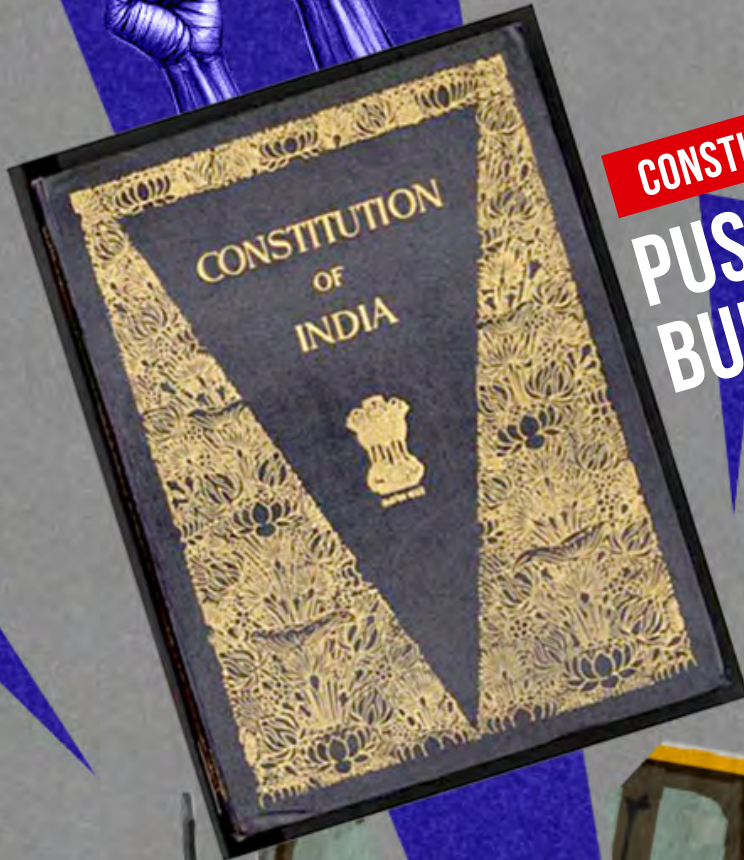


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CENTRAL ORGAN OF CPI(ML)

DECEMBER 2024

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CPIML Strongly Condemns RSS Hooliganism at Udaipur Film Festival

The CPIML unequivocally condemns the cowardly disruption by RSS goons of the screening of Had Anhad at the Udaipur Film Festival. This brazen attack on democratic spaces and progressive art reflects the growing attack on freedom of speech under the fascist regime, which seeks to stifle any voices critical of exploitation and injustice.

The Udaipur Film Society organised this 3-day festival (15-17 November) as part of the Cinema of Resistance initiative to promote critical and socially important cinema. This year's festival, dedicated to the memory of thousands of Palestinian children brutally murdered by settler-colonial Israel, and to Professor G.N. Saibaba, a tireless advocate

for people's rights, was disrupted on its second day. The RSS thugs demanded the removal of these dedications, spewed vile abuse against Palestinians and Professor Saibaba, and unlawfully halted the screening of Had Anhad.

Despite the organisers securing all necessary permissions, the administration failed to stop this undemocratic and unlawful act of RSS. Even the intervention of the District Collector proved ineffective in curbing the RSS's hooliganism.

The CPIML stands in firm solidarity with the Udaipur Film Society in its brave stand against fascist intimidation. The refusal of the organisers to remove their dedication to Palestinian children and Professor Saibaba

is a courageous assertion of democratic rights.

The Sangh Parivar's fear of progressive cinema like Had Anhad, which exposes the politics of religion through Kabir's poetry, underscores their broader fear of a growing popular consciousness. Art, especially people-centric cinema, challenges the exploitative status quo and inspires resistance against injustice.

We call upon all justice-loving individuals to condemn this attack on freedom of expression and stand united against the attacks on democratic spaces. CPIML reiterates its unwavering support for pro-people cinema and the Cinema of Resistance against the silencing of dissent. ■



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Adani Bribery Scam Arrest Warrant in the US, Impunity in India

The indictment of the Adani group in a multi-billion-dollar bribery scam and the arrest warrants issued consequently against Gautam Adani and his nephew Sagar Adani by the US Department of Justice mark the most serious blow to Adani's corrupt corporate empire to date. In January 2023, the Hindenburg disclosures had shocked the entire business world with details of the Adani group's monumental corporate fraud underpinning the phenomenal rise of the group in the Modi era. Subsequent Hindenburg reports and investigative revelations by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project unearthed the group's intricate network of offshore shell companies and the complicity of India's regulatory system. The Modi government dismissed the whole thing as an anti-India conspiracy and the Supreme Court relied on a non-performing SEBI whose chief is accused of being hand in glove with Adani's corrupt chain. As a result even though Adani's shares have taken a hit and globally Adani has been facing considerable outrage in the group's areas of operation, he has continued to enjoy absolute impunity in India.

This time round however the indictments have come from the US Department of Justice and are backed by solid investigation and evidence collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the US Securities and Exchange Commission. The crime of bribery has been committed by the Adani group in India, but in the process the group has violated America's strict anti-bribery laws. The indictments include charges of multiple frauds perpetrated on the US investing public and global financial institutions, concealment of information and obstruction of justice. What the CBI, SEBI and the Indian judicial system should have done to probe and prosecute the Adani group for its shady dealings has been done by the American institutions comprising the FBI, SEC and the US Department of Justice.

While the future of the criminal case against the Adani group in the US is difficult to predict - Adani was quick to congratulate Trump on his comeback, promising \$10 billion investment in US energy security and creation of 15,000 jobs - the whole world is bound to take it quite seriously. We can already see the impact in the Adani group having to cancel its \$600 million bond offering, Adani shares taking a beating across the board and most crucially Kenya scrapping two long-term and widely protested Adani contracts of airport upgradation and construction of power lines. The thermal power agreement with Bangladesh and wind power project in Sri Lanka may well follow suit.

The phenomenal rise of the Adani group over the last decade or so has happened mostly in the infrastructure and energy sector by leveraging Gautam Adani's close relationship with Narendra Modi and India's strategic partnership with the US and Israel. From the controversial Carmichael coal mine

in Australia to Haifa port in Israel and Colombo port in Sri Lanka to the power agreement with Bangladesh, almost every Adani contract in the world owes its existence to the Adani-Modi nexus. In fact, promoting the Adani empire has become a core objective of India's foreign policy in the Modi era. Even though Adani's heavy involvement in coal mining, thermal power and construction projects makes the group a major contributor to environmental pollution and destruction of forests,

biodiversity and indigenous communities, not to speak of his complicity in the ongoing genocide of Palestinians, Adani has been desperately trying to project himself as a renewable energy champion, even sponsoring an Adani Green Energy Gallery in the London Science Museum. This is not simply to 'greenwash' the group's image: Adani has been contemplating huge profits in the solar energy sector by bribing his way to secure overpriced power sale agreements with the Solar Energy Corporation of India and state distribution companies, as revealed pointedly in the indictment document.

Within India, the Modi government has been systematically handing over ports, airports, roads, power plants, forests, mines and real estate to the Adani group with non-BJP state governments also joining the competition to appease the Adani group with lucrative contracts. Indeed, the BJP is trying to distance itself from the Adani bribery scam in India by pointing to the fact that four of the five states named in the indictment document - Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha - were then under non-BJP governments. But there can be no obfuscating the fact that the power sale agreements were routed through the SECI, a central PSU, and today states like Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Chhattisgarh are all being ruled by the BJP and its allies. What stops the Modi government from announcing a



credible and comprehensive probe into the Adani bribery scam, starting with the detailed bribe notes complete with per gigawatt bribe rate meticulously calculated by the uncle-nephew Adani duo?

The super profits of the Adani group, ensured through the bribing of the right officials, are extracted from the people by imposing hefty user fees and tariffs. Every time a Hindenburg report or a criminal case in any part of the world triggers a crash in Adani group shares, the loss also has to be borne primarily by India's retail investors. The indictment of the Adani group by the US Department of Justice may be only about the group's violation of American laws like the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act or the multiple frauds perpetrated by the group in the US and on US investors, but India's failure and refusal to probe the scam that happened in India will greatly erode India's credibility as a rule-based republic and economy. Of course given the Modi-Adani partnership and its pivotal role in India's current economic and political order, we can only expect statements of denial by the Adani group and the Modi government, eagerly amplified by the Godi media, and measures of suppression to stifle every demand for strong anti-corruption action. But for democracy to survive in India, the Modi-Adani coalescence will have to be overcome by all possible means. ■

The November Poll Outcome: Pointers and Challenges

▲ DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

Jharkhand and Maharashtra Assembly election results present two utterly contrasting pictures. The BJP's desperate attempt to capture Jharkhand by riding on an unmitigated anti-Muslim hate campaign met with a spectacular defeat, but in Maharashtra the party managed to reverse the Lok Sabha results on a scale that defies any easy explanation. Alongside these two Assembly elections, there were also a good number of by-polls including two Lok Sabha constituencies and as many as forty-eight Assembly constituencies spread over fourteen states. The Congress managed to retain the two Lok Sabha seats (the Nanded seat in Maharashtra by a very narrow margin though), but the BJP/NDA managed to partially improve its strength in the Assembly by-polls. We must also note that the BJP/NDA gains in UP have been won through administrative heavy-handedness and virtual disenfranchisement of large sections of Muslim voters.

In many ways the November outcome and the Haryana and J&K results preceding it can be seen as an early reality check since the denting of the BJP's majority in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The Sangh-BJP establishment had drawn up elaborate plans to win this mini round and its plans worked in Haryana and Maharashtra. In both these states, the BJP success has been scripted by the strategic combination of OBC consolidation

and communal polarisation complemented by a clever local fragmentation of opposition votes and huge application of money power. The Lok Sabha elections had come as a warning bell for the BJP/NDA in Haryana and especially in Maharashtra and the BJP made the fullest use of the post-parliamentary poll interregnum outsmarting and outpacing the INDIA coalition campaign.

We must also note that the BJP's poll strategy was only an extension of the Operation Lotus campaign orchestrated by the Modi government to dethrone the Uddhav Thackeray government in 2022. The BJP could not possibly have won the Maharashtra elections in 2024 without first usurping power in June 2022 through making a complete mockery of the fundamental principles of parliamentary democracy. While there is a lot of discussion now about the impact of the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana launched just four months before the announcement of the elections and the meticulous micromanagement done by the RSS, we cannot ignore the pivotal role that Adani played in calling the shots in Maharashtra. Also Maharashtra has never witnessed the brazen use of cash on such an astounding scale, the ECI itself admitting to confiscation of cash worth nearly 1,000 crore in these elections, nearly seven times more than the previous election figure.

But the strategy that worked for the BJP in Haryana and Maharashtra failed spectacularly in Jharkhand. The Modi government had deployed a very similar strategy in Jharkhand complete with the obstructionist role of the Governor's office and the politics of vendetta and persecution that saw Hemant Soren being sent to jail ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. The crossing over of former CM Champai Soren to the BJP pointed to a deeper conspiracy to destabilise the Hemant Soren government before the Assembly elections by engineering large scale defections. Before defeating the BJP's hate campaign in the election, the Hemant Soren government had to withstand this destabilisation design. From the politics of vendetta and destabilisation to hate campaigns and social engineering, all the BJP's core strategies failed or backfired and the party has had to suffer a comprehensive defeat in Jharkhand.

Champai Soren has been the only BJP candidate to win from a ST reserved constituency out of the total of Jharkhand's 28 constituencies reserved for the state's indigenous people. The BJP also lost in a big way in Godda-Deoghar region and in parts of Palamu and North Chhotanagpur divisions. Most reassuring has been the emphatic rejection of the BJP's hate agenda in Jharkhand which revolved around a sinister attempt to pit Adivasis against Muslims by scaring the Adivasi population about losing their land, livelihood and daughters to so-called 'Bangladeshi infiltrators'. With the newly formed Jharkhand Loktantrik Krantikari Morcha led by Jairam Mahato effectively replacing the BJP ally All Jharkhand Students Union, the BJP found itself virtually bereft of any alliance worth its name. In contrast, the INDIA coalition parties comprising the JMM, Congress, RJD

and CPI(ML) complemented each other and put up a formidable social and political barrier to the BJP's hate-filled divisive agenda.

The unification of the erstwhile Marxist Coordination Committee with the CPI(ML) and the coming together of the legacies of Comrade AK Roy and the CPI(ML) movement played a significant role in pushing the BJP back in the Dhanbad-Bokaro region. Contesting for the first time as part of a coalition in Jharkhand Assembly elections, CPI(ML) fielded only four candidates in these elections with the JMM even forcing a 'friendly contest' in one of these four seats. The loss of the party's traditional Bagodar seat notwithstanding, the regaining of the Dhanbad district seats Nirsa and Sindri, the latter after a string of five successive defeats, has the potential of re-energising a Left revival in Jharkhand and playing a bigger role in resisting corporate plunder and communal hate.

The Left also picked up two seats in Maharashtra with the CPI(M) retaining the Dahanu (ST) seat in Palghar district and the Peasants and Workers Party winning the Sangole seat in Solapur district contesting outside of the MVA alliance. The by-polls in West Bengal held up the prospect of a broader unity of the Left with the CPI(M) supporting the CPI(ML) in the industrial area seat of Naihati in the North 24 Parganas district adjacent to Kolkata. There are no signs yet of the Left recovering its lost electoral ground, but with the BJP votes declining the Left must persist in the attempt to forge a broader unity and build agitations on the burning issues facing the people.

