hindu Rashtra (State) and replacing the Constitution with the Manusmriti, a violently Brahminical, anti-Dalit and patriarchal ancient Hindu text. It also, of course, makes it clear that Hindutva will be front and centre of the BJP's election campaign.

This is happening against a backdrop of a horrifying escalation in discrimination and violence against religious minorities, particularly Muslims, and is against the secular fabric of the country and its Constitution.

The BJP party under Modi's leadership has been actively seeking to erase traces of Muslim heritage in India, for example, through the revision of school textbooks and by rewriting history as told in popular media, and in public and political spheres. This is in a bid to present the minority community as alien and the Other, without any ties to India as construed by Hindu supremacist ideology.

The appropriation of Muslim religious sites, such as the Babri Masjid Mosque, is one of the tools in the Hindu nationalist arsenal. The Supreme Court's verdict on the Babri Masjid Mosque in 2019 has given rise to similar claims

and well-planned campaigns by Hindu supremacists against Muslim places of worship elsewhere in India. In Mathura city in Uttar Pradesh, a lawsuit is pending to determine whether the location of the Shahi Idgah mosque is the birthplace of Hindu God Krishna. In Varanasi, also in Uttar Pradesh, the Gyanwapi mosque is similarly being claimed by Hindu groups aligned to the ruling BJP party. By entertaining legal claims to these historical mosques, courts including the Uttar Pradesh High Court have enabled these acts of appropriation. India's Supreme Court has itself opened the doors to legal challenges to the Places of Worship Act 1992, which sought to protect the religious character of historical buildings after the destruction of the Babri Masjid Mosque.

As India prepares for the upcoming General Election, the inauguration of the Ram Temple – on land where the Babri Masjid mosque once stood – is a potent symbol of BJP's disregard for the right to exist for religious minorities in India's public sphere, and to exert their right to freedom of belief. It also cements a dangerous precedent already set in motion, further appropriating minorities' cultural and religious heritage, and taking away their rights as Indian citizens.

As the Indian Republic enters its 75th year, we in the diaspora stand with all of those in India who are bravely resisting the Modi regime's murderous and dehumanising offensive against Muslims, Christians, Dalits and other minorities, its virulent casteism and misogyny, its persecution of dissenters, and its attempts to replace or undermine the secular Constitution.

Signatories:

South Asia Justice Campaign | South Asia Solidarity Group | Alliance Against Islamophobia, Australia | Coalition Against Fascism in India | Craigieburn Masjid and Community Centre | Hindus for Human Rights - UK | India Civil Watch International, North America | India Labour Solidarity (UK) | Indian Alliance Paris, France | Indian American Muslim Council | International Solidarity for Academic Freedom in India (InSAF India) | Melbourne Grand Mosque | Muslim Collective, Australia | Peace in India (UK) | Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia. (PATCA). Australia | Scottish Indians For Justice | South Asian Diaspora Action Collective (SADAC) | Strive UK | The Rights Collective (UK) | UK Indian Muslim Council | Uniting Ummah of Australia Organisation | Women Against Caste ■

Karpuri Thakur: A Crusader for Socialist-Communist Unity

▲ KUMAR PARVEZ

The year 2024 marks the birth centenary of Karpuri Thakur, the ex-CM of Bihar. Today, when our nation faces multiple crises and the new year is witnessing a veritable frenzy being created by BJP in the name of inauguration of the Ram temple, CPI(ML) has decided to launch a padyatra in Bihar, commencing on 24 January, the birthday of Karpuri Thakur and ending on 30 January, the martyrdom day of Mahatma Gandhi. The padyatra has been named as "Save constitution, save democracy; oust BJP, save the nation". In this backdrop, it would be relevant to shed light on the multi-faceted aspects of the life of Karpuri Thakur, a crusader for socialist-communist unity.

Karpuri Thakur was indeed a people's leader- a visionary. Be it the street or the Vidhan Sabha, whether in power or not, he was a people's committed fighter for social justice. But that is not all that defined him. He was well aware of the fact that in a society riddled with extreme injustice, the extent to which the deprived could get justice was limited. A study of his biography and lectures as well as his accomplishments would reveal the interwoven strands of social justice and social change in his ideology. This fact has attracted less attention than it deserves. As we celebrate his birth anniversary, special attention needs to be paid to this aspect of his ideology to bring forth its distinctiveness. A fitting response can be offered to the challenges that the nation faces by revisiting his ideological framework.

The work done by him in the fields of language, education and reservations, that went a long way in empowering the weaker sections in social and economic terms are all well known. After becoming the Chief Minister, he issued appointment letters to 10-11 thousand engineers in Gandhi Maidan, thereby providing an impetus for employment generation. He considered education and reservation as important tools for

achieving social justice. No wonder, he faced the wrath of the reactionary forces on many occasions. He resisted these attacks, lost power but remained steadfast on his mission. His policies and programmes paved the way for establishing a unity of backwards, most backwards and Dalits as well as poor people of upper castes in Bihar. These initiatives had the potential to change the fate of Bihar. Unfortunately, this process could not continue for long.

Nowadays, the aspect of social justice is viewed within the framework of reservation. Karpuri Thakur's thoughts went far beyond this narrow vision. He yearned to change the structure of the society that was based on injustice. No wonder that when the Dalits and poor in Bihar's hinterland faced feudal oppression and attacks, he openly advocated for arms to the oppressed for their self-defense. The 80-90's were the decades when the politics of Bihar was marked by a historic mass awakening of Dalits and poor and a severe backlash and counter attacks in response. During his chief ministership he ordered the release of all Naxalites languishing in prison. Very few in the Samajwadi camp had the distinction of openly standing with these movements. He would visit the IPF office at any time and discuss common strategy for various struggles.

After the infamous Arwal massacre in 1986, there was a historic gherao of the Vidhan Sabha led by IPF. A severe lathi charge and arrest of activists ensued. In protest, he sat on a dharna inside the Vidhan Sabha till the activists were eventually released. Similarly, in 1988, the then Central Government proposed 59th amendment which was opposed by IPF by calling for a Bihar Bandh. Karpuriji gave his open support for the Bandh. He was always at the forefront when it came to oppose oppression of any kind. Many such anecdotes can be recalled which distinguish him from other leaders.

It is impossible to conceive of social transformation in Bihar without the centrality of land reforms. He tried

to move forward in this direction but the well-entrenched bureaucracy and anti-land reform forces placed umpteen obstacles in his path. Whatever may be his limited contribution to land distribution, it deserves to be applauded. To address the issue of land tenancy in Bihar, it was planned to have a survey and he took substantial initiatives on this matter. It was during his regime that some efforts were made for survey in the Kosi area but they could not make much headway.

It is an irony of history that the broad unity between the socialists and Communists in the era of anti-Congressism could never see the light of the day. A section of the socialists sided with the communal forces. It is often assumed that in India, the socialist and communist streams are distinct with no overlap between them. Historically, there has been a divergence between the two although both these streams place the liberation of the oppressed as their paramount goal. Karpuri Thakur always strove to tear apart this boundary between the two streams. Today, when the country is in the grip of the fascist BJP-RSS combine, democracy and the constitution are under attack, efforts are underway to establish an opposition-free democracy and the country is witnessing a frenzied campaign to turn the country into a Hindu state, the ideals of Karpuri Thakur become all the more relevant. Had he been alive, he would have harnessed all his strength to form a broad unity of social forces to save the constitution and democracy.

It is welcome to note that a positive intervention has been made in this direction in Bihar and a broad coalition against BJP has taken shape. This has aroused a sense of hope in the country. At this crucial juncture of our country's polity, the broad vision of Karpuri Thakur makes him more relevant today. Let us imbibe the basic values of Karpuri Thakur's politics and march forward to form a broad coalition of fighting forces for saving our country. ■

‘Deeno Daan’ (‘Destitute Donation’)

A poem written by Rabindranath Tagore in 1900.

Translated from the Bengali by Arunava Sinha (The Scroll).

Said the royal attendant, “Despite entreaties, king,
The finest hermit, best among men, refuses shelter
In your temple of gold, he is singing to god

Beneath a tree by the road. The devout surround him
In numbers large, their overflowing tears of joy
Rinse the dust off the earth. The temple, though,
Is all but deserted; just as bees abandon
The gilded honeypot when maddened by the fragrance
Of the flower to swiftly spread their wings
And fly to the petals unfurling in the bush
To quench their eager thirst, so too are people,
Sparing not a glance for the palace of gold,
Thronging to where a flower in a devout heart
Spreads heaven’s incense. On the bejewelled platform
The god sits alone in the empty temple.”

At this,

The fretful king dismounted from his throne to go
Where the hermit sat beneath the tree. Bowing, he said,
“My lord, why have you forsaken god’s mighty abode,
The royal construction of gold that pierces the sky,
To sing paeans to the divine here on the streets?”
“There is no god in that temple,” said the hermit.

Furious,



The king said, “No god! You speak like a godless man,
Hermit. A bejewelled idol on a bejewelled throne,
You say it’s empty?”

“Not empty, it holds royal arrogance,

You have consecrated yourself, not the god of the world.”

Frowning, said the king, “You say the temple I made

*With twenty lakh gold coins, reaching to the sky,
That I dedicated to the deity after due rituals,
This impeccable edifice – it has no room for god!”*
Said the tranquil hermit, “The year when the fires
Raged and rendered twenty thousand subjects
Homeless, destitute; when they came to your door
With futile pleas for help, and sheltered in the woods,
In caves, in the shade of trees, in dilapidated temples,
When you constructed your gold-encrusted building
With twenty lakh gold coins for a deity, god said,
‘My eternal home is lit with countless lamps
In the blue, infinite sky; its everlasting foundations
Are truth, peace, compassion, love. This feeble miser
Who could not give homes to his homeless subjects
Expects to give me one!’ At that moment god left
To join the poor in their shelter beneath the trees.
As hollow as the froth and foam in the deep wide ocean
Is your temple, just as bereft beneath the universe,
A bubble of gold and pride.”

Flaring up in rage

The king said, “You false deceiver, leave my kingdom
This instant.”

Serenely the hermit said to him,

“You have exiled the one who loves the devout.
Now send the devout into the same exile, king.” ■

The BJP's Escalating War on Women

▲ DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

On the last day of 2023, India received the news of the three young men accused of gang-raping the 20-year-old woman B Tech student of IIT-BHU at gunpoint two months earlier, being finally arrested. The three men were Kunal Pandey, Saksham Patel and Anand Chauhan, all associated with the BJP's Varanasi IT cell – the first two, in fact the convenor and co-convenor of the IT cell. The social media accounts of the arrested, which was deleted soon after their arrest, bore ample witness to the close connections of the arrested with the BJP top brass including PM Narendra Modi, CM Yogi Adityanath, BJP President JP Nadda and women and child welfare minister Smriti Irani. The three were perhaps not arrested earlier because of the elections in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. In fact, they had made good their escape from Varanasi to Madhya Pradesh to campaign for the BJP in MP elections.