The November results have come right before the impending winter session of the Lok Sabha and just on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of India and the fourth anniversary of the historic farmers' movement. The indictment of the Adani group by the US Department of Justice has further exposed the Adani group and the corrupt Modi-Adani nexus. The Left and the INDIA coalition must take the Maharashtra poll debacle in their stride and intensify the battle to save India's democracy from the continuing fascist assault and defend the rights and interests of the people in the face of India's deepening economic crisis. ■

CPIML Election Campaign

The CPIML campaign for assembly elections in Jharkhand, and bye-elections on four seats, one each in Bihar, Assam, West Bengal and Rajasthan, witnessed a vibrant participation of various sections of the people centering around the issues of immense hardships to the people, countering BJP's pro-corporate crony politics and attempts of communal polarisation through spread of hatred and lies. Party candidates raised the issues of rights and livelihoods, and in defence of democracy and constitution.

Jharkhand

In Jharkhand, CPIML contested in four seats - Bagodar, Nirsa, Sindri, and Dhanwar. Arup Chatterjee, a former MLA from Nirsa (Dhanbad) and a member of the party Central Committee, won the Nirsa assembly constituency with 1,04,855 votes defeating BJP's Aparna Sengupta. Chandradev Mahato won from Sindri defeating BJP's Tara Devi. He received 1,05,136 votes. Vinod Singh from Bagodar and Rajkumar Yadav lost from Bagodar and Dhanwar respectively. In Bagodar CPIML polled 94,884 votes and in Dhanwar 32,187. Party has held Bagodar seat since 1990, with the exception of a narrow margin defeat in 2014. Comrade Mahendra Singh represented Bagodar until his assassination after filing his nomination for the 2005 Assembly elections, the first election following the formation of the state. Comrade Vinod Singh has been representing this seat since then. Bagodar, Nirsa and Sindri were fought as part of the INDIA alliance, while in Dhanwar, JMM had also fielded its candidate.

CPIML's election manifesto for Jharkhand was released on November 3, 2024, focused on defeating BJP to protect the resources of the state that the Modi-BJP regime wants to destroy and exploit for the benefit of its corporate cronies. It also noted that the Modi government has consistently targeted Jharkhand, disrespecting the 2019 state mandate. The BJP has weaponized institutions like the ED and CBI to undermine the rights of people of Jharkhand and has fueled communal tensions. Promises regarding employment and reservation policy have been stalled.

The Jharkhand manifesto also focused on generating employment opportunities in the state and called for reversing the privatisation of mining, industry, and services. The improved budget allocations for education, ensuring quality schooling at the block level and accessible transportation for students was also a major pledge in the manifesto along

with increased funding for education, health, sports, and universal housing and universal access to ration. The burning issue of environment and fight against deforestation, destruction of rivers, land-grab policies and productive lands being converted into residential zones and ever-growing mountains of debris that are disrupting Jharkhand's ecosystem were raised prominently. It also called for strict enforcement of the Fifth Schedule to protect Jharkhand's ecology and indigenous heritage.

Speaking at the INDIA Alliance rally in Sindri, CPIML General Secretary Dipnakar Bhattacharya said Sindri has been the historic centre of Comrade AK Roy's struggle, represented subsequently by stalwarts like Binod Bihari Mahato and Anand Mahato. But because of an unfortunate division in the pro-Jharkhand state political camp this legendary cradle of the Jharkhand movement has fallen in the hands of the BJP. Time has come to hold high the red flag in this citadel of the working class movement and free Sindri from the clutches of the corporate-communal nexus."

The Jharkhand campaign also witnessed Women's Dialogue led by AIPWA leader Meena Tiwari and Youth Dialogues that witnessed vibrant participation with the clarion call for rights and justice. Raja Ram Singh, MP from Karakat, Sudama Prasad, MP from Arrah and leaders from Bihar also took part in campaigning in Jharkhand. Party ranks actively campaigned in all assembly seats in the state in support of INDIA bloc candidates with enthusiasm.

Complaint against BJP's Fake News

CPIML on November 10, 2024 filed an official complaint against the BJP in Jharkhand for spreading

false propaganda in violation of the Model Code of Conduct in the Sindri Assembly constituency. In a letter addressed to Rajiv Kumar, the Chief Election Commissioner, CPIML's Jharkhand State Secretary Manoj Bhakt said that the BJP has been running a disinformation campaign against CPIML candidates and the party itself, including incitement to violence.

Comrade Manoj Bhakt, in the letter to ECI demanded swift action against the BJP, urging the Election Commission to remove the false videos and materials being circulated by BJP against CPIML. He stated that without prompt intervention, such misleading campaigns could severely impact the fairness of the electoral process.

Party thanked the people of Jharkhand for emphatically rejecting the BJP's hate campaign and sinister agenda of inflicting Adani Raj on this resource-rich state by giving such an overwhelming mandate in favour of the INDIA coalition.

Bihar

In the Tarari bye-election, CPI(ML) leader Raju Yadav was the candidate supported by the INDIA alliance. The assembly seat became vacant after the sitting MLA Sudama Prasad won the Ara Lok Sabha seat defeating the BJP's RK Singh. CPIML was not able to retain this seat and Comrade Raju Yadav lost by a thin margin. He polled 68,143 votes.

During the campaign, a joint INDIA alliance rally was organised on 11 November in Tarari, which was joined by Dipankar Bhattacharya, Tejashwi Yadav and Mukesh Sahani.

A desperate BJP camp resorted to violence and intimidation of voters

in Tarari at some booths. In booth no 223, village Dharmapura, feudal communal elements in support of BJP candidate attacked CPIML voters with impunity. The incident was reported to local administration immediately but the Election Commission did not initiate any action against this brazen violation of the code of conduct to ensure free and fair polling. Lalan Yadav was seriously injured in this attack and had to be hospitalised for many days. While he was treated in the hospital, local police lodged a false case against the victim himself. Such an administrative bias is not new in Bihar! He was later set free when the Chief Judicial Magistrate refused to send him to jail and verbally scolded the police for this injustice. The police have not arrested any of the attackers so far.

WB, Rajasthan and Assam

In the West Bengal by-election, CPIML fielded Debajyoti Mazumdar from the Naihati Assembly Constituency, supported by the Left Front. He received 7,593 votes. In Rajasthan, Shankar Lal Meena was the candidate for the Salumbar (ST). He received 1771 votes. In Assam, CPIML leader Lakhikanta Kurmi contested from Behali securing 5093 votes.

This time again the elections were marked with rampant violations of model code of conduct and vicious, hate-filled false narratives by the BJP leaders besides an even more vitriolic and divisive propaganda through unofficial social media handles of the BJP-RSS establishment. On a number of occasions opposition parties made complaints to the Election Commission which went unheard without any remedy. BJP leaders like Narendra Modi, Himanta Biswa

Sarma and Adityanath spread lies in their speeches in Jharkhand but their divisive agenda was rejected as is evident in the final outcome of the elections. Ruling establishment's misuse of administrative machinery and huge amounts of black money is gradually corrupting the democratic nature of polity. A BJP general secretary was caught red handed distributing cash on the eve of election in Mumbai, but he was treated very softly. The frequency of intimidation and threats to opposition parties' voters with the help, or direct involvement, of police and administration has increased to dangerous proportions. The polling day incidents in Uttar Pradesh pose a strong warning to all democracy loving people where Muslim voters in many constituencies were not allowed to exercise their voting right on filthy pretexts. Thanks to some videos which went viral on that day reporting police harassing minority voters, including women. The ECI suspended seven police officials after one such incident was reported through a tweet by SP leader Akhilesh Yadav. But this was only a face wash action as the voters in Muslim areas continued to be stopped from going to polling booths. This brazen crooked act of disenfranchising a huge minority population undoubtedly poses a direct threat to the democratic system. The bye-elections held in nine seats in Uttar Pradesh need to be investigated thoroughly where some seats which are supposedly traditional Samajwadi Party strongholds were lost to the NDA candidates because opposition voters could not exercise their democratic right to vote for the fear of life. ■

INTERVIEW

“Issues of Toiling Masses and the Call for Gender Justice formed the Bedrock of Our Campaign in Naihati”

CPI(ML) contested the bye-election of Naihati assembly constituency in West Bengal, supported by CPI(M) and the Left Front. Liberation spoke to CPI(ML) candidate Debajyoti Majumder, a retired Bank employee and an active trade union cadre, about the election campaign and issues faced by the people of Naihati.

Q : What were the main issues and focus of our election campaign?

Debajyoti Majumder (DM): Our main focus of the campaign among the jute mill dominated areas was to address the plight and predicament of jute workers. At present the entire jute industry is in the throes of collapse. Under the pretext of demand crunch, the owners of the mills has curtailed production, reduced shifts and the workers are working only for 48 hours in a week, the statutory retiral dues of provident fund and gratuity are not disbursed, the employers are not abiding by the signed tripartite agreement, and the state govt has given a free hand to the mill owners to violate all the labour laws to the hilt. We also addressed the issues of scheme workers, particularly of the mid day meal workers, their legitimate demand of fixing minimum wages, recognition as govt employees etc. Re-opening the closed mills was also a burning issue. The state govt miserably failed to provide new decent job opportunities that forced labour migration to other states on a huge scale was also a talking point. The false narrative of development was the main election plank of the ruling TMC. And interestingly, during the entire phase, BJP's presence was very much insignificant. Congress also contested from this constituency, but they virtually remained nonexistent.

Q : What was the impact of the RG Kar issue among the electorates?

DM: The Justice for RG Kar was our major election issue. We highlighted women's issues, the demand for fearless freedom, the most powerful slogan that emerged during the course of movement. An all-pervasive threat-culture and peoples' health were also our election issues.

Q : What was the response of the Jute and other sections of workers'?

DM: The leadership of Jute federations of different mills plunged into the election campaign. During the last lag, our MLA of Bihar, Com Satyadeo Ram initiated an energetic campaign among the Jute workers and their response was quite good.

Q: For the first time in WB, CPIML contested as part of the left bloc in this election. Do you think this would strengthen unity among left forces at grass root level?

DM: This has generated new hope and optimism among the left forces, not only in Naihati but the state as well. This was an energetic well organised election campaign which was reckoned by all left parties. ■

Pledge on the 75th Anniversary of the Adoption of the Constitution of India: Push the Bulldozers Back

Even as the BJP propagates the paradigm of 'bulldozer raj' as a sign of 'justice' and 'strong governance', two recent judgements of the Supreme Court have come down heavily on this state-sponsored lawlessness. On 6 November a three-judge bench comprising Chief Justice DY Chandrachud and Justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra imposed a punitive fine of Rs 25 lakh on the UP government for illegally demolishing the house of journalist Manoj Tibrewal Aakash in Maharajganj district in 2019. The bench found the act of the UP government totally disproportionate to the alleged scale of encroachment (3.7 square metres) and in complete violation of the due process of law. Exactly a week later came a more comprehensive indictment of the much-touted BJP template of 'bulldozer justice' when the two-judge bench of Justices BR Gavai and KV Vishwanathan termed the growing spate of demolitions mala fide and unconstitutional and laid down an elaborate set of guidelines that must be complied with to establish the legality of any demolition.

Along with mob lynching and other modes of state-sponsored orchestration of privatised violence, the extra-judicial weaponisation of the rampaging bulldozer and encounter killings has emerged as the most definitive sign of fascist

terror and aggression in the Modi-Shah-Yogi era with UP as the leading laboratory of this fascist statecraft. The Supreme Court verdicts have now exposed the true meaning of this 'bulldozer model'. The illegal demolition of a house built with the lifetime savings of a family violates the fundamental right to shelter and life of a citizen. The collective punishment meted out to a family for the presumed crime of an individual inverts the basic principle of justice and amounts to usurpation of the powers of judiciary by the executive. The selective targeting of Muslims, toiling masses and dissenting citizens bulldozes the very secular democratic foundation of India's Constitution.

Even though the Supreme Court judgements do not provide any retrospective justice to the victims of the BJP's bulldozer aggression and it remains to be seen if and how the judiciary will actually enforce executive accountability to stop demolitions in the future, the verdicts have served a timely reminder to the people of India about the grave and growing threat to the core values and principles of the Constitution. The assault on the Constitution happens not just in the form of passage of explicit amendments but through policies and measures that are in brazen violation of the spirit of the Constitution. Only a few arbitrary

and corrupt measures like electoral bonds may have been stopped by the judiciary while the executive has been allowed to get away with equally unconstitutional measures like demonetisation and PM Cares fund, but even the limited instances of judicial intervention should suffice to alert the people of India to the real and growing threat of subversion of the Constitution.

It is really ironic that this assault on the Constitution is intensifying at a time when we are approaching the seventy-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution (26 November, 2024) to be followed by the seventy-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the Republic and enforcement of the Constitution (26 January, 2025). The Constitution had been adopted two years after India's freedom from British colonial rule which was unfortunately accompanied by the tragedy of Partition and the trauma of unprecedented bloodshed and displacement affecting millions of people. Yet the impact of the anti-colonial movement and the dreams of an egalitarian social order were so powerful that the trauma of Partition could not cast its shadow on the Constitution. It was the RSS and the Hindutva far-right which actually got isolated with their stubborn opposition to the Constitution and its secular democratic orientation.

Today seventy-five years later the Sangh-BJP entrenched in state power and having orchestrated a rightward pro-corporate, pro-imperialist shift in India's economic and foreign policies is in a much stronger position to challenge and subvert the Constitution and trample over the rights enshrined in it. Yet even as India's weak democratic institutions are found wanting in standing up to the fascist assault, the people of India, the source of India's sovereign power have shown the potential of rallying around the

Constitution to defeat the fascist offensive. If the BJP suffered a shock decline in the Lok Sabha elections right in Uttar Pradesh, the heartland of Hindutva and laboratory of bulldozer raj, the Constitution served as the pivotal point for this anti-fascist mobilisation of the people. Even during the ongoing elections to Maharashtra and Jharkhand the BJP is resorting to shocking lies and slanders to discredit the INDIA bloc's defence of the Constitution - terming it an 'urban Naxal' agenda, linking

the red cover of the Constitution to China and even accusing the Congress of distributing copies of the Constitution with empty pages - thus revealing the Modi regime's deep discomfort and vulnerability on the issue. Making the fullest use of the Constitution and building the people's struggle for the liberty and rights it espouses to defeat the fascist offensive is the best and only way of meaningfully marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of its adoption. ■

The Supreme Court Rules Bulldozer Demolitions Unconstitutional

▲ CLIFTON D' ROZARIO

Two recent judgments of the Supreme Court against the so-called bulldozer justice meted out by BJP governments, present a glimmer of hope in these times in which religious minorities and political opponents have been targeted under an authoritarian 'Bulldozer Raj'. These judgments could go a long way in putting a stop to the arbitrary demolitions of people's houses, irrespective of the state's claim that these were encroachments.

In the first judgement, a 3-judge Bench of the Supreme Court, while dealing with the unlawful demolition of the ancestral house and shop of Manoj Tibrewal, a senior journalist, on the grounds of alleged encroachment on a national highway, held that "... Justice through bulldozers is unknown to any civilised system of jurisprudence. There is a grave danger that if high handed and unlawful behaviour is permitted by any wing or officer of the

state, demolition of citizens' properties will take place as a selective reprisal for extraneous reasons. Citizens' voices cannot be throttled by a threat of destroying their properties and homesteads. The ultimate security which a human being possesses is to the homestead. ... Bulldozer justice is simply unacceptable under the rule of law. If it were to be permitted the constitutional recognition of the right to property under Article 300A would be reduced to a dead letter. ... Any action in respect of public or private property must be backed by due process of law." On 04 October 2019, Manoj Tibrewal's ancestral residential house and shop in Mohalla Hamid Nagar, Maharajganj district were demolished by the Uttar Pradesh administration.

Pronouncing a verdict on this suo motu Writ Petition registered under Article 32 of the Constitution on the basis of a letter sent by the affected person to the highest

Court, the Supreme Court has laid down certain guidelines that the State must adhere to in dealing with such alleged encroachments. These include the necessity to ascertain the encroachment, if any, followed by written notices to remove the encroachment and a speaking order to the said notices. In addition the Court has mandated that, thereafter, reasonable notice would be furnished to the person against whom any adverse action is proposed and it is upon the failure of the said person concerned to act, that the authorities can proceed to remove the encroachment, in accordance with law.

In the second Judgement, pronounced barely a week later, on 13 November 2024, a 2-Judge bench of the Supreme Court laid down comprehensive pan-India guidelines on the issue of demolition of residential and commercial properties by the state machinery without following

due process of law, on the ground of the accused being allegedly involved in criminal offences. In answering this question, the Supreme Court elaborated the impermissibility of such actions against the principle of the rule of law, the concept of separation of powers, the doctrine of public trust in respect of government officials holding their offices, the fundamental right to shelter, the Constitutional protection from arbitrary state action, the rights of accused and the rights against collective punishment. In doing so, the Court in no uncertain terms condemned state-abetted lawlessness.

The sanctity of the home

In this notable judgement, the Court clarified that a house is not simply a commodity, rather “an embodiment of the collective hopes of a family or individuals’ stability and security”. As the judgement proceeds, the Court has poignantly reminded the executive the importance of a house to people. For an average citizen, the construction of a house is often the culmination of years of hard work, dreams, and aspirations. A house is not just a property but embodies the collective hopes of a family or individuals for stability, security, and a future. It gives a sense of dignity and a sense of belonging.

Reasserting the rule of law against state lawlessness

The Supreme Court held that it is wholly impermissible in our constitutional set-up for officers of the State Government to take upon themselves the adjudicatory functions that are entrusted to the judiciary, to inflict the punishment of demolition of the properties of a person undergoing a trial. The executive cannot become a judge

and decide that a person accused is guilty and, therefore, punish him by demolishing his residential/commercial property/properties. Such an act of the executive would be transgressing its limits contrary to the principles of ‘rule of law’ violating the principle of ‘separation of powers’. And that the public officials, who take the law in their hands, should be made accountable for such high-handed actions. Our constitutional ethos and values would not permit any such abuse of power and such misadventures cannot be tolerated by the court of law.

Invoking the doctrine of public trust and accountability

The Court invoked the doctrine of public trust to restrain the unbridled state-lawlessness in bulldozing homes, holding that the executive exercises its powers as a ‘trustee’ of the citizens, as such executive actions must be consistent with maintaining public trust. Ultimately, the Court warned the officer/officers concerned to be held responsible for restitution of the demolished property at his/their personal cost in addition to payment of damages.

Allegations are not a Carte Blanche to bulldoze people’s properties

From the time this unconstitutional practice was first unleashed in Uttar Pradesh, to date, these demolitions follow a familiar pattern: “A protest takes place in a locality or neighbourhood, which turns violent. Soon after, the police declares that a certain individual, or set of individuals, have been identified as the “masterminds” behind the violence. Immediately after that, the municipality declares that these individuals are residing

in unauthorised buildings (often – as in the most recent case – with backdated notices of doubtful authenticity). The buildings (homes) are then demolished. In the normal course of things, the time period between the police declaring that it has identified the masterminds behind the violence, the municipality declaring that the buildings are illegal, and the actual demolition, is under twenty-four hours”. In the face of this, the Court has upheld the rights of accused/ convicts against arbitrary and excessive measures in the form of demolitions.

If a citizen’s house is demolished merely because he is an accused or even for that matter a convict, without following the due process as prescribed by law, it will be totally unconstitutional for more than one reason. Firstly, the executive cannot declare a person guilty, as this process is the fundamental aspect of the judicial review. If the executive demolishes the property/properties of an accused person without following the due process of law, such an act of the executive would be transgressing its limits.

Acknowledging malafide “coincidences”

When a particular structure is chosen all of a sudden for demolition and the rest of the similarly situated structures in the same vicinity are not even being touched, a presumption could be drawn that the real motive for such demolition proceedings was not the illegal structure but an action of penalising the accused without even trying him before the court of law. No doubt, such a presumption could be rebuttable. The authorities will have to satisfy the court that it did not intend to penalise a person accused by demolishing the structure.

Rejecting collective punishment of entire families

The Court reiterates that the theory of community guilt and collective punishment has no place in Indian jurisprudence, and no person shall be punished except for his own guilt. It is a settled principle that a person is presumed to be innocent till he is held guilty. If demolition of a house is permitted wherein a number of persons of a family or a few families reside only on the ground that one person residing in such a house is either an accused or convicted in the crime, it will amount to inflicting a collective punishment on the entire family or the families residing in such structure. Our constitutional scheme and the criminal jurisprudence would never permit the same.

Mandatory guidelines

Having clearly outlined the unconstitutionality, illegality and inhumanity of bulldozing houses of persons accused/convicted of any crime, the Court lays down elaborate guidelines that are binding in nature.

Firstly, the Court has mandated that no demolition should be carried out without a prior show cause notice granting enough time is given for persons to respond (at least 15 days). Importantly the Court has passed crucial directions to prevent back-dating notices, while directing that the notices so contemplated must contain details of the alleged unauthorised construction, details of the specific violation and grounds for demolition and a date for personal hearing. The Court has directed every municipal/local authority to assign

a designated digital portal, within 3 months, to carry details regarding service/pasting of the notice, the reply, the show cause notice and the order passed.

Secondly, the Court has held that personal hearing is mandatory and that minutes of such hearing would be recorded. Thirdly, the Court holds that, on conclusion of the above process, the designated authority is permitted to pass a final order only after giving reasons for doing so. The Court has also held that, in the event the designated authority orders demolition, then it has to demonstrate that the "extreme step of demolition is the only option available and other options like compounding and demolishing only part of the property are not available".

Writers, Editors and Literary Critics Condemn Hypocrisy Behind the JCB Prize for Literature

Over a hundred and eighty literary personalities around the world have criticised the hypocrisy behind the JCB Prize For Literature being awarded by the UK based bulldozer manufacturer JCB enterprises "on account of the company's major role in the horrifying destruction of homes and livelihoods across India, Kashmir and Palestine". They have condemned "the obscuring of violence that this prize stands for".

K. Satchidanandan, Asad Zaidi, Isabella Hammad (Palestine/United States), Jacinta Kerketta, Meena Kandasamy, Siddhartha Deb, Mira Mattar (Palestine/Britain), Rafeef Ziadah (Palestine), Ahdaf Soueif (Egypt), Shailja Patel (Kenya), Nandita Haksar, Prof. Pranay Krishna, Prof. Gopal Pradhan, Devi Prasad Mishra, Prof. Ashutosh Kumar, Ramji Rai, Urmilesh, Bodhi Sattva, Alok Bajpai, Naseria Sharma, Jaleshwar U, Yogesh Dhyani, Priya Verma, Durga Singh and Roopam Mishra are some of the prominent signatories of this open letter.

The letter says "the employment of JCB equipment within far right Hindu supremacist projects in India comes as no surprise" in the context that JCB (India) is a wholly owned subsidiary of the British construction equipment manufacturer JCB, which has been one of the most influential donors to the British Conservative party. The Narendra Modi government has consistently used JCB bulldozers in a systematic campaign to demolish Muslim homes, shops and places of worship. "These same bulldozers and backhoe loaders are also responsible for home demolitions and settlement expansion in occupied Palestine, due to a contract between JCB's agent and the Israeli Ministry of Defence, thus playing a key role in Israel's continued attempts at ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. Unsurprisingly, JCB exports its support for occupation and displacement to Kashmir, where its equipment is deployed to demolish Kashmiri homes".

The open letter condemns JCB's hypocrisy saying, "a prize awarded by a company responsible for the destruction of human lives globally is not a meaningful celebration of a country's literature". "Through bulldozer demolitions, JCB is punishing the marginalised communities which it claims to be rewarding through the literature prize. This prize cannot wash off the blood on JCB's hands." ■

Fourthly, the Court has provided breather time of 15 more days after the demolition order is passed, for availing the opportunity of approaching appellate forums challenging the demolition order. The affected party needs to be given some time so as to challenge the order of demolition before an appropriate forum, or to vacate and arrange their affairs.

Fifthly, the Court has mandated the manner in which demolitions are to take place. Proceedings of demolition are to be mandatorily videographed, and the concerned authority shall prepare a demolition report giving the list of police officials and civil personnel that participated in the demolition process. The video recording is to be duly preserved, while the demolition report is to be displayed on the digital portal.

Sixthly, violation of any of the directions would lead to initiation of contempt proceedings in addition to the prosecution, and errant officials would be held responsible for restitution of the demolished property at their personal cost in addition to payment of damages.

Conclusion

These two judgments are timely, necessary and welcome since, together, these may ring the death knell to this form of targeted demolitions and the weaponization of the bulldozer as a weapon for Hindutva politics.

Having said that, it must be said that the judgments fail in explicitly acknowledging these demolitions have a track record of disproportionately targeting

Muslims. They amount to an attack on the fundamental norms of justice, equality, and above all, fraternity. The Court has refrained from identifying this practice with BJP-ruled states, even as it defeats the party's most prized communal weapon. This represents a missed opportunity where the Court could have called out this illegality for what it is – a BJP-invented communal policy of punitive domicile.

In conclusion, and this criticism notwithstanding, these judgments will go a long way in dismantling the communal punitive domicile practiced by the BJP where it heads the state governments, as also the inhuman bulldozing of homes of the poor and slum dwellers in rural and urban India. ■

Nitish Government in Footsteps of Yogi's Bulldozer Raj

When the Supreme Court of India was delivering its verdict against Bulldozer injustice of BJP governments, the Sahaba Academy Islamic School, situated hardly four kilometres away from Samastipur town, was bulldozed by Bihar police on 13 October. Hundreds of police personnel led by Kalyanpur PS officials reached along with tractors and JCB machines to demolish the school. They destroyed the main gate and dismantled windows and doors after forcing kids studying in classes to leave. The police took school furniture including childrens' desks away with them. They also threatened teachers and students present in school.

This was done at the behest of local

police to target one Rukhsar who was named in an FIR. The said school which caters to children from all communities is not even a residential premise of the accused. It is run by Rukhsar's mother Shagufta Zabin, managed by his father and elder brother, while he himself also works as a teacher. The police acquired a seizure notice on 12 October which was not served or displayed in public as was required under the law, and came with bulldozers at the school while Rukhsar's residence is in the neighbouring Mathurapur.

By the time this school was being demolished, Rukhsar had already surrendered in the court. The police, while returning after perpetrating this illegal act along with school's furniture etc, was told by local

people of his surrender in court the same day. The police, then, had to return all belongings of the school that were being taken by them.

The said accused and target of bulldozers, was not even initially named in the first information report regarding a reported murder crime. His name was inserted later. Other accused are from different communities.

Earlier on 10 October, police came in plainclothes to forcibly take Rukhsar without showing any papers, but he fled when local people intervened suspecting plainclothes police as criminals. This infuriated police more to the extent of illegally going for demolition of the school. Samastipur unit of CPIML took cognisance of this atrocity and sent a team comprising Dinesh Kushwaha, Raju Paswan and Insaf Manch leader Md. Dulare at the spot of demolition.

They reported the details of this illegal act and announced a protest immediately.

CPIML Bihar state committee termed this incident an attempt to copy Yogi's bulldozer raj in Bihar and demanded action against police for this communally motivated vengeful act. A high level team led by party's Bihar Legislative group leader Mahboob Alam, Baidyanath Yadav, Diwakar Prasad and Samastipur district secretary Umesh Kumar visited the affected school and met with teachers, students and general public on 20 October. They found the police committed this crime very intentionally. People in the area also told them that the name of Rukhsar has been incorporated in the FIR conspiratorially to target Muslim community.

Comrade Mahboob Alam reported to the media of this atrocity and said that sadly this crime of bulldozer injustice was perpetrated on the same day when the Supreme Court had delivered a verdict against such acts. This in itself tells a lot about the ongoing communal bias of NDA governments in the country. The people of Bihar have always been the champions and defenders of secularism and the constitution and any attempt to tarnish secular credentials of people of the state will certainly be foiled, he said.