Huge protests had erupted in early November in the IIT-BHU campus forcing the police to file an FIR. The initial FIR had sought to downplay the degree of crime and it was only after the victim made a statement before the Magistrate that gang-rape charges were included. Clearly, the initial response of the university authorities and the police administration was to try and hush up the incident. Student organisations active in Varanasi, including AISA and Bhagat Singh Chhatra Morcha, women's organisations and local units of several opposition parties have repeatedly protested against the culture of misogyny and thuggish violence practised by the Sangh brigade, but the state has only been busy suppressing the protests. In fact, in this case, the ABVP, in connivance with the university and police, sought



to derail the protests by implicating AISA and BCM activists. But for once, the truth could not be suppressed and the true colours of the Sangh brigade's 'sanskari culture' have been exposed for the whole world to see.

Varanasi is the constituency of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. BHU is an iconic academic institution of the city, and 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' is a key slogan of the government. Many of the Modi government's flagship schemes from 'Swachh Bharat' to 'Ujjwala Yojana' have been projected as steps towards women's empowerment. Just the other day the government called a special session of Parliament, the first one in the new building, to pass the women's reservation bill calling it the 'Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam', a worship offering to women's power! When the safety of a girl student is so brazenly violated in IIT-BHU and the perpetrators turn out to be key functionaries of the BJP's own IT cell, it should be seen as a matter of the deepest shame for the Modi government. But the government could evidently not care less!

Indeed, if we look at the status of Indian women on the ground, the present regime should be described as

a reign of growing insecurity with the perpetrators of anti-women violence often being protected and promoted by the ruling party. The message was delivered loud and clear on the 75th anniversary of India's independence when the convicted rapists of Bilkis Bano in the Gujarat pogroms of 2002 were granted a premature release from jail as a special independence day gift and accorded a hero's welcome ahead of the Gujarat elections. Thankfully, the Supreme Court has now revoked this selective remission charging the Gujarat government of suppression of facts and usurpation and abuse of power.

The horrific scale of violence against women and children in Manipur has shocked the whole world, but the Modi government has refused to take any measure to restore any kind of normalcy in the state. And under the double engine Modi-Yogi government, India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh has emerged as a key laboratory of anti-women violence and oppression. According to NCRB figures, Uttar Pradesh topped the list with 65,743 registered FIRs of crimes against women in 2022. There were as many as 62 registered cases of 'murder with rape or gang-

rape'. Dalit women in particular have been targeted for some of the most horrific atrocities.

The BJP today has the highest number of sitting MPs or MLAs with cases of crime against women – according to the ADR's National Election Watch Report 2023, the figure is as high as 44, with seven facing rape charges. And we know how the BJP backs them to the hilt. The likes of Kuldeep Singh Sengar (former MLA from Unnao) and Ramdular Gond (BJP MLA from Duddhi, Sonbhadra sentenced to 25 years in jail for rape of a minor girl) were defended till the very end. Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh continues to roam free as the BJP MP from Gonda, despite having serious charges of sexual harassment levelled by India's award-winning women wrestlers and corroborated by Delhi police in its primary investigation. And this is not restricted to India: Balesh Dhankhar, founder-president of the Overseas Friends of BJP in Australia is currently facing trial in Australia on charges of serial rapes and assaults on women.

The slogan of security and empowerment of women has lost all meaning with the worst perpetrators of misogyny and crimes against women enjoying the highest level of patronage in the Sangh-BJP establishment. An ideology rooted in Manusmriti can only try and enforce social inequality and slavery by all means and when it has the backing of political power it becomes so much more dangerous. As the people of India celebrated the pioneer of women's education and anti-caste social justice Savitribai Phule's legacy on 3rd January, it was clearer than ever that, as Savitribai taught us, the fight for women's education and empowerment in India calls for an emphatic rejection of the misogynistic Brahminical ideology of Manusmriti. Today, this also requires the decisive political defeat of the regime which enforces its violent prescriptions from the citadels of power. ■

The Case of ICF: Vande Bharat Sold Out!

▲ SHANKAR V

It was the Bibek Debroy Committee of NITI Aayog in 2015 that set the ball rolling for privatisation of railways. It came up with a vision for two decades to privatise major areas of a mammoth network of Indian Railways. Since then, the Modi-led BJP government has resorted to privatisation in various ways. Contractualisation of the workforce and outsourcing of various operations have already replaced lakhs of workers. The huge network of Indian railways which employed more than 35 lakh workers has now been downsized to around 10 lakh. Corporatisation has become the first step for privatisation and all production units are already being corporatized with various operations like ticketing, catering, etc., being brought under IRCTC. Soon the Indian Railways will be handed on a platter to private corporate houses.

The government has come up with a plan to hand over railway stations to private companies in the name of 'redevelopment of stations to match global standards'. They targeted some 400 stations for privatisation, but are yet to make much progress. Some trains like 'Tejas' were allowed to be operated by private operators. There are also plans to handover all railway tracks in the country to the corporates in a phased manner.

The government has now found a new way of selling out public infrastructure like ICF (Integral Coach Factory) in Chennai, which is one of the best performing production units in the country. They indigenously produce the breed of Vande Bharat trains. The product was drummed up as one of the best, modern, indigenously produced trains in the country, but one that will be handed over to multinational companies.

Recently, the Indian Railways has concluded two agreements – one with Titagarh Rail System Limited (TRSL), an Italian company in collaboration with Bharat Heavy Electronics Limited (BHEL), and another with Transmashholding (TMH), a Russian company in collaboration with Rail Vikas Nigam Limited (RVNL).

TMH-RVNL consortium is expected to produce 120 Vande Bharat trains of 16 rakes and TRSL-BHEL consortium is to produce about 80 trains. ICF produced the same trains for Rs. 70 crore, while the international market rate for manufacturing the same is estimated to be at Rs. 200 crore. The government has awarded the contract for the production of the same coaches and trains to MNCs at the rate of Rs. 120 crore per train, i.e., Rs. 50 crore more than the production rate of ICF.

However, it does not end here. The companies are also given government land for free, along with free utilisation of power, gas, water, etc. They are also entitled to use the technical knowhow, design, drawing and everything that was supposed to be the patents, intellectual property rights, of ICF and Indian Railways.

Additionally, the ICF land, resources and infrastructure in Chennai are handed over to the TRSL and whereas, the Marathwada Rail Coach Factory (MRCF) in Latur is being handed over to the TMH.

Ironically, all these are carried out in the name of "Atma Nirbhar" (Self Reliance) and "Make in India". In this joint venture, a Special Purpose Vehicle called

Kinet Railway Solutions Limited is floated and registered as a company in which 70 percent of shares is owned by the Russian company – TMH. This is the “Atma Nirbhar” principle that the Modi led BJP government is promoting, where indigenous technologies are developed and handed over to multinationals at a higher price.

With “Make in India”, foreign companies had to invest and produce in India, to add to the wealth of the country. However, in reality, we see that Indian wealth and indigenous technology is being swallowed by the multinational companies.

The ICF workers are opposed to such a shameful model of reliance on multinationals in Indian soil and are on a warpath to secure their rights and the pride of the nation. Thousands of ICF workers unitedly formed a Joint Action Council (JAC), including all trade unions of ICF, against the handing over of ICF land and infrastructure to the multinational company, and made it loud and clear that Indian workers and employees are quite capable of producing Vande Bharat trains at a much cheaper rate.

Workers demonstrated on 25th October, 2023 and held a sit-in demonstration on 27th October, 2023 in front of the GM office, demanding the scrapping of the unfair and unilateral agreement with the corporates.

The argument advanced by the management justifying the act of handing over the manufacturing of Vande Bharat trains was that the ICF did not have sufficient manpower.

According to the JAC, for in-house manufacturing of one 16-car rake of Vande Bharat (excluding propulsion system), ICF needs approximately 227 Group C employees, including 182 direct technicians, 27 supporting staff, 18 technical supervisors. It is said that 22.2 percent technicians’ posts (totalling 1,419 posts as on 01.09.2022) and 600 helper posts are lying vacant for quite long in ICF. If these vacancies are filled up, ICF can phenomenally increase its production capacity. But, the government has chosen the route of privatisation instead. In fact, the original strength of 16,000 workforce in ICF was brought down to 10,000 and now close to 2,000 posts are vacant.

In fact, various models of privatisation of Indian Railways will have a great impact on the railway fare and travel. Trains have been one of the major form of transport used by the people of the country. It is acknowledged as an affordable transport for the poor. Introduction of newer variety of trains only lead to increased fares and the public transport is being turned to serve the privileged. Even experiences of China, Japan, etc., shows that public transport needs to be subsidised from the larger interests of growth and development of the economy and the countries. Trying to make public transport a profit driven industry, not only makes travel unaffordable for the millions of poor, but also

makes a greater impact on the growth of the country as a whole and its people.

In such a backdrop, the working class movement in the country should rise up to demand the scrapping of agreement to hand over the production of Vande Bharat trains to the multinational companies. The struggle to repeal the policy of privatisation and monetisation can be successful only if the Modi-led BJP regime is thrown out of power. ■

Stand in Solidarity with Hasdeo Movement!

After the BJP government assumed power in Chhattisgarh, the widespread tree-felling in Hasdeo Arand forest region has resumed. About 2.5 lakh trees are slated to be chopped in the forest, which will clear massive swathes of land for the Parsa East and Kete Basan (PEKB) Phase-II coal mining, where Adani Enterprises Ltd. is the official “mine developer and operator”.

The Hasdeo forest area spanning across Surajpur, Surguja and Korba districts, has a significant Adivasi population, and has been a focal point for the anti-mining struggle of the Adivasis, who are resisting the government-backed corporate coal mining. Earlier in 2022. After strong resistance from the Adivasi communities, the Chhattisgarh Assembly passed a unanimous resolution to designate the 2,000 sq km expanse of Hasdeo forests as mining free and was declared as the Lemru Elephant Reserve. This move has been reversed by the incumbent BJP government. With changes to the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 being introduced in 2022, that has made it easier for governments and developers to acquire lands for mining and business purposes, without any consideration for local stakeholders, the clearance of trees has only exacerbated the oppression against the Adivasis.

Several Adivasi activists like Ramlal Kariam, Jayandan Porte, and Thakur Ram, were picked up from their homes and detained, whereas Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan’s convenor Alok Shukla and documentary film maker Ajay TG were attacked by unidentified individuals on December 21st.

The repression and land grab in Hasdeo exposes Modi-BJP government’s lie of protecting *Jal, Jungle and Zameen* of the Adivasis. CPI(ML) steadfastly stands in solidarity with the Adivasis in Hasdeo Arand and the rest of Chhattisgarh in their fight for protection of their constitutional rights, homes, livelihood and lives. ■

Hitting the Poor Hardest: MNREGA 5 Crore Job Cards Deleted After Budget Cuts

▲ SAURABH NARUKA

P rime Minister Narendra Modi (in)famously said that MNREGA is the epitome of failure of the previous governments, a seven after 60 years of independence, people were being sent to dig pits as a means to provide employment. In a satirical tone, Modi added that he will not discontinue the program, but would keep it going to highlight the failure of previous governments. He had to retract his words when he had to rely on MNREGA during covid pandemic, when forced migration due to unplanned lockdown ensured that the only means of providing sustenance to the people was this rural employment guarantee scheme. In reality, despite continuing the scheme, the BJP government did not give due attention to MNREGA. After ten years of being in power, along with tall talks being laid bare, lackluster economic performance and record breaking unemployment rates, the Modi government's buzzing confidence to denounce MNREGA may have reduced. But through systematic budget cuts, an attempt to bury the scheme is being made.