The CPIML has demanded action against the police incharge of Kalyanpur thana and accountability from district SP. The party organised protests in Samastipur and Darbhanga against this bulldozer action. ■

Mega Infrastructure Project in the Great Nicobar Island

Development or Ecocide?

▲ MADHURIMA BAKSHI

The Great Nicobar Island Development Project is a Rs. 72,000 crore mega infrastructure project envisioned by NITI Aayog in March 2021 claims to be part of 'holistic development of Great Nicobar Island'. The project includes the construction of the following in the Great Nicobar Island (GNI):

- Galathea Bay International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT): A terminal with a capacity of 14.2 million TEUs (unit of cargo)
- Great Nicobar International Airport (GNIA): An airport with a peak hour capacity of 4,000 passengers
- Great Nicobar Gas and Solar Power Plant (Great Nicobar GSPP): A power plant with a capacity of 450-MVA spread over 16,610 hectares
- Two new greenfield coastal cities.

The 3 phase, 30 years long mega venture is to be executed by a government undertaking Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation' (ANIIDCO). Two crucial approvals, the stage-1 in-principle forest clearance and environmental clearance have been already granted in late 2022. The Central Government is about to issue invitations for bids for the first phase of the terminal construction. The contentious mega project has raised several questions on prioritising profitable infrastructure over the need of preserving pristine biodiversity and upholding cultural and social rights of the indigenous communities.

An Unique Ecosystem

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are divided by the 150 km wide Ten Degree Channel. Great Nicobar, a part of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, is the southernmost and largest of the Nicobar Islands, administered as a union territory in India. The island receives around 3,500 mm of annual rainfall and is characterised by the presence of lush tropical rainforest. The biodiversity rich island was declared a biosphere reserve in 1989 and in 2013 was included in UNESCO's Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme for its immense ecosystem services. The project site is located in Galathea Bay on the south-eastern coast of the Island.

GNI, a part of biodiversity hotspot with two national parks, a biosphere reserve, is inhabited by small populations of the indigenous communities, Shompen and Nicobarese tribal people, and a few thousand non-tribal settlers. The Shompen, around 250 in total, are classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) who mostly live in the interior

forests having minimal contact with outsiders for centuries pursuing hunter-gatherer way of life. The coast dwelling community of Nicobarese having two groups: the Great Nicobarese (living along the island's southeast and west coast and were forced to relocate to Campbell Bay from their ancestral lands after the 2004 tsunami) and the Little Nicobarese (mostly living in Afra Bay in Great Nicobar and also in two other islands in the archipelago, Pulomilo and Little Nicobar). Out of its total 910 km² area, nearly 850 km² is designated as a tribal reserve under the Andaman and Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation, 1956. The region belongs to one of the most tectonically active zones.

Background of the Project

The idea of developing a port in GNI, near one of the world's busiest international sea routes (the Malacca Strait) to boost participation in global maritime trade came into existence since 1970, when the Trade Development Authority of India (presently 'India Trade Promotion Organisation') conducted techno-economic feasibility studies. The current project labelled as 'Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island' started after the NITI Aayog Pre-Feasibility Report (PFR) in August 2021, conducted by AECOM India Pvt. Ltd, a multinational consultancy firm. The International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT) targets to become a key player in the regional and global maritime economy by focusing on cargo transshipment. The proposed airport and greenfield cities are designed to support the growth of maritime services and international and national tourism activity.

Strategic location?

The PFR stressed on capitalising the strategic locational advantage of the island, which is approximately equidistant from Colombo (Sri Lanka) to the southwest and Port Klang (Malaysia) and Singapore to the southeast, to transform it into a global hub for 'business, trade, and leisure'. The AECOM report says GNI "needs to trade on its remoteness and exquisite beauty. Some high net worth individuals will appreciate the chance to have a luxury home on such an unspoilt island". It also states, that "if required tribals can be relocated to other parts of the island". It adds, tourism development "can capitalise on the exceptional tourism assets to attract high-end tourists..."

GNI is situated just 90 km from the western tip of the Malacca Strait, a crucial waterway linking the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. It is also near the Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait, and the Coco Islands, making it vital for shipping, security, and maintaining a stronger military presence in the region to control key trade routes. It is to be noted that news reports have highlighted significant ongoing upgrades to the military infrastructure in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. The 'strategic' objectives of the project and the militarization of the island may heighten tensions between China and the QUAD as well as ASEAN countries potentially disrupting stability and forging arm competition.

On the other hand, the commercial aspect of the project questions its strategic dimension, as the AECOM report highlights an "economic development opportunity" tied to trade in shipping and tourism, suggesting commercial objectives are the primary driving forces behind

the venture. To achieve the targets unhindered, it has been labelled as a "strategic project", making public disclosure easily avoidable, pointed out by many activists.

Role of regulatory bodies

There have been many objections and controversies regarding how the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Social Impact Assessment (SIA) have been done and clearances have been granted in a rushed manner. The role of the regulatory agency MoEF&CC has come under scrutiny as the details of the environmental clearance and appraisal process, which are typically public documents, have been kept confidential.

National Green Tribunal (NGT) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) facilitated the clearances instead of putting a check on such projects in this vulnerable ecosystem. The Directorate of Tribal Welfare of the Andaman and Nicobar Administration extended help in clearing regulatory processes, including for de-reservation of tribal reserve land for the project.

ANIIDCO, a little known quasi-government agency based in Port Blair is designated as the project proponent, responsible for coordinating and overseeing infrastructure development, land acquisition, relocation and concerns of the local communities. It is questionable how a company with Rs. 370 crore average annual turnover and Rs. 35 crore profit over the last three financial years, has been given responsibility for such a high profile project in an eco-sensitive region like GNI. When ANIIDCO was appointed as the project proponent in 2020, it did not

even have any environment policy, environment cell, administrative system to ensure compliance with environmental clearance conditions or prescribed standard operating procedure or specialist to carry out the task. Still the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) granted environmental clearance to ANIIDCO in November 2022. It was only in late 2022 ANIIDCO started recruiting people with relevant technical, legal and financial expertise.

A petition filed in NGT by the Mumbai based Conservation Action Trust in 2022, elaborates multiple conflict of interests among the functionalities of regulatory bodies. When ANIIDCO was granted the forest clearance, its managing director was also the Commissioner cum Secretary (Environment and Forests) of the island, leading to a case of the project proponent certifying itself. Furthermore, the responsibility of assessing compliance with the Stage I forest clearance conditions lay with the same authority tasked with ensuring adherence to these conditions.

In April 2023, the Kolkata Bench of the NGT decided not to interfere with the environmental and forest clearances granted to the project. However, the project and its clearances have been under legal scrutiny at the NGT for alleged violation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and assessment protocols and formation of a high-powered committee was ordered to review the environmental and Coastal Regulation Zone clearances. An all-government high power committee, headed by the Secretary of the Environment Ministry, with members from NITI Aayog, ANIIDCO, MoEF&CC and its Expert Appraisal Committee who are directly associated with the project execution raises questions

on its reliability and integrity. The Chief Secretary of the islands, who also chairs the board of directors of ANIIDCO, became a key member of this high powered committee as well. There is no clarity when and how the report has been submitted as it was made classified and not brought into public. The committee did not associate any independent institution or expert to ensure an impartial review.

Ecological implications

From the days of its inception, the mega GNI project has constantly faced criticism from environmentalists, wildlife biologists, anthropologists and tribal rights activists. The rainforests and beaches of the island acts as a huge carbon sink and is the home of numerous endangered species of flora and fauna including giant Leatherback turtles, the Great Nicobar Crane, Nicobar Megapode, the Nicobar crab-eating macaque, Nicobar tree shrew, hundreds of kilometres of mangroves and Pandan forests along its coast and other rare species of trees and corals. The proposed mega construction is going to adversely affect this rare ecological wealth by destroying coral reefs and the local marine ecosystem, and posing a threat on nesting habitats of terrestrial Nicobar Megapode bird and leatherback turtles.

The project requires the diversion of over 130 km² of pristine tropical forest land, and has been granted a stage-1 clearance leading to the felling of around 1 million trees. In August 2023, the government informed the Parliament that 9.6 lakh trees could be cut down, with 'compensatory afforestation' planned thousands of kilometres away, in the vastly different ecological zone of Haryana. This kind of ecological compensation is not only farce but

also raises concerns about its impact on the region's carbon sequestration capacity.

In order to expedite the project and pave way for the construction activities in otherwise prohibited areas, the Modi government, in January 2021 "denotified" two wildlife sanctuaries on the island including the Galathea Bay, one of the world's largest nesting sites for the giant leatherback turtle and the Megapode wildlife sanctuary. The 'National Marine Turtle Action Plan' published by the central government during the same period enlists Galathea Bay as a marine turtle habitat in India. Both these species are listed in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and categorised as highly protected animals. Leatherback turtles are considered as one of the oldest surviving creatures on the earth. There are a number of endemic species in GNI which are yet to be documented.

The proposed port is located in a seismically volatile zone that experienced permanent subsidence of about 15 ft following the 2004 tsunami. Despite this, the project proponents have adequately assessed the earthquake risk. The Andaman and Nicobar archipelago lies within the "ring of fire": a seismically active region that endures frequent earthquakes throughout the year. Estimates suggest the area has experienced nearly 500 quakes of varying magnitude over the past decade. The area is in category V: the geographical zone with the most seismic hazard making it highly vulnerable to natural disasters. The devastation caused by the 2004 earthquake and tsunami underscores the region's susceptibility to extreme weather events. Biodiversity loss, deforestation, change in land use,

rising sea levels, inadequate disaster preventive and management plans and rapid commercial urbanisation is expected to exacerbate the island's climate vulnerability. The extensive loss of carbon sinks due to land diversion, the lack of a clear plan for coral reef transplantation, and the potential loss of habitat for over 1,700 species of birds and animals are urgent issues that demand attention.

Violation of tribal rights

The project will be implemented over 30 years and is expected to bring more than three lakh people to the island by 2050 which is currently the total population of the entire Andaman and Nicobar Islands. As far as the GNI is concerned, the island will witness an increase of population at 4,000 per cent.

The GNI project is posing a massive threat to the survival of the Shompens and violates the sanctity of the Nicobarese peoples' ancestral lands. Shompen and Nicobarese are dependent on the resources of the riparian and forested parts of this proposed project area. The Shompen are categorised as a vulnerable tribal group having special needs and rights and their population is reported to be just 250. The project will gradually lead to social displacement of their indigenous settlements violating their rights and needs for land, water, resources, culture etc. The arrival of people from outside could expose these tribes to diseases against which they haven't yet developed immunity. Moreover, the proposal to use geofencing (barbed wires) for the 'protection and safety' of Shompens, due to the power plant being situated close to their habitat, is both brutal and regressive and appears to be a tactic to confine them to their own land. In February

2024, experts from around the world urged President Draupadi Murmu to abandon the project, warning that it could lead to the extinction of the Shompens.

The ancestral lands of the Nicobarese and some Shompen settlements have been wrongly classified as "uninhabited" in the NITI Aayog's plan. Since 2004, the Nicobarese have repeatedly sought to go back to their ancestral (pre-tsunami) lands but the current relocation plans in the mega project do not address this long standing demand. The government is exploiting the displacement of the native Nicobarese caused by the 2004 tsunami to facilitate a massive land grab under the guise of 'development' agenda.

The island administration appears to be rushing forward with the project, disregarding the rights of local tribes by manipulating consent. The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, a constitutional body, has sought an explanation from the district administration on this matter. It is important to note that the Forest Rights Act mandates free, prior and informed consent from tribal and other forest-dwelling communities before any relocation can take place, meaning relocation is not a predetermined outcome. When assessments are conducted using selectively ascertained justifications, the resulting reports are likely to reflect bias. In this case, the local administration failed to adequately consult the Tribal Council of Great and Little Nicobar Islands, as required by law. In November 2022, the tribal council revoked the no-objection certificate it had previously issued for diversion of about 160 km² of forest land, citing that the administration had misled them and withheld critical

information regarding the use of tribal reserve lands.

A group of experts have written to the National Commission of Scheduled Tribes (NCST) highlighting how the clearances granted to the project are fraught with legal inconsistencies and how it will be harmful for the region's indigenous population. More than half of the GNI project lies over the Tribal Reserve Area, but officials claim that no tribal reserve is part of the proposed project. This is because 84.10 km² of tribal reserve area has already been denotified, effectively stripping the area of its protected status to accommodate the project. In their letter, they stated that such diversion of tribal land violates constitutional mandates. To compensate for the reduction of the Tribal Reserve and safeguard the habitat of the Shompen and Nicobar tribes, the Andaman and Nicobar Administration proposes to re-notify 76.96 km² of land within Campbell Bay National Park, Galathea National Park, and areas outside these parks as Tribal Reserve. But this pragmatic move is extremely dangerous as it is based on the flawed assumption that any land can be considered equivalent and therefore replaceable to meet the needs of the tribals. This approach reflects the UT administration's lack of understanding and insensitivity towards the unique requirements of indigenous communities and the bio-geophysical diversity of the island.

The local panchayat of Campbell Bay also raised concerns over the SIA process for land acquisition for the airport due to lack of transparency and accountability. The SIA including the Public hearing was conducted ignoring the traditional inhabitants of the region, Shompen and Great

Nicobarese, thus violating the A&N Islands Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation (ANIPATR). The hearing held on June 29, 2024, to address the concerns of the 'project affected community' invited residents of Gandhi Nagar and Shastri Nagar, two Gram Panchayats of Campbell Bay, where settlers from mainland India were relocated between 1968 and 1975. Notably, the 117-page long draft SIA, fails to assess the impact of the mega infrastructure project on the interests of the original inhabitants and does not mention these two communities even once defying the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013. A group of 103 former civil servants raised serious objections to the SIA report in a letter addressed to the secretaries of the Ministries of Tribal Welfare and Home Affairs, the Social Welfare Department of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Chairman of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, terming the report as 'superficial'.

Conclusion

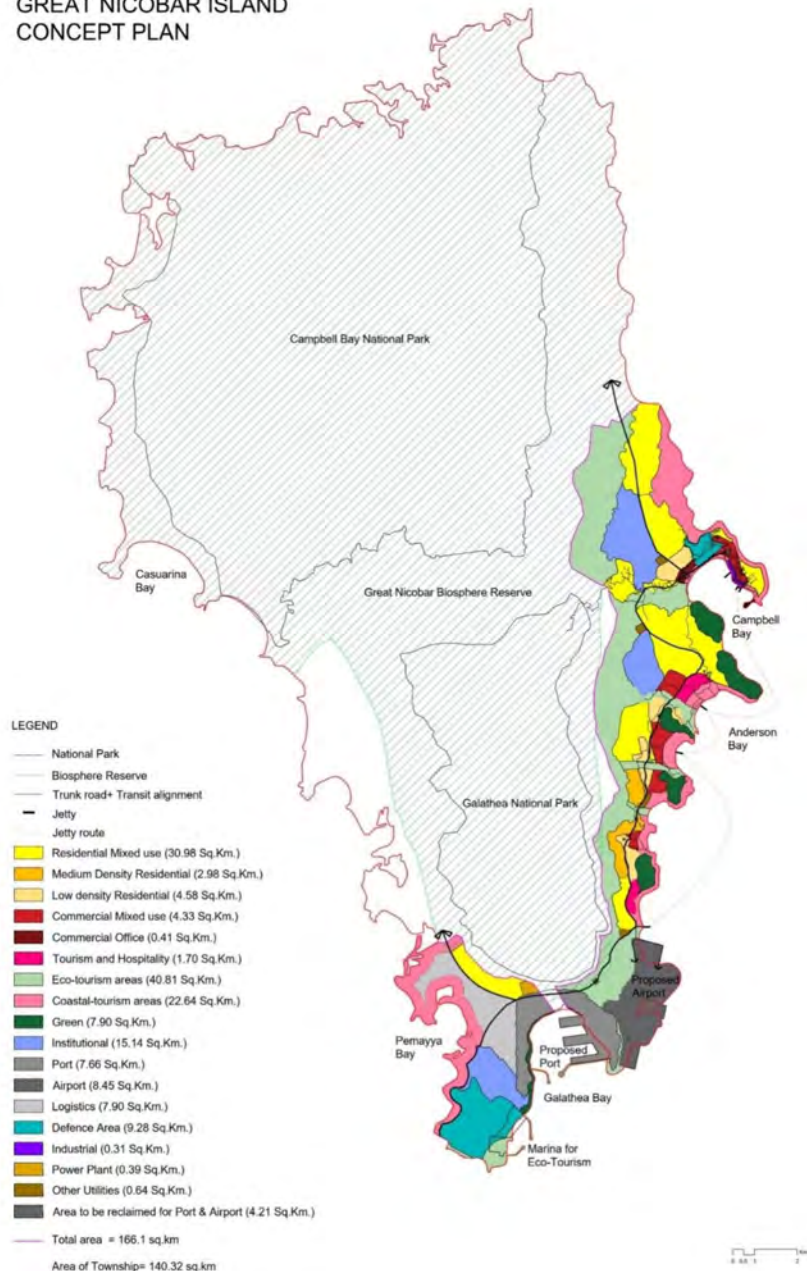
The GNI project needs to be seen in the light of massive deforestation drives in Hasdeo, Buxwaha, Dehing Patkai as a part of Modi governments pro corporate profit seeking policies aiming 'ease of doing business'.

Despite tall claims about economic growth and geopolitical strength of this project, its potential to cause an ecocide has made several environmental activists, academics and anthropologists to write to the government highlighting its unconstitutional nature and harmful environmental and social impacts urging for its withdrawal. The process of 'transforming' an extremely fragile eco-sensitive zone into a hub of trade, tourism, and strategic military

presence, is embarked with the hallmarks of ecological, seismic and humanitarian disaster and has been rightly coined as a perfect example of 'disaster capitalism' by activists. The project prioritises a singular model of economic development through large-scale infrastructure, where progress is envisioned at the

expense of indigenous peoples' rights and the destruction of a unique ecology. This venture deliberately undermines the pro-people and pro-environment sustainable policies and is driven by economic and strategic interest favouring larger corporations and investors over local lives and livelihoods. ■

GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND CONCEPT PLAN



Char Dham Project: Towards a Himalayan Tragedy?

▲ SEEMANTIKA

The Char Dham Highway Project in the Indian Himalayas is a classic case of infrastructure development fraught with ecological risk. This 900-kilometre two-lane project promises improved access to four sacred Hindu shrines, intended to facilitate both tourism and potential military utility. This project actually represents a looming disaster for the fragile Himalayan ecosystem, resulting in frequent landslides. This project's adverse environmental impacts are not only evident, but also severe.

At its core, this massive undertaking is marred by poor planning, unscientific construction practices, and government neglect of environmental guidelines. In this push for infrastructure, the government has disregarded the fundamental environmental limitations of the Himalayas. The road-widening activities along National Highway 7 between Rishikesh and Joshimath, for instance, have led to an uptick in landslides. A study has documented 309 road-blocking landslides within a 247-kilometre stretch, effectively confirming the road expansion as a primary factor in the region's increasing geological instability. The density of landslides in this corridor, measured at 1.25 per kilometre, underscores the project's disastrous environmental impact. More troubling is that these landslides often result in roadblocks causing

fatalities and also endangering lives. Such incidences are more common during high-rainfall periods, the project's catastrophic implications for safety and environmental health are becoming more pronounced with each year passing.

Despite such dire projections, the Government continues to justify the project as necessary for military logistics, a rationale upheld by the Supreme Court of India. The court originally supported a road width of 5.5 meters, recommended by an expert committee, but ultimately sanctioned the 12-meter width favoured by the Union Government, emphasizing 'national security'. The mountainous ecology, characterized by steep slopes and sharp gradients, is inherently prone to erosion and landslides, making large-scale construction risky and unsustainable. Rather than adapting construction practices to the unique challenges posed by the mountainous terrain, the government has favoured its ambitious plan, aggravating the landscape's fragility.

The adverse effects of the project extend beyond environmental degradation, impacting local communities and leading to what the researchers call a "silent disaster." Ground subsidence, observed across several Himalayan towns, is a direct result of the unchecked construction, poor drainage systems, and increased infrastructural stress. Joshimath,

one of the towns affected, has shown significant land deformation, which scientists attribute to the excessive burden placed on the landscape. The Tungnath temple, another local landmark, is suffering from structural instability, with foundation subsidence, water leakage, and shifting wall slates. Yet, these visible signs of ecological distress have done little to change the government's stance on its development strategy. The Border Roads Organisation has even proposed widening another stretch of road in the Bhagirathi Eco-Sensitive Zone, an area crucial to the ecology of the Ganges River.

The ecological repercussions of such large-scale construction are intertwined with the socioeconomic impacts on Uttarakhand's rural communities. As the project attracts businesses and infrastructure investment from the plains, locals are increasingly compelled to abandon agriculture in favour of tourism-driven employment. According to the 2011 Census, over a thousand villages in Uttarakhand are uninhabited, while hundreds more have a population of fewer than 10 people. This depopulation trend, likely exacerbated by the so-called development boom, threatens traditional livelihoods and the cultural fabric of the region. Despite local government's efforts to restrict land sales to outsiders, the forces driving land abandonment persist. Limited access to water and other environmental challenges make farming less viable, while the lure of tourism jobs often draws younger generations away from agriculture.

Proponents of the Char Dham Highway argue that the project has stimulated economic growth, with the state government

boasting increase in gross state domestic product (GSDP) and decline in unemployment. However, these economic gains come at a high ecological and social cost, undermining the state's long-term environmental sustainability. Uttarakhand's heavy reliance on tourism has made the region especially vulnerable to environmental degradation. The focus on tourism-driven infrastructure has been promoted without adequate environmental safeguards, despite the government's rhetorical commitment to climate resilience on international platforms. This contradiction between development goals and ecological responsibilities raises fundamental questions about the government's long-term strategy for Uttarakhand and the Himalayas.

The Himalayan ecosystem, which has long been one of the world's most ecologically sensitive

regions, is now facing intensified risks from projects like the Char Dham Highway. The frequency of landslides, increasing fatalities, and evident degradation of local landmarks illustrate that the project is straining the environment beyond its limits. While improved access to remote regions is essential, it should not come at the cost of ecological collapse. The Himalayas demand a cautious, well-informed approach to development that respects their fragile geology and the region's unique socio-cultural and ecological heritage.

In the face of such stark realities, the Char Dham project's vision of improved connectivity must be reconciled with the Himalayan ecosystem's inherent strain. Both the Union and State governments should prioritize environmental assessments before proceeding with additional expansions. Scaling down or modifying the project to mitigate its ecological footprint,

rather than exacerbating it, would demonstrate a genuine commitment to sustainable development. The government could also consider alternative means of achieving its strategic objectives, such as using air transport for military logistics, to reduce the strain on the mountain landscape.

Ultimately, the Char Dham Highway highlights the complex intersection between development and environmental stewardship in one of India's most treasured natural regions. Without a course correction, the consequences of such unrestrained construction could lead to irreversible damage, impacting both the people of Uttarakhand and the broader ecosystem of the Himalayas. Preserving the Himalayas for future generations requires balancing the pursuit of modern connectivity with a deep respect for the natural limitations and ecological treasures of these ancient mountains. ■

Marchula Bus Accident: Lives Lost to Crumbling Transport System and Deteriorating Roads in Uttarakhand

The tragic accident involving a bus traveling from Kinath/Barat in Pauri district to Ramnagar occurred near Marchula in Almora district on November 4, resulted in the loss of 36 lives. CPIML State Secretary Indresh Maikhuri, in a statement, extended his heartfelt condolences to the families of the deceased and wish a swift recovery for the injured.

Comrade Indresh noted that this accident once again exposes the shortcomings of the transportation

system in the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand. It has come to light that the bus was overcrowded, carrying far more passengers than its capacity. Public transport in the hills is typically in a dilapidated state, and due to a shortage of vehicles, overloading is common. The roads are in extremely poor condition, despite repeated promises from the Chief Minister to make the roads pothole-free, dating back to 2022. However, the reality is that the condition of roads in the hills remains deplorable.

Following this incident, the Chief Minister has ordered a magistrate-led inquiry. However, this appears to be more of a formality. In July 2018, a horrific accident in Dhumakot in Pauri district claimed the lives of 45 people. The then-Chief Minister also ordered a magistrate inquiry at that time. Before conducting yet another inquiry, it is essential to clarify what actions were taken based on the previous inquiry and what lessons were learned from it.

CPIML has demanded concrete steps to be taken urgently to put an end to the loss of lives due to a crumbling transport system and deteriorating roads in the hills. ■

Smart Electricity Meters: How People are Paying the Price for Energy Privatization

Mohammad Mustafa Panwari, a resident of Bihar's Jagdishpur was shocked to see his electricity bill of Rs. 34,57,334 – courtesy to the new smart meter he had disconnected several months back, but it continued to roll, spewing a bill of Rs. 9,527 per day for several months. This 'smart' meter, part of Narendra Modi government's Smart Meter National Programme (SMNP) couldn't even gauge if it was connected or not! It took several weeks of effort by Mustafa, with support from CPI(M) MP Sudama Prasad and party members before the bill was corrected to Rs. 1,718.

The story of Mustafa Panwari is just one among millions of toiling masses and poor across India who are facing the wrath of an unwarranted technological system that only benefits the private electricity companies and not the people. These meters, sold by the government as a 'revolutionary step' towards accurate billing and electricity theft prevention, is nothing but to help the private companies amass wealth.

In Uttar Pradesh's Prayagraj, smart meters installed in seven divisions have reportedly caused bills to increase by three to four times for many households. A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed in the Allahabad High Court in 2021 has highlighted these discrepancies. For instance, consumers who previously received monthly bills between Rs. 500 and Rs. 700 now report charges as high as Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 5,000. The petition accuses

the power distribution officials of ignoring complaints and failing to investigate irregular readings, leaving consumers frustrated and financially burdened

Under the pretext of modernisation of the electricity grid, multi-crore contracts were issued to private companies to provide smart meters and upgrade the system. One such company was Adani Group, a company marred by bribery and fraud charges. In 2023, it bagged two contracts worth Rs 13,888 crore by the Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (MSEDCL) to install smart meters in Mumbai. The Adani Energy Solutions Ltd (AESL), which controls 30% of the smart meter market share, has faced severe backlash in Maharashtra. Despite promises of greater billing precision, many consumers have claimed that their bills have nearly doubled without any significant change in their electricity consumption.

Many state governments have adopted stringent measures to ensure compliance with smart meter installations, including forcibly disconnecting households using older meters. Several households also face issues with prepaid smart meters, where electricity is cut off immediately after the balance depletes. This system is especially brutal for those with irregular incomes who cannot predict when they will run out of funds to top up their accounts.

The implementation of smart meters has led to frequent complaints of

inflated bills across the country. Unlike traditional meters, where households could gauge their consumption manually, smart meters calculate consumption digitally and often inaccurately, leading to sudden spikes in monthly bills.

The Electricity (Rights of Consumers) Rules, 2020, which implemented the provisions of prepaid smart meters, also introduced Time of the Day (TOD) tariffs or dynamic pricing. There will be different pricing for high peak (after solar hours) and non-peak hours. The peak hours will witness a rate 10-20% higher. This absurd pricing scheme will hit the poor hardest. TOD tariffs could become a financial burden, as they would have no choice but to pay the higher rates, even though they are among the least able to afford them.

Smart Meters Face Backlash in Several Countries

While the World Bank and international financial institutions are pushing for smart grids across the developing countries, several developed countries have found this system failing and not cost effective.