In last years budget, i.e., 2023-24, the fund allocation to MNREGA was slashed to Rs. 60,000 crore from Rs. 73,000 crore in 2022-23, while the revised estimate for 2022-23 stood at Rs. 89,000 crore. The average rural employment provided under MNREGA is also dwindling in the past few years, with 2023-24 data showing 46 days of employment (as per latest data available till January 2024). The average wage in 2023-24 stands at Rs. 237 per day, as compared to Rs. 132.70 per day in 2013-14, i.e., in the past 10 years, wages have increased only

by a mere Rs. 115! Adjusted against the Consumer Price Index (CPI) of rural areas, the percentage annual increase in real wages paid under MNREGA during the BJP regime stands at a meagre 1.15%, whereas the national average wage rate paid under MNREGA is much lower than the prevailing market rates in most states, thus ensuring the decline in demand for MNREGA. The Minimum Wages Act was made inapplicable to MNREGA beneficiaries, and several social activists deemed this to be unconstitutional. The same came to be challenged and the matter is pending before the Supreme Court, even as MNREGA workers struggle to meet ends with their paltry wages. Apart from low wages, informal administrative ways and artificial ways are used to suppress demand. For example, when workers approach the Panchayat demanding MNREGA work, they are turned away for reasons that there is no work available due to shortage of funds. When workers are turned away, their application forms are not received, which means that the demand for such work does not enter the system, which is shown as the reason for budget cuts.

It is in this context that one must analyze the statement of Minister of Development Giriraj Singh, who said in Lok Sabha, that around five crore jobs have been removed in 2022-23, as opposed to the data which stood at 1.5 crore in 2021-22. Reasons cited for such a drastic increase in job removals was due to "fake" job cards, duplicity of job cards, no demand for work, shifting of residences of workers, or workers' death, etc. However, the scale of job removals raise suspicions on

external interferences which holds the motive to flush out the scheme. The current data shows that in 2023-24 (until January 22, 2024), 7.66 crore individuals worked under MNREGA, and for the completed year of 2022-23, it stood at 8.75 crore. In 2013-14, the number of individuals working under MNREGA stood at 7.38 crore. Even by taking into account the absolute increase in casual and manual workers in rural area, who form the base for MNREGA, and the period of ten years, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that MNREGA has been forced to not keep pace with the actual requirements. It must also be highlighted here that when only less than 3% of households engage in MNREGA, and complete 100 days of work, will they be entitled to the present scale of allocation.

The social activists who engage with MNREGA state that the level of allocation in the last programme is "killing the law". As per their estimates, an allocation of Rs. 2.72 lakh crore is required to ensure that legally entitled quota of 100 days of work for all households in the current year are met. The budget allocation has come down from 2.4% in 2016-17 to 1.3% in 2023-24.

It is in this context that we have to factor the 5 crore job cards being cut in a single year under MNREGA! The numbers analyzed clearly indicate that the present ruling dispensation is hell bent on damaging and destroying the largest programme of demand-driven rural public employment of the country. It is for the progressive and democratic forces, fighting for people's rights to organize workers and safeguard MNREGA. ■

Indian Science Congress: *Murder of an Institution*

▲ ARATRIKA

Ever since the RSS-BJP came into power at the central government with Narendra Modi as the face, every year the Indian Science Congress would make the headlines for all the wrong reasons. This year again it has made the headlines, but for a completely different kind of reason. The central government has finally decided to stop funding the annual event citing a host of reasons. Before we go into the current status of the Congress or the merit of the dismissal, a few words need to be said about its rich legacy.

Since its inception in 1914, the sessions organised by the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA) have been held every year, except the time the pandemic was raging. In whatever form modern science has developed on Indian soil, the Congresses have had a part to play in those. The ISCA was the brainchild of two British academics serving in India — Prof PS MacMahon of Canning College, Lucknow, and Prof JL Simonsen of Presidency College, Madras. It was modelled on the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The Congress was aimed to provide a platform for discussion on the latest developments in pure and applied sciences as well as on the connection between science and society. Since then hundreds of scientists have been associated with it across the nation. Post-independence it has always been the prime minister who has inaugurated this Congress giving it a unique character. Many times, it has been the platform from which related policies have been declared by the prime ministers as well.



The post-2014 situation demands special attention. The RSS-BJP has practically declared war against all rational and progressive voices and practices prevalent in this nation through political coercion, threats, and even death. Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh were rationalists assassinated by Hindutva goons for their staunch critique of the ideals of Hindutva that feed off of pseudoscientific practices prevalent in the society. The centuries old fight against the proponents of pseudoscience who use it as a tool to preserve their hegemony thus continues. Thanks to this saffron regime in power right now, the Indian Science Congress too has become a playground for absolute mockery of science in the past few years. The situation worsened to the point that it was being deemed as a 'circus' by respected members of the scientific community.

In such a scenario, the Indian Science Congress Association required a complete overhaul to bring back

its glory and relevance. Rather than putting the effort to restore its glory days, the Department of Science and Technology that provides the funding for the Congress, has declared stoppage of funding for this event till it 'mends its ways'. One may wonder, what ways are to be mended. To clarify this the DST has brought charges of "financial irregularities" and a "unilateral decision" by a few ISCA office bearers, without government approval, to shift the venue of the 2024 session from Lucknow University to Lovely Professional University at Jalandhar as the reasons for discontinuing funding for the Congress indefinitely. Expectedly, the recent instances of spreading pseudoscientific claims from the stage of the Congress never got cited as a reason. The allotted fund of Rs. 5 crores was thus summarily dismissed.

The venue for the 2024 Indian Science Congress was initially decided to be Lucknow university. Upon cancellation of funds, Lovely Professional University (LPU)

agreed to host the event. At the last minute, even LPU backed off leaving the organisers in a limbo. ISCA President Arvind Saxena informed that the association had decided to post an appeal on its website inviting universities to host the event possibly in February. Basically, the whole Congress has been relegated to the mercy of the future as of now. It can very well be concluded that the century old Indian Science Congress joins Vigyan Prasar, and a host of science awards, in the dustbin. The matter of course did not end here, the DST rather channelled funds into promoting another science meet called Indian International Science

Festival, an annual science festival organised by the Vijnana Bharati- the science wing of the RSS. This is a clear subversion of the scientific temper and secular values a body like DST is supposed to uphold. At this IISF organised in Delhi last month, the Surya Tilak instrument parched upon a miniature model of the Ram Mandir meant to project sunlight on the Ram Lalla idol jointly made by central research institutes like the Indian Institute of Astrophysics and Central Building Research Institute, was one of the biggest attractions.

Whatever be the recent track record of the Indian Science Congress, disposing of it indefinitely is an

outright attack on science. Diversion of the same funds towards a saffron project under the garb of science, paints the picture of an even darker future. Fascist forces always try to capture every possible institution at their disposal to the fullest extent possible. If and when this exercise faces an obstacle, the institution gets bulldozed. Pseudoscience has always been a tool to dampen dissent in a society, a tool that fascists through history have used expertly. With the rise of Vijnana Bharati, the saffron regime has strengthened another medium to carry out pseudoscientific propaganda. ■

AISA Condemns the Involvement of Central Research Institutes in Ram Mandir Construction

Statement | All India Students' Association strongly condemns the use of central government research institutes like Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA) and Central Building Research Institute (CBRI) to construct a contraption for the upcoming Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Such research institutes of national importance that are run on tax-payers' money are supposed to uphold the ethos of secularism in keeping with scientific temperament and constitutional values. The use of political pressure to rally them on a project that is principally political and secondarily religious, by the current saffron regime, is a matter of grave concern.

With the media blitzkrieg being orchestrated right now, the fact that the Ram Janmabhoomi andolan of '92 shook the entire country leaving a trail of blood with the 500-year old Babri Masjid demolished by the Sangh at the centre, has been effectively pushed into oblivion. Post Babri demolition, a meteoric rise of the BJP has been observed in Indian polity. This year, the election campaign for the BJP starts early with the Ram Mandir consecration being carried out on 22nd January.

In such a situation it is utterly condemnable that the IIA and CBRI agreed to provide the design and construct the optico-mechanical contraption respectively, to project sunlight on the idol's forehead

on every Ram Navami for 3-4 minutes, at the behest of the Ram Janmabhoomi Trust. The contraption donated by OPTICA, a private company, costs Rs. 84 lakhs. At a time when the research fraternity is reeling under fund cuts, closing of Vigyan Prasar, slashing of science awards etc. it is unthinkable that the central government institutes agreed to divert precious human labour towards this fascist project. With the introduction of the National Research Fund meant to regulate funding processes as well as research projects that may get public/private funds, incidents of such nature will become more common.

In this scenario, not only science students, researchers, and academics, but every progressive and democratic individual should unitedly speak out against the subversion of research institutes to the Hindutva ideology. ■



A team of scientists from CBRI Roorkee with a model of Ram Mandir.

Beating the Colonial Powers at their Game – the Draconian New Criminal laws

▲ CLIFTON D' ROZARIO

In December of 2023, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), during the winter session of the Parliament, pushed through three crucial laws – Bharatiya Sakshya Sanhita, 2023, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 replacing the Indian Evidence Act, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Indian Penal Code respectively. These new Criminal Codes were granted Presidential assent on 25th December 2023, but do not come into force until a notification to this effect is issued by the Union government.

The new criminal laws are primarily an exercise in re-numbering and/or re-structuring of provisions in the existing three laws, besides which a small number of necessary changes have been incorporated including proving statutory basis to “zero FIRs”, decriminalisation of homosexuality, introducing a time limit for completing investigations, recognition of electronic evidence as primary evidence, expansion of the scope of secondary evidence among few others. However, it is another set of changes, though small in number, that are concerning since these are pernicious, from the point of view of human rights and civil liberties in the country.

Encoding draconian provisions into the new penal code:

Terrorist Act:

A major and concerning development is the introduction of the crime of “terrorist act” in the BNS, which did not exist in the IPC.

Section 113 of the BNS, adopts a broadened definition of a “terrorist

act” from the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), while doing away with two (howsoever inadequate) safeguards present in the UAPA, namely, sanction of prosecution from the government and mandatory requirement of an independent authority to peruse the evidence before sanction is granted.

With this new BNS provision, the government has the unbridled choice to prosecute and imprison political opponents using either the UAPA (with its cursory procedural safeguards) or the BNS (without even that fig leaf). By using this provision, the government can declare as terrorist activity, any nonviolent struggle and movement for democracy or social, political or economic justice, or any public discourse that conflicts with the government narrative.

Retaining sedition law under a new nomenclature:

Contrary to popular belief, the offense of sedition (section 124A of IPC) has been retained under section 152 of the BNS, under a new nomenclature, and a more severe punishment.

The Union government has ignored the concern that sedition is an over broad, arbitrary offence which has no place in a constitutional republic. It has broadened the ambit of this already over-broad provision to criminalise even “encouraging feelings of separatist activity”, ignoring the Supreme Court requirement of the speech to be linked to the promotion of violence. The Union Government makes a mockery of the order of the Supreme Court suspending trials in sedition cases. This order came against the backdrop of indiscriminate use of

sedition to quell dissent, obstruct free speech and target any opposition to the dominant ruling class ideology of crony capitalism and Hindutva. 2010 – 2021, has famously been called the Decade of Darkness, with more than 800 sedition cases being filed against 13,000 people. In fact more than 500 cases of sedition were filed since the BJP came into power in 2014 and 2019. It also found that the conviction rate was 0.1%.

Criminalising hunger strikes:

Section 226 has been introduced in the BNS that criminalises any attempt to commit suicide with the intent to compel or restrain any public servant from discharging his official duty. This alleged crime carries punishment of simple imprisonment upto one year, fine or community service.

Clearly the sole purpose of this provision is to prohibit hunger strikes, targeting the right of people to peaceful and democratic protest. Hunger strikes is democratic form of dissent and resistance, and forms a spirited and important part of the history of Indian freedom struggle - be it Gandhi or Bhagat Singh.

It is ironic that Modi who rode to power on the wave of the hunger strikes during the anti-corruption movement, has criminalised and denied to the people this form of protest.

Criminalising promise to marry:

Section 69 of the BNS states that whoever, by deceitful means or by making promise to marry to a woman without any intention of fulfilling the same, has sexual intercourse with her, such sexual intercourse not amounting to the offence of rape, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall also be liable to fine. The explanation to section 69 states that “deceitful means” shall include inducement for, or false promise of employment or promotion, or marrying by suppressing identity.

Right-wing groups loudly proclaim that this provision is going to be instrumental in countering the so-called “love jihad”, since the explanation categorically includes “marrying by suppressing identity”.

Love jihad – this pejorative and communal term for inter-religious marriages is a conspiracy theory on baseless claims that Muslim men suppress their religious identity and “lure” Hindu women into romantic relationships and then convert them to Islam. This claim has been instrumental in demonising and “otherising” the Muslim community despite being a bogey. Remember that even the Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs G. Kishan Reddy stated on the floor of Parliament on 04.02.2020 that “no such case of ‘Love Jihad’ has been reported by any of the central agencies”.

Alongside inter-religion marriages, it is inter-caste relationships that have been targeted and this provision could very well be weaponised against them. The BJP government, in pursuing its communal casteist agenda, has ignored the rampant murders of couples, solely because they belong to different castes and communities, also called “(dis)honour killings”. Instead it grants statutory blessings to notions propagating inequality, hatred and are snatching away the rights of the people of this country, and which are steeped in patriarchal, paternalistic notions, where women need to be “saved” from “predatory” men, thus denying the agency and the autonomy of the woman.

Enhancing arbitrary powers of the police:

It is widely known that the criminal justice system in India has been weaponised against religious minorities, other vulnerable communities like Dalits and Adivasis and the poor. The new codes by granting arbitrary powers to the police and effectively sanctioning breach of Fundamental Rights by the law enforcement agencies. This will

only further entrench a system of oppression through law which will be wielded against the vulnerable.

Sanctioning 24 hours detention by the police:

Section 172 of BNSS, is a new provision that is introduced that did not exist in the CrPC. According to this provision, all persons are bound to conform to the lawful directions of a police officer given in fulfilment of any of his duties and such police officer is empowered to detain/remove any person resisting, refusing, ignoring or disregarding such orders, and further he “may either take such person before a Magistrate or, in petty cases, release him as soon as possible within a period of twenty-four hours”. Thus statutory sanction has been given to the police to detain persons, without complying with the safeguards around arrest since this would not be deemed to be arrest.

Publicising accused details:

Section 37 of BNSS mandates the “prominent display”, both physically and digitally, of the name, address and the nature of the offense of an arrested accused, in every police station and district headquarters. This provision in addition to violating the right to privacy and human dignity of a person, facilitates the profiling and targeting of individuals by the police prior to any formal conviction.

Statutorily mandating handcuffing:

Another weapon given to the police is the introduction of handcuffing vide section 43(3) of the BNSS, which was not only was absent in the CrPC but was held by the Courts to be prima facie inhuman, unreasonable and akin to treating human beings like animals. This provision allows the use of handcuffs during arrests, if the person fits the criteria of a habitual repeat offender, an escapee from custody, or if they stand accused of certain offenses like organized crime or terrorist acts.

Empowering the police to avoid registering FIRs:

Under section 173 of the BNSS, the police are not required to register an FIR based on a complaint on a category of cases which is punishable with three years but less than seven years. Instead the police are given the option to hold “preliminary inquiries” and determine if a “prima facie” case exists before registering an FIR. This is dangerous because it provides the police arbitrary discretion. It is known that “bunking of crime” i.e. the turning away turn away of complainants by the police without registering their complaints, is a reality in the country and the number of FIRs not registered is approximately equivalent to the number of FIRs actually registered. Section 173 of the BNSS effectively grants statutory backing to the vice of bunking of crimes.

Sanctioning custodial violence – enhancing police custody from 15 days to 60/90 days:

Atrocities perpetrated by the police are rampant. The dehumanizing torture, assault and deaths in custody have assumed alarming proportions and raise serious questions about the credibility of rule of law and administration of criminal justice system. In this regard, limiting police custody is one of the protections afforded to accused persons. Section 167 of the CrPC mandates that the accused can be remanded to police custody only for up to fifteen days within the first fifteen days of the accused being presented before the Magistrate after their arrest.

This stands completely altered by section 187 of BNSS which deals with the duration of police custody, and enhances police custody from the present limit of 15 days of police custody, to 60 or 90 days (depending on the offence). This prolonged custody period would expose the accused to intimidation, torture and danger, by encouraging the men in ‘Khaki’ to consider themselves above the law

and sometimes even to become law unto themselves.

Half-measures at tackling mob lynching:

While introducing the BNS, 2023 in Parliament in August, 2023, Union Home Minister Amit Shah loudly declared that in response to the widespread hue and cry about mob lynching by civil society, his government has introduced provisions for tackling mob lynching.

However, the BNS does not per se mention “mob lynching”; but sections 103(2) and 117(4) criminalises such actions without specifically calling it as such. Murder and causing grievous hurt by “a group of five or more persons acting in concert commits murder on the ground of race, caste or community, sex, place of birth, language, personal belief or any other similar ground” is made a special crime.

What is glaring is the absence of “religion” as one of the explicit grounds in these provisions, despite universal recognition that religion is one among the prime motivating factors for mob lynching. Public executions or mob lynching of Muslims, much like caste murders, is an every-day and inescapable reality in new India. As such, the failure to mention religion cannot be accidental or oversight.

Sanctioning arbitrary and inhuman punishments:

Community service:

Section 23 of the BNS has introduced “community service” as a form of punishment, for certain offences: theft of property less than Rs. 5,000/-, drunken behaviour in public, defamation, etc. It is evident that the failure to specifically define community service, is deliberate. This clause, which on the face appears as progressive, has the potential for serious misuse and abuse.

This stems from the fact that no definition of community service is provided, except that it benefits the

community. This lack of definition and statutory framework for what constitutes community service is a matter of grave concern, particularly in light of arbitrary and problematic orders passed by the Courts directing arbitrary and illegal acts of community service, as part of bail conditions or punishment for minor offences. These include orders to plant tree saplings, enlist as Covid Warriors, donate to PM Cares Fund, tie rakhi to rape survivor, etc. Essentially these orders on community service become a way of judges to further their own prejudices and biases in the name of judicial discretion.

Solitary confinement:

Alongside handcuffing, section 11 of the BNSS backs the inhuman punishment of solitary confinement, which has been recognised as psychological torture and a violation of the right to dignity by the Supreme Court.

Section 11 of the BNS offers the Court the discretion to sentence an offender to upto 3 months solitary confinement according to the following scale:

- (a) a time not exceeding one month if the term of imprisonment shall not exceed six months;
- (b) a time not exceeding two months if the term of imprisonment shall exceed six months and shall not exceed one year;
- (c) a time not exceeding three months if the term of imprisonment shall exceed one year.

Thus, any offender, convicted of any crime, can be forced into solitary confinement at the untrammelled discretion of the judge. Moreover it exposes the hollow claim of the Union government of elevating justice above punitive measures.

The Union government’s claim that the intention behind the criminal codes is decolonisation is patently false, given the fact that the punishment for solitary confinement under the new

codes is far worse than the provisions that existed before. The provision of solitary confinement under the old laws can be traced to sections 73 and 74 of the Indian Penal Code and section 29 of Prisons Act, 1894. Under the old laws there is a mandate that the inmate must have a means of communicating with a prison officer during solitary confinement, and, in cases where the inmate is confined in a cell for more than twenty-four hours, s/he shall be visited at least once a day by a medical officer. Solitary punishment in the BNS does not provide these cursory safeguards that the colonial-era Prisons Act, 1894 mandated.

Conclusion:

At its core, the substantial changes introduced through these three criminal laws, “equip the government with adequate power to hollow out our democracy and transform India into a fascist state – should the government choose to deploy the new laws to their fullest extent” and can facilitate the clampdown on legitimate political dissent and protest against social and economic exploitation.

The only possible obstacle to India becoming the police state which the new criminal laws envisage is the voice of the people on the street. With the Union government rendering parliament virtually powerless, and the courts abdicating their duty to hold the government responsible, it is only the people that can teach the Modi government a stern lesson, like the truck driver unions who have successfully protested against the new criminal laws. In fact the truck drivers have juts followed the farmers who came out against the three Farm Laws, the working class whose struggle has left the Labour Codes in limbo, and the struggle of the Muslim community against the communal Citizenship Amendment Act. In the coming days, many such agitations are inevitable as the consequences of these new criminal laws becomes apparent to the people. ■

Voters' Day 2024: Defend the Framework and Spirit of Universal Adult Franchise

▲ DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

On 25 January, 2024, the Election Commission of India (ECI) will observe its 74th foundation anniversary. The foundation day of the ECI is celebrated nowadays as National Voters' Day. As a permanent constitutional body entrusted with the responsibility of conducting elections in a country as vast and diverse as India, the institutional significance of the ECI can hardly be overemphasised. The credibility of the electoral exercise depends considerably on the credibility of the Election Commission and the ECI today suffers from a major crisis on this score. The refusal of the ECI to meet a delegation of the INDIA bloc over the demand for 100% counting of VVPAT slips has further shaken the confidence of voters on the fairness of the election process.