Britain, Germany, and Canada have experienced substantial backlashes against the high costs and inefficiencies of smart meters. In fact, the stories of foreign nations can serve as cautionary tales, warning India against repeating the same costly mistakes.

In the UK, the government's ambitious plan to roll out smart meters in every home by 2020 has been nothing short of disastrous. Originally estimated

to cost £11 billion, the initiative has far exceeded budgets and raised serious concerns about its effectiveness. By 2021, a National Audit Office report revealed that the cost savings promised by the program had failed to materialise. Instead of reducing consumer bills, many households found their electricity charges increased due to smart meter malfunctions and hidden fees related to installation and usage.

Despite an investment of billions, many users still complain of receiving higher bills, particularly due to the dynamic pricing models that smart meters enable. A staggering one-quarter of UK households have either refused to install the meters or opted to have them removed. The UK government, facing mounting pressure, announced plans to scale back the program and re-evaluate its long-term viability.

In Germany, the rollout of smart meters has been far more cautious. Germany's Energy Agency has only allowed the installation of smart meters in high-energy-consuming households and industrial sectors. A 2020 study concluded that smart meters would only be economically viable if installation costs were significantly reduced and if the benefits for low-consumption households were clearly demonstrated. The findings starkly contrast with India's rushed implementation of these meters, which have already sparked widespread discontent among lower-income consumers.

Germany's decision to restrict smart meter usage highlights the importance of cost-benefit analysis and consumer protection before rolling out large-scale energy

reforms. A report by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs stated that costs for households with low energy consumption outweighed the benefits, which is precisely the issue India faces today.

In Ontario, Canada, the introduction of smart meters has resulted in widespread consumer dissatisfaction. The Ontario Smart Meter Program, launched in 2009, promised to reduce electricity costs by providing more accurate billing. However, it has instead led to increased costs due to time-of-use pricing (dynamic pricing) and technical glitches. Many users complained of receiving sky-high bills despite minimal usage, and the resulting public backlash forced the Ontario Energy Board to investigate the program.

A 2019 report by the Toronto Star revealed that while smart meters did provide real-time data for utilities, they failed to deliver the promised savings to consumers. The Ontario Energy Minister admitted that the program had resulted in a cost to taxpayers that had not been justified by any corresponding benefit.

A 'Smart' Push Towards Privatisation

What makes this smart meter situation even more alarming is the role of private electricity companies in India's power sector. These smart meters are part of the 'One Nation, One Grid, One frequency, One Price' framework of the Modi government for adoption of a market based economic dispatch in the centralised day-ahead market (future power market). In 2021, Ministry of Power issued a notification introducing the Market-

Based Economic Dispatch (MBED) framework, which aims to undermine state-level autonomy in power management, forces state-owned Distribution Companies (DISCOMs) into a centrally controlled system, and creates opportunities for large private players to dominate the market, potentially exploiting it for profit.

The MBED framework is seen as the precursor to a broader agenda aimed at complete privatisation of India's public power sector. Under World Bank guidance, the Ministry of Power initiated a mandatory smart metering project, which was abruptly enforced alongside the withdrawal of existing financial support schemes for DISCOMs from the central government.

As part of these plans, the National Smart Metering and Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme (RDSS) launched with an ambitious budget of Rs. 3,03,758 crore. While Rs. 97,631 crore is supported by the central government, Rs. 2,06,127 crore will eventually fall on state DISCOMs and consumers, imposing significant financial strain. The RDSS proposes the discontinuation of all cross-subsidies on electricity. If any subsidies are to be provided, the state government must do so via the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) system. This means that every consumer will have to first pay the full price for electricity, and any subsidy they are entitled to will be reimbursed later. We have seen how the DBT system has failed miserably in previous instances, such as the gas cylinder subsidy, where many beneficiaries were either excluded or faced delays, leading to inefficiencies and immense suffering for the poor.

Apart from smart meters, the RDSS also covers the upgradation of the electricity distribution sector. The overall aim behind these frameworks and schemes is to open the gates of electricity distribution, which is currently managed by state-owned companies, to private corporations. This way private players are reaping profits in the name of a "modernised and efficient system," using the consumers' money.

The picture painted by the Modi regime to push for privatisation is that state DISCOMS are facing financial burden. However, a significant part of this financial strain stems from non-beneficial, often unfavourable, contracts with electricity generators. This purchase cost forms 70-80% of the expenditure for state DISCOMS. These contracts, which were often signed at high rates, have contributed to the unsustainable

financial situation of many state-owned DISCOMS. Furthermore, the move in India to privatise electricity generation has resulted in the states having to enter into regressive power purchase agreements (PPAs) with private companies leading to steep increase in the average cost of electricity generation. The whole scheme of smart meters has nothing to do with technology or modernisation—it is a political scam to help corporate cronies. ■

Protest Against Prepaid Electricity Meters

As part of its "Oust BJP, Save Uttarakhand" campaign, CPIML Uttarakhand staged a protest outside the Sub-Divisional Officer's (SDO) office of the Electricity Department in Lalkuan on November 6, 2024. The protesters opposed the installation of prepaid electricity meters, the rising electricity bills, and the ongoing moves towards privatisation of the Uttarakhand Power Corporation Limited (UPCL). They called on the state government to abandon the prepaid meter scheme and halt any privatisation attempts of UPCL. The protest program began with a tribute to the victims of the recent tragic accident in Marchula, Almora, along with wishes for the swift recovery of the injured.

Senior CPIML leader Comrade Bahadur Singh Jangi said the BJP-led state government is attempting to privatise UPCL by introducing prepaid meters, which he argued would increase hardships for the public, who already face high electricity tariffs. He noted that repeated tariff hikes had already strained household budgets, and the new prepaid meter scheme

would only worsen the situation.

District Secretary Kailash Pandey highlighted that the prepaid meter policy could lead to significant price hikes and ultimately push the power sector towards privatisation, handing control to private conglomerates such as Adani. While people are suffering under skyrocketing prices and increasing unemployment, the Modi and BJP governments across the country are bothered about how to increase profit for Adani and other big corporates, who are close to the ruling regime.

Kailash Pandey said that the scheme would not only exploit consumers with higher bills but would also endanger the jobs of existing Electricity Department employees, with mass layoffs expected, particularly among contract workers, exacerbating the state's growing unemployment crisis. Following the protest, a memorandum listing the party's demands was submitted to the Chief Minister through the SDO. Three key demands were as follows:

1. The state should abandon the installation of prepaid electricity meters and maintain the traditional post-paid system.
2. Any attempts to privatise or outsource UPCL should be immediately halted.
3. Immediate steps should be taken to address the persistent low-voltage issues, and substantial increases in electricity bills should be prevented.

Earlier on October 25, 2024, CPIML initiated a month-long statewide campaign in Uttarakhand with the slogan, "Oust BJP - Save Uttarakhand." The campaign began with mass contact and leaflet distribution in Nainital district, led by senior CPIML leader Bahadur Singh Jangi.

The campaign against the Pushkar Singh Dhama-led government highlighted that the BJP regime has failed to improve Uttarakhand despite holding power for the majority of the state's existence. The BJP government has turned Uttarakhand into an experimental

ground for resource exploitation and communal division. The BJP's "loot, lies, and divisive politics" endanger Uttarakhand's future, which needs to be safeguarded by taking inspiration from historical Uttarakhand leaders like Chandra Singh Garhwali and Nagendra Saklani.

The campaign also drew attention to the crisis posed by stray cattle, which has disrupted farming and led to frequent road accidents. The government is exploiting cow protection laws for political gain. The "Remove BJP - Save Uttarakhand" also condemned the increasing violence against women in the

state. Further, the campaign noted Chief Minister Dhama's rhetoric around "Love Jihad," "Land Jihad," and "Spit Jihad" as shameful and unconstitutional and these moves by BJP are to intensify communal divisions rather than addressing real issues. ■

Workers' Rights Under Threat: CPIML MP Rajaram Singh Raises Alarm Over Labour Issues

Comrade Rajaram Singh, Member of Parliament from CPIML representing Karakat, Bihar, has submitted a series of appeals to Shri Basavaraj Bommai, Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development. In these letters, Rajaram Singh, who is a member of the committee has highlighted critical labour rights issues affecting millions of workers across the country, ranging from wage stagnation and retrenchments to systemic violations of labour laws and neglect of workers' welfare.

Call for Revision of Minimum Wages

Rajaram Singh has drawn attention to the failure to revise the basic rates of minimum wages under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. The last revision occurred in 2017, despite the law mandating a revision every five years. He stressed that rising living costs, including food, education, and healthcare, have left workers in dire straits, with stagnant wages pushing many into conditions akin to forced labour.

The primary intent of the Minimum

Wages Act, 1948, is to prevent "sweated" labour and to protect unorganised workers from exploitation. The Act operates on the principle that it is the duty of the State to ensure minimum wages are paid to employees, regardless of the financial capacity of the industry or establishment. Fixing the minimum wages is the primary obligation laid out in Article 43 of the Indian Constitution, henceforth ensuring a decent standard of life for all workers.

"The failure to revise minimum wages violates both statutory and constitutional obligations. Workers deserve justice and decent living standards," he said in a letter dated October 14, 2024.

Retrenchment of Safai Karamcharis and Exploitation

Another pressing issue is the alleged illegal termination of 61 Safai Karamcharis (Sanitation Workers) by the Centre for Airborne Studies (CABS), DRDO in Bengaluru on 23rd March, 2024. Most of these workers, from marginalised communities, were dismissed after reporting extortion

by contractors who demanded a cut from their wages. The workers have since been protesting, demanding reinstatement and improved working conditions.

Terminated workers, with support from the Karnataka General Labour Union (AICCTU), approached the Karnataka Safai Karamchari Commission. Despite directives to reinstate them and investigate extortion claims, CABS-DRDO ignored the demands to take back workers and also refused to conduct any inquiry into the complaints of both actions.

Safai karamcharis endure exploitative conditions, performing tasks like cleaning, unclogging drains, and removing weeds under the hot sun without safety gear or proper tools. They must lift rotting garbage with bare hands and eat lunch on the floor, often interrupted for urgent work. These undignified conditions persist daily. It is under these undignified working conditions that the workers are forced to work. Despite performing essential work for years, workers were classified as contract workers to deny them rights.

He condemned the exploitative conditions faced by these workers, who perform hazardous tasks without adequate safety measures.

"The management must be held accountable for victimising these workers instead of addressing their grievances," Comrade Rajaram Singh asserted.

In the letter, he also raised the issue of violation of basic rights of workers in Chabua Air Force Station in Dibrugarh, where wages are not paid in a timely manner, and minimum wages are not being paid to workers. They are not even provided social security, and are not provided ESI cards and Provident fund details, making it impossible for them to access these benefits.

Violation of Payment of Bonus Act

In a letter dated November 19, the MP also highlighted the plight of over 1,000 contractual workers at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and other institutions in Delhi. Despite repeated protests and legal mandates, these workers have been denied bonuses as per the Payment of Bonus Act, 1965. Mr Singh called for immediate intervention from the Ministry of Labour and Employment to ensure compliance with the law.

Comrade Rajaram called for immediate intervention from the Ministry of Labour and Employment in this regard to ensure that Payment of Bonus is implemented for all contractual workers in JNU and all other central government institutions in Delhi.

Concerns Over Jute Industry Crisis

In another letter, Comrade Rajaram expressed grave concerns about the crisis in the jute industry, which threatens the livelihoods of 2.5 lakh workers and 40 lakh farmers

in eastern India, especially West Bengal. Declining demand for jute products, illegal imports from Bangladesh, and lack of timely procurement orders have left the industry operating at 40-50% capacity.

The owners of the jute mills of West Bengal have passed the buck of this crisis upon the workmen by drastically reducing shifts, running the mills for 4-5 days, rendering thousands of workers out of employment citing the issue of lack of Production cum Supply Orders (PCSO) issued by the Jute Commissioner Office (JCI).

He urged the government to implement stricter monitoring of mandatory jute packaging norms and increase support for farmers, including revising the Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism. Raw jute may be procured by JCI directly from the cultivators, number of direct purchasing centres to be increased substantially, and channelized to the jute mills according to their demands. He also noted that considering the abundance of raw jute during the current jute year, the existing norms of 20% for packaging of sugar may be revised to a greater extent.

Employment Linked Incentive (ELI) Scheme Under Scrutiny

In a separate letter on November 19, Comrade Rajaram criticised the Employment Linked Incentive (ELI) Scheme. The scheme does not actually guarantee that employers will recruit new workers or generate new jobs without retrenching existing workers or recycling workers from the pool of the educated unemployed. The scheme offers no direct benefit

to the workers or employees themselves. It only draws from the government exchequer to subsidise certain statutory wage components.

He warned that the scheme could exacerbate job insecurity, promote exploitative internships, and fail to guarantee sustainable employment outcomes.

"The government must prioritise filling vacant posts in public services, enhancing MGNREGA, and addressing the agrarian crisis rather than allocating subsidies to private employers," he said. In this regard, he also drew attention to the detailed suggestions submitted by the Joint Platform of Central Trade Unions (JCTU).

Demand for Regularisation of Scheme Workers

Highlighting the contributions of nearly one crore scheme workers, including Anganwadi and ASHA workers, Comrade Rajaram emphasised the need for regularisation and social security benefits. These workers, lauded globally for their service during the COVID pandemic, continue to be denied basic rights.

Comrade Rajaram reiterated the charter of demands issued by All-India Scheme Workers Federation (AISWF):

1. All Scheme Workers should be given the status of government employees. In the interim period, they must be granted minimum wages as per the Central Government's schedule.
2. All Scheme Workers should be given the status of "workers", as

recommended unanimously by previous (45th and 46th) Indian Labour Conferences (ILC).

3. They must be allotted fixed working hours, and comprehensive social security including pension.
4. Gender Cells must be set up to stop gender-based exploitation at the workplace.
5. Appropriate compensation should be paid to the families of Scheme Workers who lost lives during covid.
6. Privatisation of work under various government Schemes and the incorporation of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Scheme work be stopped. The government must take full responsibility for Scheme work and for the rights of Scheme Workers.