India is currently one of the few countries across the world where voting is done almost entirely through electronic voting machines or EVMs. Only small numbers of voters – mostly sections of government staff including employees on polling duty and elderly voters with health issues – who are in no position to visit their designated polling booths are entitled to use postal ballots. A decade ago the Election Commission itself accepted the fact that the machines deny the electors their basic right to be assured that their votes have been duly credited to candidates they have voted for. To inspire confidence among voters, the EC agreed to complement every EVM with machines generating Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail or VVPAT record. But what use is a VVPAT machine if voters are not given a chance to actually verify the paper trail and the

votes thus verified are not taken up for counting?

Of late there have been growing complaints and doubts about votes being 'transferred' to select symbols and results thus being technologically manipulated. It should be remembered that prior to the introduction of the VVPAT the BJP was most vocal about the lack of reliability of EVMs. From Advani to Modi, senior BJP leaders then used to talk about democracy being endangered by EVMs. Now the BJP has turned into the most vocal champion of EVMs and rejects the very idea of using the VVPAT record to dispel widespread doubts and complaints raised by the electorate. All that the INDIA bloc has suggested is that voters should get a chance to verify their votes and the verified paper slips should be taken up as a substitute for ballots and treated as the basis for counting.

We are told that such counting would take a lot of time. Till two decades ago we were used to waiting for the counting of ballot papers. As former Chief Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi has argued, the counting of VVPAT slips would take much less time than the counting of multi-candidate ballots in earlier elections. At the end of the day, the biggest test of the credibility of any electoral exercise is the confidence of the electorate. The very introduction of VVPAT took place in order to inspire confidence in the voters' minds. Now that large sections of electors and parties of the INDIA bloc, which accounted for more than half of the votes polled in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, are demanding complete count of VVPAT slips there can be

no reason for the ECI not to agree to that public demand.

If India is still internationally regarded as a functional democracy howsoever flawed and limited, at the heart of it lies the overall credibility of India's electoral track record. But now along with the constitutional foundation and institutional framework of democracy, the electoral system itself is fast losing its credibility. Everything related to elections is being rendered absolutely opaque and arbitrary. The corporate funding of elections has been granted absolute secrecy through the shadowy system of electoral bonds with the government telling the Supreme Court that the people had no business to know about the source and identity of the electoral bonds. The government of the day has now got total control over the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner. And the committee appointed under the chairmanship of former President Ramnath Kovind is all set to club all elections into a single event under the dubious "One Nation, One Election" slogan.

As the Indian Republic enters the seventy-fifth year of its existence, the electoral system needs to be rescued from the growing all-out crisis that threatens to effectively disenfranchise the people. It is encouraging to see India's lawyer community take an active interest in saving the electoral system and at least one former CEC, a known defender of the EVM system, back the demand for complete count of VVPAT slips to allay growing apprehensions of electoral manipulations. A group of senior Supreme Court lawyers recently carried out a live demonstration in Delhi exposing the vulnerability of the current EVM-VVPAT system. As the constitutional body entrusted with the task of overseeing the entire electoral exercise, the onus is on the Election Commission of India to act to reassure the Indian electorate about the credibility and transparency of the electoral system and substantiate the claim of "free and fair elections". ■

Commemorating the Death Centenary of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov

Lenin Still Walks Around the World, Continues to Inspire Revolutionary Imagination and Initiative

▲ ARINDAM SEN

In the spectacular galaxy of twentieth-century revolutionaries, Lenin is widely recognised as the brightest star. As a theorist, publicist and activist rolled into one, as a party-builder and leader of leaders, as a visionary with a magical power of arousing the masses in revolutionary action, and as the principal architect of the world's first socialist state, what he achieved in a lifespan of fifty-four years is truly astonishing.

Not only did he establish, with great theoretical rigor, the strong possibility of the global chain of imperialism breaking at its weakest link, thus ushering in socialism in one or a few country/countries to begin with, he proved it in real life almost simultaneously with the publication of his *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. He thus inherited the theory propounded by Marx and Engels, elevated it to a new height and carried the great work initiated by the heroes of the Paris Commune to consummation. Among all his qualities and contributions, what made Lenin the most beloved hero of the wretched of the Earth – and the most hated enemy of the richest of the Earth -- was his revolutionary audacity to move the mountains (as Rosa told Clara).

For the sanguivores, his second major crime is that he refuses to die and continues to egg on the toiling millions the world over to rebel against every kind of tyranny and exploitation. Naturally, the most successful enemy of the bourgeois order has always and everywhere been a prime target of vicious attacks from forces of status quo and reaction.

In our country, 'Guru' Golwalkar,

“

It was in 1907 at the World Congress of the Second International at Stuttgart when Rosa Luxemburg, who possessed an artist's eye for the characteristic, pointed Lenin out to me with the remark: 'Take a good look at him. That is Lenin. Look at the self-willed, stubborn head. A real Russian peasant's head with a few faintly Asiatic lines. That man will try to overturn mountains. Perhaps he will be crushed by them. But he will never yield.'

- Clara Zetkin,
Reminiscences of Lenin



following his Guru Hitler' singled out communists as the most hated political enemy. In an overt symbolism, the BJP in 2018 celebrated its electoral victory over the ruling Left Front government in Tripura by bulldozing a grand statue of Lenin. The regime has chosen to use the generic term urban Naxal (and its variations like cultural Naxals) to harass and imprison anyone who dares to dissent and speak truth to power as a terrorist and security-threat to the nation. To buttress this fascist campaign, the government has now drastically revised the relevant laws to arrogate to itself arbitrary powers to declare any peaceful protest or public discourse that contradicts the official narrative as terrorist activity, often branding the leaders as urban Naxals.

To this expanded Modi version of McCarthyism add the brazen attacks on our lives and livelihood, our Constitution and rule of law, our secular-pluralist traditions and syncretic cultural ethos, our civil and

human rights including the right to privacy and dignity -- you get to see the deep dark clouds of a diabolic dystopia gathering overhead. We must act now to disperse the calamitous clouds and save the nation. We must act swiftly, decisively and with abundant trust on the masses in the spirit of Lenin.

Just five days prior to his untimely death, Lenin said in a dictated note:

"Napoleon, I think, wrote: 'First engage in a serious battle and then see what happens.' Well, we did first engage in a serious battle in October 1917, and then saw such details of development ... as the Brest peace, the New Economic Policy, and so forth. And now there can be no doubt that in the main we have been victorious."

Come, let us engage more seriously in the ongoing battle to defeat the fascist juggernaut in the hustings, on the streets and no less important, in the socio-cultural/ ideological plane; and then see what happens and what is to be done next. ■

Adani-Hindenburg Case: Justice Denied

▲ PRASENJIT BOSE

The Supreme Court verdict on the Adani-Hindenburg matter was delivered on January 3, 2024. While the judgement did not give any clean chit to the Adani Group of companies vis-a-vis the allegations made in the Hindenburg report, it ruled that there was no regulatory failure on the part of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) in investigating the matter and rejected the plea for constituting a Special Investigating Team. SEBI has been asked to continue its ongoing inquiries and "preferably" conclude them in the next three months.

Following the publication of the Hindenburg report and the consequent crash in the prices of Adani company shares in January 2023, the Supreme Court had admitted a batch of petitions in the matter. In an interim order on March 2, 2023, the apex court had set the terms of reference for SEBI inquiry and also formed an Expert Committee (EC) to inter alia investigate whether there was any regulatory failure.

The SEBI was directed to investigate: (i) Whether there had been a violation of Rule 19A of the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Rules 1957 (SCRR, 1957); (ii) Whether there had been a failure to disclose transactions with related parties to SEBI, in accordance

with the law; and (iii) Whether there was any manipulation of stock prices in contravention of existing laws.

Rule 19A of the SCRR, 1957 stipulates that every company listed in the stock market must maintain at least 25 per cent public shareholding, which implies that the promoter group of a company cannot own shares beyond a threshold of 75%. This rule is meant to ensure that adequate shares of a listed company are available in the stock market to enable coherent price discovery and to prevent market manipulation.

Hindenburg's Exposé

The Hindenburg report had provided elaborate material pointing to the existence of a massive web of overseas shell companies acting as front companies for the Adani group. The overseas entities identified by Hindenburg included: (I) Elara India Opportunities Fund, with a total market value of about \$ 3.04 billion, of which over 98% was invested in 3 Adani stocks; (II) Monterosa Investment Holdings, which held 1.69% of Adani Enterprises, 5.09% of Adani Transmission, 2.72% of Adani Total Gas and 1.29% of Adani Power in end-December 2022; (III) Cyprus based New Leaina's investments which held over 1% stake in Adani

Green Energy (IV) Mauritius based Opal Investment Private Ltd which held 4.69% of total shares of Adani Power as on December 2022.

In short, Hindenburg concluded that stock parking entities like Monterosa, Elara and New Leaina, together with suspicious offshore entities like EM Resurgent Fund, Asia Investment Corporation, Emerging India Focus Fund, etc., held and transacted in Adani companies' scrips in disproportionately large magnitudes. Hindenburg also provided evidence which linked these suspect overseas entities with the Adani group promoters via Gautam Adani's elder brother Vinod Adani and his associates like Subir Mitra and Chang Chung-Ling.

As per Hindenburg's analysis, if the shareholdings of the suspected entities were included, four listed Adani group companies were clearly violating the 75% threshold for promoter ownership in end-December 2022 (table below). The proper classification of the suspected shareholdings as insider or promoter holdings would result in the delisting of these Adani group companies.

Expert Committee Findings

The report of the expert committee (EC) appointed by the Supreme Court revealed that 13 overseas entities having significant shareholdings in Adani group companies were being investigated by SEBI since October/November 2020. It is noteworthy that all the 13 entities suspected by SEBI and named in the EC report were independently identified in the Hindenburg report, among many others, as those owned by Vinod Adani and his associates.

The EC noted that SEBI, despite its investigation into these overseas entities, was unable to gather conclusive evidence of their link

How Adani Companies Flouted Rule 19A of SCRR, 1957 (as on End-December 2022)			
	Disclosed Promoter Group Shareholding (%)	Suspect Overseas Holdings (%)	Suspected % over 75% Rule
Adani Transmission Ltd.	74.19	10.27	9.46
Adani Enterprises Ltd.	72.63	3.29	0.92
Adani Power Ltd.	74.97	5.98	5.95
Adani total Gas Ltd.	74.80	4.34	4.14

Source: Hindenburg Report, January 2023

to the Adani promoter group. The EC further noted that significant regulatory amendments were made to SEBI's Foreign Portfolio Investors' Regulations in 2018 and 2019, which diluted the restrictions on FPIs having any "opaque structure" and helped in concealing the "ultimate beneficial owners" of FPIs.

The 13 overseas entities suspected by SEBI had declared their "beneficial owners" in accordance with the amended FPI regulations. Yet, SEBI had expressed suspicion about shareholders who had contributed capital that was invested by these 13 entities. The names of such controlling shareholders and economic interest shareholders of companies incorporated in tax haven jurisdictions, however, were not made available to SEBI.

The EC had expressed scepticism regarding SEBI's ability to obtain full disclosure on the ultimate beneficial owners of these entities in the following words: "[T]his is where it has hit a wall. It is evident that SEBI had drawn a blank in this investigation and the publication of the Hindenburg Report has revived SEBI's efforts to attempt figuring out economic interest in the FPIs that have these investments in listed Adani stocks. It is evident that such an exercise could be a voluminous one but potentially a journey without a destination."

EC further elaborated on SEBI's references made to the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) and Directorate of Enforcement (ED), asking them to investigate the 13 suspected overseas entities. CBDT stated that it could not take up any investigation unless the "tax evasion petition" contained specific, verifiable and actionable intelligence. The ED responded that it could not proceed unless SEBI filed a case under the scheduled offences listed under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002. This was characterised by the EC as "a chicken-and-egg situation".

EC further noted that SEBI's regulatory policies and enforcement

stance had moved in opposite directions — on the one hand, SEBI had diluted regulations regarding foreign portfolio investors since 2018 to enable concealment of their ultimate beneficial ownership, while on the other it had been trying to establish non-compliance by 13 suspected FPIs on the basis of rules and regulations existing prior to their dilution.

Evidence Ignored

The Supreme Court judgement could have taken cognisance of the evidence of SEBI's regulatory failures contained in the EC report. Rather, the apex court relied upon a status report filed by SEBI that it has already concluded 22 investigations related to the allegations of insider trading, price manipulation of shares, non-disclosure of related party transactions, etc. and 2 of its investigations, including the crucial one on violation of Rule 19A of SCRR, 1957 by Adani group companies, are still ongoing. The findings of the 22 completed SEBI investigations have remained unknown. The apex court did not allow the petitioners access to the completed SEBI investigation reports. The EC was also not asked to examine them and provide their final observations on regulatory failure.

Since the EC could not conclude that there was a regulatory failure based on SEBI's initial submissions, the apex court evidently did not dissolve the EC after the submission of its first report. It was only logical then to ask the EC to vet the finalised SEBI investigation reports.

The EC report also indicated that SEBI's successive amendments of FPI regulations went against Section 12A of the SEBI Act, 1992. Yet these statutory violations were not struck down by the apex court on the basis of SEBI's assertion made through an affidavit filed on July 10, 2023, that the amendments to FPI regulations in 2018 and 2019 had continuously "tightened" regulations for the disclosure of beneficial owners of FPIs. This was not a true

claim because the amendments had decisively diluted the FPI regulations in three significant ways:

- (i) The crucial term "ultimate beneficial owner" as per the definition of the 2010 Master Circular on Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Combating Financing of Terrorism (CFT) Standards, was replaced with "beneficial owner"
- (ii) "Beneficial owner" was redefined as per the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA, 2002) and Rules framed thereunder, which mandated 25% shareholding thresholds for identifying beneficial ownership
- (iii) The term "opaque structure" was deleted altogether

SEBI's July 10 affidavit admitted that "the existence of thresholds for determination of beneficial owners" offered a challenge in identifying beneficial ownership of FPIs. Yet, SEBI suppressed the fact that the 25% shareholding threshold in the Prevention of Money Laundering (Maintenance of Records) Rules, 2005, was amended only on March 7, 2023, by the Ministry of Finance to lower the threshold to 10%. This amendment was made after the Supreme Court order on March 2, 2023 had already set the terms of reference for the SEBI inquiry and the matter was already sub judice.

The Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) had also reported that two Mauritius based funds, namely Emerging India Focus Fund and EM Resurgent Fund had invested and traded in large volumes of shares in four Adani companies between 2013 and 2018. Two key foreign investors of these funds were Nasser Ali Shaban Ahli from UAE and Chang Chung-Ling from Taiwan, who had channelled the money through Bermuda-based Global Opportunities Fund. Links with Vinod Adani were also traced. These investigative findings were published in the Financial Times and The Guardian on August 31, 2023. The apex court, however,

ruled that the OCCRP findings were "allegations" which could not be regarded as "conclusive proof".

The OCCRP report had also revealed the correspondence between the Director General of the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) to the SEBI chairperson in January 2014 on "the dealings of the Adani Group of companies in the stock market". One of the letters was accompanied by a CD of evidence from a DRI probe into allegations of over-invoicing of capital equipment imports against Adani power projects, stating that "there are indications that a part of the siphoned off money may have found its way to stock markets in India as investment and disinvestment in [the] Adani Group." How SEBI acted on

the DRI alert vis-à-vis money flowing from Mauritius based entities into Adani scrips way back in 2014, has remained undisclosed till date.

Conclusion

SEBI's inaction vis-a-vis the Adani group and its reluctance to consider the evidence provided by Hindenburg, OCCRP or the DRI, is evident. Yet, the apex court has chosen to repose faith in the SEBI investigation and also directed a probe into Hindenburg for causing market volatility and investor losses. The findings of the completed SEBI inquiries on share price manipulation, insider trading, non-disclosure of related party transactions, etc., continue to remain secret.

Continuation of an endless "chicken and egg" SEBI inquiry into the violation of minimum shareholding norms by the Adani group companies would only make ordinary investors in the stock market vulnerable to shocks like the one delivered by Hindenburg last year. It also poses a risk to the stability of public sector financial institutions like the Life Insurance Corporation of India, which has already suffered substantial losses on their Adani shareholdings. Public sector banks like the State Bank of India, which are major lenders to the Adani group, shall also remain vulnerable. Justice, far from prevailing in the case, has become a casualty in the Adani-Hindenburg matter. ■

Towards A Totalitarian Regime!

▲ SOMENATH GUHA

In the last few months a slew of bills have been promulgated to monitor (read surveil), control, and if need be, suspend or suppress all kinds of communications through all and every available means of media. It is widely acknowledged that in the last ten years the mainstream media in our country has turned into Godi media, meaning the most powerful TV channels or the newspapers and periodicals, both in English and vernaculars, particularly in Hindi, have turned into veritable lackeys of the central government. According to a reliable estimate almost 70% of media networks are controlled by one particular industrial conglomerate. Dismayed by this revelation the 'Telecom Regulatory Authority of India' (TRAI) observed that the ownership of media companies by a handful of entities would increase the possibility of misuse of the rights of the media for interests that are not in the larger public good.

But then the government is hardly concerned about public good. On the contrary even after having the mainstream media under its thumb it feels insecure. This is the age of

technology, newer forms of media, myriad communication channels are evolving every day. This has made the government paranoid. The number of laws that has been enacted in the last few months towards the singular purpose of throttling public opinion is astounding - the Telecom Act, Press and Registration of Periodicals Act (PRP Act), Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP act), Post Office Act, Broadcasting bill and last but not the least IT amendment rules, 2023. All these acts have been promulgated in the most undemocratic fashion. Government makes a show of public participation by calling for people's opinion on the bill as they have done for the Broadcast bill, for which the deadline for submission of suggestions was January 15. Needless to say everything in the proposed bill is already decided and any call for suggestion from the public is merely a show. Besides there is hardly any discussion or debate in the parliament, neither is it forwarded to a select committee for further consultation as was the practice earlier. Government gets it passed in both the houses of the parliament

through its brute majority, or more conveniently in a 'Virodh-mukt and sawal-mukt sansad'.

Basically all these new Acts are more vitriolic forms of the old ones. There are a few common threads which run through most of these bills. Let's have a look at them. Firstly, some of them replace colonial era laws - the Telecom Act replaces the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, Post Office Act replaces Indian PO Act of 1898, PRP Act replaces the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867. No doubt with time many of the provisions of these laws had become redundant. But the same people who once sabotaged the freedom struggle are now trying desperately to wipe off their sin by replacing British time laws and bragging that they are freeing the country of the colonial mindset. In the same breath they boast of ushering in cultural independence by eliminating Mughal period from Indian history, by destroying Mughal architecture, by arbitrarily changing historical names of roads, towns and places.

Secondly the acts are replete with broad definitions that could include

everything. For instance a 'message' could mean any sign, signal, writing, text, image, sound, video, data stream, intelligence or information sent through telecom intermediary. Likewise a program may mean audio, video, audio-visual content, images, films, features, dramas, documentaries, advertisements, serials, writings etc. Definition of telecommunication has been widened to include transmission, emission or reception of any messages by wire, radio, optical or other electromagnetic systems. It is so wide that it could include online communication services like Zoom, Meet, Skype and even those sharing content on Instagram, WhatsApp, even e-mails. The Broadcasting bill may turn out to be the most draconian since it defines a broadcaster as any content creator, including those broadcasting via internet. Thus OTTs, websites, comedians, you-tubers, social commentators, meme-makers all are included in its purview. The bill even goes on to include media which are in the realm of the future, citing 'emerging technologies' say like artificial intelligence. This is certainly being done with the sinister purpose of shutting out any content which is not to the government's liking. They are particularly weary of you-tubers. Ever since the mainstream media lost its credibility, large number of viewers (users number around 450 million) have turned to you-tube channels for news and commentary. The likes of Ravish Kumar, Dhruv Rathee, Ajit Anjum have chalked up millions of subscribers. This trend has mounted a challenge to the mainstream media became obvious when the recent assembly election results were announced and analysed by an 'independent media' consisting of Newslandry, News Minute, Scroll, The Caravan and The Wire. This endeavour has reportedly been very popular with the viewers, though exact viewership figures are not available.

Thirdly the process of registration or issuing license, now termed as authorisation has been made more

stringent. In the Telecom Act the central government has kept to itself the exclusive right to authorise every kind of media, digital and all. Now online messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, Gmail will be required to obtain authorisation from government similar to telecom providers like Jio, Vodafone, Airtel etc. In the name of national security the government can possess, suspend, intercept or detain any of these telecommunication services or network. And in the name of the same national security it could also allow any unauthorised entity to operate; it is entirely the government's discretion! In the PRP Act beside the Press Registrar who is empowered to issue registration certificate, a Specified Authority has been created who needs to be kept informed whenever any newspaper or periodical is registered. This SA is omnipotent with the power to cancel any registration. He or she could be anyone from District Magistrate to ED or CBI official. In the Broadcasting bill the broadcaster's volume of membership and profile will be monitored periodically. It is not mentioned specifically in the bill but number of subscriptions beyond a threshold may not be permitted. The narratives of the bills have been purposefully kept vague even allowing for new rules to be framed from time to time. What's more the additional rules will be framed by the government only and they need only inform the parliament about it, no need for any discussion whatsoever!

Fourthly the narratives of all these Acts show that the government is least concerned about the privacy of its citizens. In the Telecom Act identification of every user is now a must. For that biometrics may be used, even there is the possibility that linking Aadhar with mobile may become a legislation. This will mean handing over entire personal details to the government. The DPDP Act takes violation of privacy to the extreme when it states that Indians will have to part with their personal details from birth to death.