He demanded that the union government must initiate immediate steps to regularise and ensure rights of scheme workers across the country.

On Indian Labour Conference (ILC) and Labour Codes

Comrade Rajaram raised concerns over the government's prolonged delay in convening the Indian Labour Conference (ILC), which has not been held for nine years. The ILC, a tripartite body comprising representatives of workers, employers, and the government, last met in 2015.

The issue has gained prominence as major reforms in labour laws were carried out without consultation through the ILC. The working class,

which is impacted by the labour codes were completely kept out of the discussions and consultation. The codification of 29 central labour laws into four Labour Codes, including the Code on Wages passed in 2019, bypassed the usual democratic practice of engaging the ILC.

Comrade Rajaram demanded an immediate announcement of the next ILC date. Furthermore, he also called for a moratorium on implementation of labour codes till the matter is discussed in ILC. ■

Ara MP Sudama Prasad Returns Expensive Gifts Received from Railways

C PIML Member of Parliament from Arrah, Sudama Prasad, has returned the expensive gifts received from RITES and Rail Vikas Nigam Limited during the study tour of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways, conducted between 31 October and 7 November 2024. The tour covered Bangalore, Tirupati, and Hyderabad. The gifts included a 1-gram gold coin and a 100-gram silver block.

In a letter dated November 2, 2024 addressed to the Chairperson of the Railway Standing Committee, CM Ramesh, the MP remarked that traditionally, guests are presented with shawls, paintings, flowers, or other mementos. He strongly criticised the Indian Railways for giving unethical gifts such as a gold coin and a silver block.

Highlighting his concern, Sudama Prasad stated that when passengers are grappling with issues such as inadequate safety measures, fare hikes, lack of amenities, and disrespectful treatment by Indian Railways, gifting such expensive items to members of the Standing Committee is deeply unethical. He termed it a sinister attempt to silence MPs from raising public interest issues.

He further noted that railway employees are denied even minimum wages, forced to work on contracts, and subjected to exploitation by contractors. At the same time, common passengers are deprived of dignified travel conditions in general and sleeper-class compartments. Instead of introducing new trains for the poor and middle classes, the government has focused on premium trains like the Vande Bharat Express. This reflects the Modi regime's attempt to deny railway services to ordinary citizens, he added.

Sudama Prasad expressed his indignation and disappointment over such gifts and has returned them as a mark of protest. He urged the government to prioritise addressing critical issues plaguing Indian Railways over indulging in such practices.

A Working Class Muslim Woman Navigates Rising Fascism

Review of *The Many Lives of Syeda X: The Story of an Unknown Indian* by Neha Dixit (Juggernaut, 2024)

▲ BY ANANYA WILSON-BHATTACHARYA

Neha Dixit's book *The Many Lives of Syeda X: The Story of an Unknown Indian* is a cross between a novel and a historical account, based on interviews conducted by Dixit, an award-winning journalist, over several years.

The titular character is a real working-class Muslim woman living in Delhi, having migrated from the city of Banaras in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Dixit charts the course of Syeda's life up until 2020, as she navigates the rise of Hindu supremacy and a climate of increasing hostility toward Muslims in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century North India.

Since its launch in Delhi this August, the book has caused a stir among Indian audiences. Dixit is known for her various investigations into atrocities and scandals involving the Hindutva right. She has long been a target of the clampdown on journalism under the rule of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Her retelling of Syeda's story is no less daring.

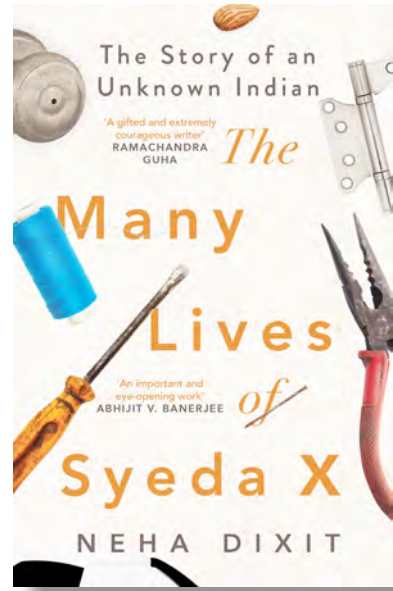
Many Lives

The title itself is indicative of the book's nature, invoking a combination of universality and anonymity. Instantly we are told that this is not a novel, and yet readers

will find themselves as engaged with the narrative as if they were reading a work of fiction. However, interspersed direct quotes from Syeda jolt us out of the narrative, serving as a powerful reminder that Dixit actually spoke to the people whose stories are at the heart of her book.

The phrase "many lives" has more than one meaning. While Syeda's experience is one that she shares with many others, she is also forced to reinvent her own life several times. This is hinted at by the objects on the book's cover, such as a spool of thread and a set of tweezers, which Syeda employs as working tools at various points in her life.

Dixit begins by introducing Syeda's father, Rashid, as a child growing up in a weaver family producing sarees in Banaras shortly after India gained independence from British rule in 1947. She introduces the subject of Hindu-Muslim relations in postindependence India right from the opening page, when Rashid's own father explains to him that "a saree is not Hindu or Muslim" and that Banaras is a Hindu city "only since the angrez [British] started calling it that. Banaras is a masaaldan, a spice box." At this point, we see the role of British colonialism in cementing divides between Hindus and Muslims, and



the firm resistance against such divisions that characterized the postindependence period.

Interestingly, the opening page mentions the weaving of sarees with the design of the tricolor Indian flag — "the new flag of independent India." Today, this flag is being appropriated by Modi's Hindu nationalist regime, which falsely projects itself as anti-colonial despite its complicity in ongoing forms of imperialism through strong ties with multinational corporations based in the Global North. There is a sense of despair in reading Dixit's first pages and knowing what is to come — both in Syeda's life and the wider Indian political climate.

The author sprinkles occasional mentions of events like Hindi film releases into the timeline of Syeda's story, locating it in its cultural context. These take the form of single-sentence paragraphs in bold font. We soon learn of two events from the year 1973: the release of the film *Zanjeer*, which "popularized the angry young man prototype in Indian movies," and Syeda's own birth.

Dixit's juxtaposition of these two events foreshadows how different forms of patriarchy will shape Syeda's life throughout, from childhood to marriage and beyond. Over the course of the book, the bold sentences become more politically focused, lending a haunting rhythm to Dixit's account of a growing and changing economy that is constantly edging closer to fascism.

Prejudice Against Muslims

The first indication of anti-Muslim feeling comes when Syeda's husband Akmal overhears a snide, seemingly offhand comment on the number of children he has from a local Hindu weaver. Dixit ominously describes this as "the beginning," explaining how this remark speaks to the harmful false narrative that Muslims will become the dominant group in India by having large numbers of children.

This communal scaremongering later informed the passage of Modi's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), arguably a step toward the ethnic cleansing of India's Muslim population, which has gone hand in hand with religious leaders openly calling for genocide of Muslims and for India to become a Hindu state. Dixit highlights how such rhetoric was being used to fuel anti-Muslim feeling as Hindutva forces were beginning to gain power in the political sphere. The BJP's 1996 election manifesto included several policies, such as the proposal for a National Register of Citizens (NRC), that have become a disturbing reality in recent years, as Dixit will later discuss.

The author notes a key distinction

between Hindu-Muslim relations within the Baranasi weaving community before and after the rise of Hindutva. Previously, while "distance was maintained in the social sphere," the overall picture was one of "coexistence and acceptance" rather than hostility: "Traditionally, the weavers were Muslims and the traders were Hindus. Both depended on each other."

At one point, Dixit quotes four lines from a poem by the fourteenth-century poet Kabir, who was also a weaver from Banaras. According to Kabir, while Hindus and Muslims might have their own gods, "no one was able to know who the real God actually is." This sense of collective religious uncertainty contrasts starkly with the convictions of Hindu supremacists that were seeping into the weaving community several hundred years later, during Syeda's lifetime.

Dixit's account remains focused on Syeda's experience as a working-class Muslim woman and the ways in which these aspects of her identity intersect. In the early chapters, she chronicles the changing experience of the weavers under the pressures of global capitalism, as the demand for traditional handlooms decreases, putting many weavers out of work. When this shift converges with the rise of Hindutva fascism, Dixit's narrative creates a haunting atmosphere that culminates in the first major outbreak of violence during Syeda's life.

Following the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque by Hindutva forces and political leaders in December 1992, many Muslim families like Syeda's were forced from their homes in a frenzy of

communal violence or even killed by armed police, and Muslim men were tortured for days on end. Dixit examines how this violence led to a shift in gender relations within Muslim communities as women had to take on responsibility for tasks outside the home for the first time.

While this experience may have been liberating to some extent, it inevitably added pressure on the women. "The mental load of thinking and communicating what and how things had to be done," as Dixit observes, fell on Syeda in this period. In the aftermath, Syeda and her family move to Delhi — the first time their lives are upturned, but far from the last.

Journey to Delhi

Dixit's detailed account of the family's train journey as they migrate to Delhi, one of many such episodes, underlines the harsh conditions of poverty and Syeda's firm resilience. It is during these sections that one feels most as if one is reading a novel — a testament to Dixit's narrative skill and her ability to bring the stories from her interviews to life.

Having paid regular visits to Delhi and the UP border area throughout my life, I often found Dixit's descriptions of these areas and particular stations and landmarks within them evocative. The presence of the Hindu right was also all too familiar: today BJP-ruled UP is notorious among Indian states for its high rates of anti-Muslim, gender, and caste-based violence.

Syeda's role in providing for her family expands further once they are in Delhi, as she plays the roles of sole carer as well as

main breadwinner throughout her three children's upbringing. At one memorable point, she has the stark, timeless realization: "Thank god for women, humanity is alive!" This simple sentiment encapsulates the endless burden of invisibilized labor which continues to fall on women globally.

When Syeda is looking for work in Delhi during the mid 1990s, Dixit explains how many people are working as bricklayers for the Ram Temple being built on the site of the Babri Masjid — a classic example of fascist forces building widespread support through creating jobs for working-class people. This is also an early indication that Syeda and her family have not been able to escape these forces by leaving Banaras.

Syeda moves between numerous jobs, eventually starting her own business at home making "per-piece work," various small items, with the help of her young daughter. She also makes a brief foray into activism. At one point, having struggled with isolation since moving to Delhi, she discovers a community of women workers who begin organizing for their rights with the help of a local union.

Rehearsed Responses

Dixit traces Syeda's relationship with patriarchy and with other women around her. She develops a "rehearsed response" to women experiencing sexual harassment from male subcontractors in the workplace — "Don't do things that make the men pay attention to you" — instead of acknowledging the responsibility of the subcontractors themselves. Dixit explains this as a way for women in her position to

maintain the "ecosystem" of the local area that "sheltered them, employed them, helped them survive."

As her children grow up, Dixit notes that Syeda starts to replicate patriarchal attitudes toward younger women that she herself found to be suffocating in her younger days. This does not contradict her independence or her ability to demand her rights in certain contexts. While maintaining complete understanding of her perspective, Dixit never shies away from portraying Syeda's less sympathetic moments, such as her sometimes harsh treatment of her daughter Reshma.

Alongside Syeda, other characters with their own backstories are introduced, both Hindu and Muslim (a status that is sometimes only indicated by their names). Religion is not always a major focus of their day-to-day lives, yet religious tensions continually reappear against a backdrop of shifting local power dynamics and competition around land and housing.

When Syeda first attempts to send her children to school, the intertwined issues of Islamophobia and xenophobia rear their heads once again as the principal expresses fear that "she could be Bangladeshi" because she does not have an identity card. Dixit explains how identity cards were a requirement for parents to enrol their children in school. Once again, this foreshadows the subsequent introduction of the CAA and NRC, which have disenfranchised Indian Muslims who lack proof of their citizenship.

Eventually, once her children do

start school, Syeda's son Salman makes friends with the son of a local Sikh landowner, only for deep-rooted Islamophobia to manifest itself when he visits their house. Syeda and her family face paternalistic and prejudicial attitudes as working-class Muslims, offered charity and looked after by wealthy non-Muslims while at the same time being stigmatized for their religion.

A Damning Indictment

The book comes with an endorsement commending Dixit for a work that "rescues the lives of ordinary Indians from invisibility." This is true, of course: like many countries with deep-rooted economic inequalities, many among the upper echelons of society are oblivious to the lives of poor and working-class Indians. But it would be dangerously depoliticizing to focus solely on this aspect of the book.

Economic inequality is not the only factor that shapes Syeda's life. This crucially intersects with her position as a Muslim woman in a country that has experienced the rise of Islamophobia and Hindu supremacy over recent decades. In the climate currently pervading India under Modi's decade-long rule, Dixit's book is a brave and damning indictment of Hindutva fascism that shines a crucial spotlight on the ordinary lives that continue to suffer its horrifying impact. It is also an unapologetically feminist celebration of their daily existence.

(This article is reprinted from Jacobin, October 2024)

Trump's Electoral Comeback - Lessons and Challenges

▲ DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

After a failed coup attempt following his defeat four years ago, Donald Trump has now staged a dramatic comeback in the US presidential election with the biggest ever Republican victory in last two decades. He has also become the first Republican President to win in terms of the popular vote too. Coupled with the Republican control over the Senate and the Congress, this will make Trump 2.0 much stronger than Trump 1.0, putting him in a more advantageous position to aggressively pursue his rabidly racist and imperialist rightwing agenda. As far as the Democratic Party is concerned, the result is clearly one of their worst electoral debacles. In three successive contests with Trump, this is the Democratic Party's second and more decisive and comprehensive defeat. The American people will now have to find an effective answer to the Trump presidency and its ominous implications beyond the limited and declining wherewithal of the Democratic Party.