The government can share all these personal information with surveillance agencies. The Postal Act empowers any official to open a parcel if he thinks it is suspicious, without informing the person to whom it has been sent. He can also send it to customs or any other agency for further investigation. Even encryption is under threat. WhatsApp and other popular messenger service providers offer end-to-end encryption security feature that ensures complete privacy for individual users. Government or any agency cannot intercept or read these messages. However again on the pretext of national security, private safety or curbing fake news, government is pressurising these service providers to reveal the source of any message or even withdraw the entire encryption feature. This will severely violate right to privacy as a fundamental right.

Fifthly the definition of News and Current Affairs is intriguing. These are defined as events of social, political, cultural and economic nature. News providers are nonplussed at the use of the word 'cultural'. Evidently it points to any content which outrages public decency or morality. Now who are going to judge these criteria? For monitoring content and all other activities of the broadcasters and network operators there is a proposal for a three-tier regulatory and advisory council. The composition of all the three-tiers will be decided by the government. Needless to say these will be entirely stacked with people handpicked by the government. Hence viewers will have to depend on these sarkari/sanskari people to know what is decent or moral!

Last but not the least the government has absolute power to raid the office or residence of any content-creator, broadcaster, telecom or broadcasting network, service provider without informing the purported offender or violator or without assigning any reason for the same. It can arrest anyone indiscriminately, it can seize, copy and confiscate all equipments and devices, including

digital ones. We have seen how the devices of the Bhima Koregaon detainees were confiscated and tempered with by inserting utterly incriminating material. In the recent past we have seen how the premises of NewsClick have been brutally raided and searched, journalists and other staff detained and interrogated for hours, their laptops and mobiles seized and confiscated and not

returned for days. Of late this has become an extraordinary attack on the freedom of the Press/Media and the individual. The Supreme Court, moved to action by the petition of five renowned academicians, has woken up to this blatant violation and has asked the central government to frame guidelines for such activities and observed that uncontrolled power to access the devices was

unacceptable.

All these Acts and soon-to-be Acts are not merely draconian, they lead to the formation of a dystopian totalitarian state where any hint of a difference of opinion is promptly identified and done away with. All possibilities of annulling these Acts must be sought out. The main battle, of course, will have to be fought on the streets. ■

The Genocide Case in the ICJ: *South Africa vs. Israel*

▲ ARVIND NARRAIN AND CLIFTON D' ROZARIO

Ever since October 7, 2023, for over 100 days, Gaza has been bombed, its hospitals devastated, its inhabitants have been cut off from food, water and shelter. There are over 24000 casualties, with over 8000 children being killed and more than 60,000 have been injured. About 119 journalists have been targeted and killed during this time. The bombing has resulted in the evacuation of 85% of its population who have been herded into smaller and smaller areas. The territory has been laid to waste with over 3,35,000 homes being damaged or destroyed.

This catastrophic situation is now before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with an exemplary petition filed by South Africa alleging that Israel is violating its obligation to 'prevent and punish genocide'. The ICJ is the United Nations' most important court, resolving disputes among its 193 member states and its decisions are "binding" on the parties, and though the court has no way of enforcing them it depends in the ultimate analysis on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for enforcement of its decisions.

The anti-colonial and anti-racist underpinnings of this act of South Africa cannot be lost on anyone, given the centuries of oppression

and subjugation that the majority Black population have suffered at the hands of colonial powers. By filing the petition, South Africa is remembering its past and making a case that no country has a right to commit genocide. It is significant as well, while Germany has come out in support of Israel alongside a handful of other imperialist powers including the US and the UK, whereas Namibia, Bolivia, Cuba, Colombia, Brazil and scores of other countries have come out in support of South Africa and Palestine, exposing the hypocrisy of western democracy. As the Reverend Munther Isaac of the Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, said in his Christmas message, "leaders of the so called 'free' lined up one after the other to give the green light for this genocide against a captive population" and went on to say, "to our European friends, I never ever want to hear your lecture on human rights or international law again. And I mean this. We are not white I guess, it does not apply to us according to your own logic."

South Africa, in its application filed before the ICJ on December 28, claims that the actions of Israel in Gaza violate the "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide", which was drafted in 1948 in response to the

horrors of the Holocaust. From South Africa's point of view, what is taking place in Gaza is a genocide perpetrated by Israel. Genocide is defined as including the following acts; "killing members of a group", "causing serious bodily or mental harm of a group" and "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part". However, what is crucial in establishing that the above acts are genocide is to demonstrate that they were committed with an "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

The acts which are inflicted upon the people of Gaza also include the using of starvation "as a weapon of war". International agencies estimate that more Palestinians in Gaza may die from starvation and disease than airstrikes. The Israeli air strikes have also targeted the cultural, religious and social institutions of Gaza right from libraries, universities, museums, social and cultural spaces to the Gaza archive, reducing to rubble the ability of an entire people to survive. Gaza's oldest mosque, the Omari Mosque, along with scores of other mosques have been destroyed, and even Churches in Gaza have not been spared.

All these acts seem to be calculated to bring about the very destruction of the group. As can be seen by the mounting evidence of destruction, South Africa has a relatively easier burden to discharge, when it has to show that these acts have

occurred. For its documentation of destruction, South Africa is relying on unimpeachable sources. It was not media reports or newspapers that were relied upon but rather the extensive UN documentation including reports by Special Rapporteurs, Commission of Inquiries, UN Working Groups as well as the documentation of agencies like UNICEF, World Food Program, UNRWA, WHO etc. The level of consensus that the destruction in Gaza is unprecedented and unconscionable, pervades all institutions in the UN system. To give just one example the UNICEF referred to Gaza as becoming a 'graveyard of children' highlighting poignantly the unbearable costs of this war.

How is South Africa establishing genocidal intent?

As South Africa's legal consul submitted before the International Court of Justice, what is unique in this case is that Israel's top leaders made no secret that Gaza would have to be destroyed. The Prime Minister Netanyahu invoked the Biblical story of the total destruction of Amalek by the Israelites, stating: "you must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible. And we do remember". The relevant biblical passage reads as follows: "Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses".

South Africa established that genocidal intent flows from the express words of the Prime Minister, the President, Minister of Defence, Minister of National Security as well as other ministers, members of parliament and top army officials. South Africa by playing videos of Israeli soldiers at war is able to place before the Court, evidence as to how this message of 'annihilation' is received, internalized and acted upon by the soldiers, when

they carry out their acts of destruction of the people of Gaza singing that will 'eliminate the seed of Amalek'.

Israel's response to South Africa's compelling case of the violation of the Genocide Convention was to outline the horrors of the Hamas attack on October 7 and to assert that it had a right to defend itself under international law. Under international law, both arguments are without merit. Only states are parties in the ICJ so the question of Hamas attack is not within the jurisdiction of the Court. (Though South Africa was very clear in its condemnation of the attack, while nothing that there was a difference between an action by a group and an action by a state.) With respect to self defence, South Africa argues, that this right is not a right without limits. It has to conform to the rules of war as embodied in the Geneva Conventions. It has to conform to the Genocide Convention, since this is an obligation of international law which no state can derogate from. No state can argue that it can commit genocide as a part of its right to self defence.

It must be noted that the immediate purpose of the recently concluded hearings at the ICJ, is to convince the panel of 17 judges of the ICJ to order 'provisional measures' to prevent further "irreparable harm" to Palestinians in Gaza, whereas the larger question of whether Israel is "committing genocide" in Palestine, from an international law point of view, will take a while for the ICJ to decide. Among the measures are a call for Israel to 'suspend military operations' and to desist in the commission of genocide. South Africa also urged the ICJ to consider measures which would ensure 'prevention of the expulsion and forced displacement from their homes of Palestinians as well as preventing the deprivation of access to adequate food and water, humanitarian assistance, including access to adequate fuel, shelter, as well as medical supplies and assistance.'

The ICJ decision on provisional measures is expected in the next few weeks and it remains to be seen whether the ICJ responds on an urgent basis to this ongoing genocide and orders the provisional measures prayed for. Any decision by the ICJ denying the provisional measures sought for by South Africa, will make it complicit in Israel's colonization and genocidal war on Gaza. Any decision providing provisional measures will result in a "moral victory" at best, since the ICJ, as pointed above, has no way of enforcing its orders, and will depend on the UN Security Council, controlled by the very imperialist powers that support Israel - United States and the United Kingdom. It is however possible that such an order would further isolate Israel from global opinion and increase the pressure on Israel and her backers to conform to the commands of international law and desist from this illegal and genocidal war.

The world owes South Africa a debt of gratitude for filing the case and thereby acting on its obligations under the Genocide Convention to 'prevent and prosecute the crime of genocide.' South Africa has heard the voice of protesters around the world and given that cry of agony and anger a legal form. The fact that India has not chosen to act on its international obligation to 'prevent genocide' is a matter of deep shame. Surely a country which prides itself on being a leader of the global south, should stand with the ex-colonies (a majority of the membership of the United Nations) and legally oppose a genocide perpetrated by Israel on the people of Gaza. Every support has to be given to the Palestinian struggle for freedom from Israel, and it is this solidarity of the working class to the revolutionary struggles of colonized people that is the ultimate guarantee of freedom. ■

Delhi, Uttarakhand, Karnataka State Conferences of CPI(ML) Conclude

Delhi

The 12th State Conference of CPI(ML) Liberation Delhi-NCR was inaugurated by Polit Bureau member Ramji Rai on January 20th, at Surjeet Bhawan. Comrade Ramji said that this conference is being held at a time when the communal frenzy and hatred is being unleashed across the country in the name of the consecration ceremony in Ayodhya, which is backed by the Godi media, supported by troll army on social media, who are hate mongering and are the foot soldiers of the RSS.

“Lenin said that comrades must behave like true agents of the revolution. Professionalism in party building is the need of the hour to challenge the fascist majoritarian politics,” he added.

At the state conference, a report on party work was presented by the State Secretary Ravi Rai, which was followed by a detailed discussion on organisational activities and challenges. Since the 11th state conference held in December 2019, the CPI(ML) played a big role in the pro-citizenship movement in Delhi and intervened during the Delhi riots in 2020, supported the farmers movement at the borders of Delhi and organised relief work during the covid lockdowns.

The state conference elected a 25-member state committee (with four invitees to the state committee), with Comrade Ravi Rai being elected as the state secretary. In his concluding remarks, Comrade Ravi Rai called upon all comrades to take the party, people's movement, and the organisations in Delhi-NCR to new heights.

The state conference was preceded by homage to martyrs and flag hoisting at the venue, and cultural programmes were organised during the conference.

Uttarakhand

The 3rd State Conference of CPI(ML) Liberation in Uttarakhand was held on 7th and 8th January, 2024, in

Haldwani. The conference venue was dedicated to Com. Chandra Singh Gadhwal, the hall to Com. Deepak Bose and stage to Com. Maan Singh Pal and Com. KP Chandola.

After homage to martyrs and departed comrades at the Martyr's Column, the opening session of the conference began with speeches by representatives of various left parties and people's movements. In the inaugural session, Com Raja Bahuguna, Chairperson of Central Control Commission said that the Constitution promised us justice – social, economic and political. Yet people demanding justice are today being implicated in false cases and dumped in jails. After using farm laws and labour codes to deprive farmers and workers of their rights, the Modi government is now changing the entire set of criminal laws to turn India into a veritable police state. Every dissent and agitation against the government is now liable to be treated as an act of terror and subjected to brutal repression under draconian anti-terror laws.

Com. Rajiv Dimri, central committee member of CPI(ML) and central observer for conference, addressed the session and said that the Modi regime with the policies of lies, and 'divide and rule' is spreading the tentacles of communal-corporate fascism. We need build a concentrated people's campaign to expose Modi Ke Jhoot (Lies of Modi government).

Comrade Sanjay Sharma, Politburo Member and Uttarakhand In charge from the CC, Rajendra Pratholi, Central Committee Member, AIPF National Convenor Girija Pathak, Vidhya Rajwar, Vijay Kumar and Srikanth also addressed the conference and called for steadfast campaign to save the nation, its democracy and constitution from the Modi-BJP's fascist assault.

The delegate session of the conference witnessed presentation of various reports and enthusiastic discussions. The conference elected

a 19-member state committee with Com. Indresh Maikhuri as the state secretary.

Karnataka

The 2nd Karnataka State Conference of CPI(ML) Liberation was held over two days on December 9th and 10th, in Sindhanur taluk of Raichur district. As part of the conference, a 'Karnataka Against Fascism' rally and public convention was held with participation of over 2,000 people.

The 'Karnataka Against Fascism' rally and public convention was organized as an attempt to consolidate working class forces against the communal hatred being sown by the BJP-RSS, despite their electoral defeat and Congress staking claim of the government recently. The rally and public convention gave a call to the people of Karnataka to undo the damage caused by the BJP's rule and to detoxify our society.

In the public convention, CPI(ML) Liberation General Secretary Comrade Dipankar congratulated the people of Karnataka for voting out BJP and said that the BJP-RSS has unleashed a fascist assault on the people of this country, which is corroding democracy, is anti-people and against Babasaheb Ambedkar's given constitution.

AIPWA National President Comrade Rati who addressed the gathering said that we must fight against the corporate, communal and casteist assault of the BJP-RSS. She said, "Women face the brunt of the Manusmriti that the Sangh Parivar propagates and wants to replace the Constitution of India with. Women, therefore, have to come together to lead the struggle for equality, democracy and fraternity".

A 23-member state committee was elected with Comrade Clifton being re-elected as the State Secretary. The conference saw the participation of 160 delegates, observers and guests.

The conference gave a clarion call to build a strong party in Karnataka, which alone would be a fitting response to the fascist forces, especially since the country is headed towards the Lok Sabha elections in the coming year. ■

John Pilger

(1939-2023)

John Pilger, died at the age of 84 years on December 30th, 2023. Throughout his life, Pilger was a scathing critic of Western Imperialism of USA, UK and Australia, and wanted to expose them.

Pilger extensively covered wars on people across many nations through his journalistic pieces and documentary films, which was a narration through people's voices. His first documentary in 1970, 'A Quiet Mutiny', was on the collapse of morale among American soldiers deputed at the Vietnam. He was a first-hand witness to the atrocities perpetrated by the US Army against the Vietnamese people and write vociferously to bring justice to the people. Witnessing the oppression of the people in Vietnam and Cambodia made him a staunch anti-imperialist.

His documentary "The War on Democracy" (2007), revealed how deeply the USA intervened against the democratically elected governments in Latin America. This documentary became an account of the 2002 coup against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, which had staged protests resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths, leading to an emergency broadcast of counter-revolutionary generals which was later exposed to have been filmed even before any violence took place! The documentary narrates about the kidnapping of Chavez, the complete liquidation

of their constitution, and the mass movement on the streets of Venezuela which defeated the coup. The documentary is shown to be a victory of the oppressed and in defense of democracy.

Pilger chronicled the history of coups supported by the US, tracing them from Guatemala to Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Chile. He interviewed survivors of violence, from Christian missionaries who were raped as retaliation for speaking out against the genocide in Guatemala, to supporters of Allende in Chile, who were tortured by Pinochet's tyranny. The documentary revealed the deliberate goals of US foreign policy in these nations, which included crushing any aspirations for a better life among the economically poor and the working class in Latin America. The film shows how the people were punished to such an extent that they were discouraged from ever wanting to "rise up" or even vote for a politician who might represent their interests.

A committed activist for pro-people democracy, he stood by the American people and marched alongside them from Alabama to Washington after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. After four years of investigation in Britain, he made a documentary 'Thalidomide: The Ninety-Eight We Forgot' (1974), on the working-class victims who consumed the notorious drug prescribed to women during



pregnancy. After the injustice was highlighted, the victims of the drug were able to receive special settlements.

He reported on stories from East Timor and made a documentary on their struggle for independence from Indonesia, titled – "Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy" (1993). He also made several documentaries on his home country – Australia – to bring forth the indigenous past and present of the country. "The Secret Country" (1983), the bicentenary trilogy "The Last Dream" (1988), "Welcome to Australia" (1999) and "Utopia" (2013) were some of his films in this theme.

Be it Palestine, Iraq, Bosnia, Syria or even Ukraine, Pilger spoke through his words and images to free the world from imperialism. The world will sorely miss Pilger for standing with the oppressed people and being a mirror against all forms of injustices and oppression. Rest in power, John Pilger! ■

- Lekha Adavi

Comrade Ramappa

Comrade Ramappa died due to heart related issues on 31st December 2023 at the age of 60. He was a member of the Karnataka Party State Committee. He was the Vijayanagara district secretary of the party for many years. He also served as the State Secretary of the party for few years. He had also held the position of being party-in-charge for AIARLA and AIKM.

From his student days Com. Ramappa was active in social activities fighting for the rights of the downtrodden, rural poor and Dalits in particular. Despite not being from the Dalit community, he played an active role in the Dalit Sangarsh Samithi.

Com. Ramappa along with some other comrades came in contact with the party in 1997 in Mysore district. Numerous struggles were initiated for the issues of rural and

urban poor. We contested in 1998 Lok Sabha elections from Mysore constituency and polled 4716 votes. Those votes came from the poor Dalit agrarian labourers and poor peasants. He introduced Red Shawls as a symbol of the struggles for the rural and urban poor. It became a popular symbol over a period of time.

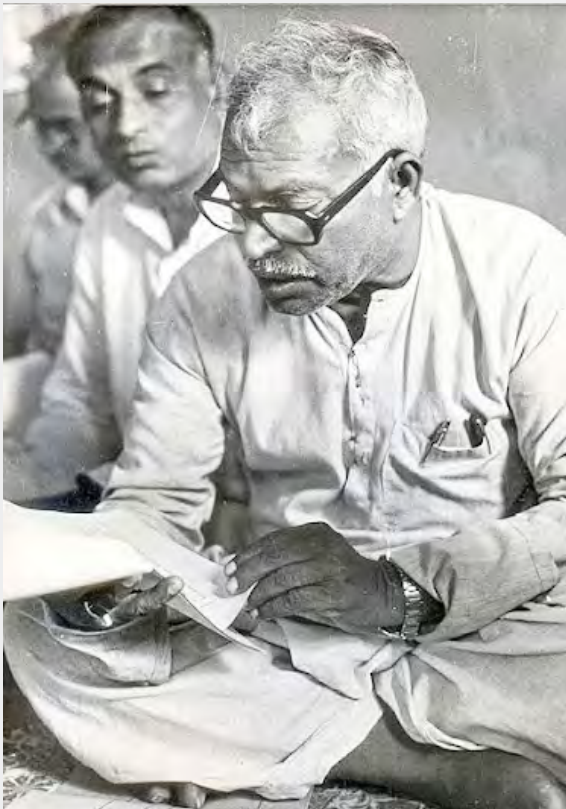
Com. Ramappa was the party's candidate in 2004 Lok Sabha election from Bellary constituency and he polled 12413 votes. In 2009 elections, the Party fielded Com. Chowdappa for Bellary constituency, during which campaign Com. Ramappa played a crucial role resulting in Com Chowdappa polling 11540 votes.

Com Ramappa played a crucial role in putting Karnataka on the party's map. He was instrumental in a breakthrough of



Karnataka party work that was emerging from underground into open work. In the Vijayanagara district, Com. Ramappa acquired an image of a fighter for people's rights. On 29th December, 2023, just two days before his death, he had participated actively in a struggle to liberate the public lands grabbed by local vested interests. Com. Ramappa would continue to inspire other comrades on the spirit of fighting for working class and rural poor till the end of one's life.

Red salute Comrade Ramappa. ■



Bharat Ratna for former Bihar CM Karpoori Thakur is a most appropriate, though belated, announcement for the great socialist icon. A lifelong champion of the oppressed and a crusader for social equality, political liberty and comprehensive justice, Karpooriji was not just one of the pioneering architects of the policy of reservation for the oppressed, he will also be remembered as an inspiration for democracy for the deprived.

As CM of Bihar after the Emergency, he was instrumental for the release of many political prisoners including those arrested on charges of being Naxalites. In this photo which is one of his most viral images on internet he can be seen sitting next to Comrade Nagbhushan Patnaik, President of Indian People's Front, who was released on indefinite parole after the Emergency thanks to the pressure exerted by socialist leaders like Karpoori Thakur.

After the 19 April 1986 Arwal massacre when 21 unarmed people attending a public meeting demanding land to the tiller were gunned down by the police Karpooriji as leader of the opposition in Bihar Assembly fought relentlessly for justice for the victims of this reenactment of Jallianwalabagh massacre in free India. When Comrade Nagbhushan was detained by the police for leading a gherao of the Bihar Assembly in August 1986 demanding justice for the Arwal massacre victims, Karpooriji echoed that demand within the Assembly.

If alive in this Modi era, Karpoori Thakur would surely have been dubbed an 'anti-national andolanjeevi' and jailed under UAPA for leading the farmers' movement just as Babasaheb Ambedkar would have been termed a Hinduphobe and anti-Ram for advocating caste annihilation and embracing Buddhism with his famous 22 vows rejecting idol worship.

A great champion of socialist-communist unity, Karpooriji would have been leading us today in the battle for saving the Constitution and foiling the fascist assault on India's secular fabric. It is the responsibility of the broader secular democratic camp, especially socialists and communists, to carry forward the inspiring legacy of Jannayak Karpoori Thakur when the constitutional framework of secular democracy and the spirit of socialism and social justice are facing an unprecedented attack by the fascist forces in power. We shall fight, we shall win!

EDITORIAL OFFICE

CHARU BHAWAN, U-90, SHAKARPUR, DELHI - 110 092

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY

Dipankar Bhattacharya for the Central Committee, CPIML
from Charu Bhawan, U-90, Shakarpur, Delhi - 110 092

PRINTED AT

Divya Offset, B-1422, New Ashok Nagar, Delhi - 110 096

EDITOR : Arindam Sen

liberation@cpiml.org
www.liberation.org.in
PH.: 91-11-42785864



@cpimlliberation