If Trump's pandemic mismanagement played a major role in his narrow 2020 defeat, the debacle of the Democratic Party this time has much to do with the dismal economic record of the Biden-Harris administration. The statistical claims of post-pandemic macro-economic recovery had little resonance among the American working people reeling under escalating cost of living and stagnant income, not to mention the share of the population haunted by

growing poverty, homelessness and deep social and economic insecurity. A smug Democratic Party establishment did not care to address the anger and anxiety of the working people and left it open for the Trump campaign to tap into this insecurity and pit it against the bogey of illegal immigration. The result is now there for the whole world to see. The American people which already had the bitter taste of Trump 1.0 has now been exposed to a bigger disaster in the form of Trump 2.0.

Trump's biggest agenda is of course his promise to carry out mass deportations by deploying a bigger machinery and invoking all kinds of laws including the archaic 1798 Alien Enemies Act, and targets of tens of millions are being projected. Such scale of deportation may not be easy to achieve given the institutional checks of America's federal system, but the xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia it will unleash will make Black people, Muslims, people of colour and immigrants in general even more vulnerable to white supremacist hate and violence. The victory of Trump with his brazenly misogynistic politics, first over Hillary Clinton in 2016 and now over Kamala Harris eight years later, also reveals a deep-seated patriarchal bias in US politics.

Presidential election in the United States of America of course continues to have ramifications across the world. In spite of its economic decline over the years,

the US remains the biggest military power in the world and its policy of global hegemony revolves around its politico-military strategy of sponsoring wars, genocides and repressive regimes across the world. A major reason for the disillusionment of the Democratic electorate is the bipartisan agreement between Republicans and Democrats on this aggressive imperialist and hegemonic foreign policy as evidenced in the continuing genocide of Palestinians by Israel. Even during the election campaign, former US President Bill Clinton rationalised the genocide in Gaza as a 'forced' Israeli response, blaming Hamas for inviting it. No wonder, the popular vote of the Democratic Party dropped drastically from 81 million in 2020 to 70 million in 2024.

The Sangh brigade in India and the pro-Modi section of the Indian diaspora in the US have been vocal supporters of the Trump campaign and are visibly elated over the Trump comeback to White House. Even though people of Indian origin including existing and aspiring immigrants are prime targets of Trump's anti-immigrant policies and politics, the Modi government seeks to imitate the same rhetoric and pursue a similar agenda in India. And the Trump-Modi bonhomie will underpin the Indo-US strategic partnership in terms of support to Israel in its genocidal war on Palestine and in the pursuit of the neo-conservative social agenda, neo-liberal economic direction and fascist governance that defines the global far-right in today's world.

The forces of democracy and social, economic and climate justice in both US and India have major lessons to learn from the Democratic debacle and Trump triumph. If fascist forces are to be dethroned or kept away from grabbing power, anti-fascist politics cannot remain content

with wishful platitudes about democracy, it can succeed only when it is anchored in transformative visions and priorities and draws on the energy of the popular quest for peace, justice, human welfare and human rights. If the Trump-Modi-Netanyahu triumvirate is out

to inflict the disastrous package of imperialism, genocide, xenophobia, corporate plunder and tyrannical rule, the forces of democracy worldwide will have to forge closer ties of solidarity to save the world from this perilous course. ■

Sorry Plight of Displaced People in Odisha

▲ MAHENDRA PARIDA

The Lower Suktel Irrigation Project on Suktel River in Mahanadi basin was conceived to address the chronic issues of water scarcity, frequent droughts, and low agricultural productivity in western Odisha. The local population has been strongly opposing the project since the 1990s because of the displacement of a huge number of people. More than twelve thousand five hundred families of about 56 villages have been displaced so far and 583 hectares of forest land was submerged in the dam. The displaced people are continuing their struggle under the banner of Lower Suktel Budi Anchal Sangram Samittee. The people who lost their land and houses got unequal treatment in terms of compensation received in exchange for the same type of house and the same type, while a large number of people did not get any compensation.

Environmental activists have also raised concerns about the ecological impact of the project, which involves significant deforestation and loss of biodiversity. The reservoir's submersion zone includes forested areas that are home to various species

of flora and fauna. Moreover, the dam was intended to benefit Bolangir and Sonepur districts, communities downstream of the river fear potential water shortages, this underlines the need for a comprehensive water management plan that ensures equitable distribution. The resettlement programs failed to address the socio-cultural dimensions of displacement leading to loss of a rich cultural heritage and social networks.

A team comprising Saroj Mohanty, prominent writer and Secretary of Pashim Odisha Krushak Sangathan Samannway Samiti, Biswajit from Gandhi Peace Foundation, Mahendra Parida, CPIML, Narendra Mohanty, INSAF, Odisha and Har Bania of Jai Kishan Aandolan along with Satya Banchhor, a leader of displaced people affected by this project visited the displaced/rehabilitated areas to enquire about the ground reality and status of displaced people after the inauguration of project.

Thirty five families from Bancharpali, Kondapalli, Dunguripali, Podamund were rehabilitated at Kushmel Temporary Colony in Loisingha block,

and are living here for two years. Each family has been accommodated in a 15' x 12' tin house, with an attached kitchen. The roof, walls, doors and windows of this house are all made with tin plates. Without a single tree in this colony, it is impossible to imagine how people live in those houses in the scorching heat and drought situation of western Odisha. Many are unable to find new jobs in new localities, or proper educational opportunities for their children. The administration had provided assistance of Rs.3.45 lakhs to the homeless which is highly inadequate. Moreover, ration cards have not been given at the new residences depriving many from availing foodgrains in the right to food scheme. There is no hospital or school nearby that locality. On the other hand, the administration had promised to give 4 decimal lands to each displaced family which was not fulfilled.

Sudam Mallik, who lost 2 acres of agricultural land, said that "I can't forget the insult the way the government removed us. Electricity was cut off from our village. Bulldozers ran over the tube wells and houses. The government has deducted Rs 1 lakh for the temporary tin house (15 x 15 feet). All the money received was spent in construction of a house. I don't understand how to manage my family of four members, says he. According to the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency

in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (Land Acquisition Act 2013), tribal people should get irrigated land as much as they have lost. The team also met with the displaced people of Ananthapalli and Kuniapali Villages.

In the case of the Scheduled Tribe community, the Forest Right Act 2006 has not been implemented. The homestead and agricultural lands were not properly evaluated by the

government. All displaced people, particularly landless ones, should be given proper compensation and rehabilitation as per the law. The land and houses allocated in temporary camps must be conducive to human settlements with communication facilities, and with schools, colleges and employment opportunities. Arrangements should be made for the admission/education of all students at the government expenses in various educational

institutions. This is unconstitutional to deprive families of the basic amenities who have not yet left their villages. The state and national human rights commission should pay attention to such human rights violations and take proper remedies. All eligible people should get benefits of all government schemes and the administration must provide opportunities for employment for their livelihood. ■

Eating Mango Kernels in Hunger

A left parties' fact finding team visited Kandhamal district in Odisha on 3 November to investigate the deaths of tribals due to eating mango kernels. The BJP government in Odisha has not distributed PDS rations for months in this region leading to scarcity of food in this backward tribal area. August-November are lean months when food is scarce, the tribals were forced to eat mango-kernels which led to hospitalisation of many and at least two deaths. The CPIML held a protest on 13 November against this man-made food crisis. The state government made PDS rations available only after two had died.

Two women died in Mandipanka village of Daringbadi block in Kandhamal district, while six others are undergoing treatment. Those women were first sent on the night of 2 November to a Hospital in Cuttack after their liver got infected, while four others were undergoing treatment at Berhampur. The next day, leaders of three leftist parties Yudhishtir Mohapatra, CPIML state secretary, Narayan Reddy from CPI and Forward Bloc secretary Jyoti Ranjan Mohapatra, went to Mandipanka village to meet the affected families and inquired about the details of the incident.

Such a sad incident occurred due to extreme negligence of the government agencies due to unnecessary delay in providing BPL foodgrains. Every year from August to November, the tribal people face food shortage for four months. During this time, they do not have food items like rice, maize or work around the house. Therefore, they are forced to eat junk food like mango kernels. Earlier, they used to get rice for every month from the panchayat office. This time, after two deaths and six people getting infected, the rice was distributed after four months on November 2.

The deceased women had applied for assistance through Subhadra Yojana, which they could not get. There are many problems in this remote area related to government schemes like updating KYC in an area where mobile networks are very weak. The fact-finding team also realised the absence of proper health infrastructure which could have prevented these deaths. There is a village hospital in Brahmani which proved of no help to the affected villagers.

CPIML has demanded provision of BPL rice on a monthly basis in the villages itself. So far, they have to spend a whole day and money to go

to the Panchayat office 9 km away to collect rice. The amount of foodgrains should also be increased, particularly in the four months of August, September, October and November, to at least 20 kg per person. Party also demanded appropriate compensation for the dead and injured.

CPI leader and former MLAN. Narayan, CPIML State Secretary Yudhishtir Mohapatra, Radhakant Sethi, All India Forward Bloc State General Secretary Jyoti Ranjan Mohapatra, Adivasi Sangharsh Morcha (ASM) National Leader Tripati Gomango and Disha Azad held a press conference in Bhubaneswar to convey the report of fact finding team. These leaders condemned the remarks made by Odisha State Food Supplies and Consumer Welfare Minister Krushna Chandra Patra blaming tribals for consuming mango kernels as a matter of habit and tradition while sufficient food was available. Deputy Chief Minister and Women and Child Development minister of Odisha Pravati Parida also blamed the dietary habits of tribals for the tragic deaths. This incident has revived the memories of starvation deaths in tribal dominated Rayagada district in the early 2000s. ■

AIPWA Leads Protest Against Rising Violence on Women and Bulldozer Politics in UP

On October 24, thousands of women from across Uttar Pradesh took to the streets of Lucknow to protest the increasing violence against women and the Yogi government's "bulldozer politics." The state-wide demonstration, organized by the All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA), faced several police attempts to halt the march. However, the determined protesters pressed on, ultimately holding a rally at the KKC intersection, just a short distance from the state assembly.

The women, representing various districts of the state, marched from Charbagh railway station, raising slogans such as, "No more violence against women," "Stop bulldozer raj," "End repression of minorities in Bahraich," "Control inflation," "Withdraw smart meters," "Stop evicting the poor from their land," and "Guarantee permanent employment for scheme workers." Other demands included enforcing labour rights, increasing pensions for widows and the elderly, and providing free education from

primary to postgraduate levels.

Addressing the protesters, AIPWA's state president, Comrade Krishna Adhikari, cited alarming statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), which place Uttar Pradesh at the top of the list for crimes against women. She condemned the state's failure to curb incidents of rape, murder, and abduction, highlighting the lack of justice for victims and their families. "Despite the claims of women's empowerment, the reality is that women are not safe in Uttar Pradesh under Yogi Adityanath's government," Krishna Adhikari stated. She also criticized the police for their failure to register FIRs and their insensitivity towards victims of gender-based violence.

Adhikari also pointed to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's silence on several sexual assault cases, including those involving BJP MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh and the recent release of convicted rapists in the IIT-BHU case, as evidence of the administration's hypocrisy and apathy.

AIPWA's state secretary, Comrade Kusum Verma, spoke about the economic hardships faced by women, particularly poor and working-class women. "Women are facing violence in every aspect of life under Yogi's rule. Government projects like the Smart Meter initiative are adding to their burdens, forcing them into crippling debt," she said.

She also criticized the government for failing to provide basic amenities such as clean drinking water, while inflation pushes families into financial despair. She added that Yogi's politics of hate and bulldozer raj have created communal polarization and division, with the recent violence in Bahraich being a stark example.

CPIML state secretary, Sudhakar Yadav, also addressed the rally, accusing the Yogi government of deliberately allowing atrocities against women and minorities. He declared that these injustices would not be tolerated and that protests against the BJP would intensify. Yadav further stated that the upcoming by-elections would be an opportunity for the people to defeat the fascist BJP and hold the Yogi government accountable. ■

Jeevika Cadres' Struggle for Justice in Bihar

Rambali Prasad

The National Rural Livelihood Promotion Mission (NRLM) is a program run by the Ministry of Rural Development. The State Rural Livelihood Promotion Mission (SRLM) is run in each state under the central scheme of NRLM.

In Bihar, it is commonly referred as Jeevika and functions under the control of the government's Rural Development Department. The scheme is run with the declared purpose of creating self-employment opportunities for the unemployed rural women in India.

The Jeevika Mission mainly consists of two categories of personnel: firstly, the officers and employees (Jeevika Cadres) who work on a contractual basis and receive a monthly honorarium determined by the Jeevika Mission; The second category of people involved in the Jeevika Mission are the volunteers of self-help groups formed at the village level, who do not receive any kind of payment.

The financial support for the state Jeevika Mission (SRLM) comes from several sources, primarily the central budget under the NRLM, the World Bank, and various international and national non-governmental financial institutions. Reports indicate substantial misuse and wastage of Jeevika Mission funds, which is shielded by higher-level officials.

On September 2, 2024, the Bihar State Livelihood Mission issued an arbitrary order stating that the monthly honorarium payments to Jeevika Cadres would decrease by 20% every two years starting from June 1, 2024, and would become zero by June 1, 2028. The order explicitly stated that the responsibility for paying the honorarium would now fall on the respective community organisations, which are already in a precarious financial situation. This means that the payment for the contract-based Jeevika Cadres would depend on contributions from village based self help groups. This is completely illogical, impractical, and unjust.

The Jeevika union leaders said that the Nitish Kumar government is exploiting Jeevika workers for political gains while failing to address their economic and social security needs. "The so-called 'double-engine' government has used Jeevika workers extensively, but now, instead of fulfilling its obligations, it is pushing these workers and SHGs into the clutches of private loan companies, moneylenders, and chit fund operators," Sashi Yadav, leader of scheme workers said.

According to the data released by the Bihar Jeevika Mission on July 9, 2024, 18,466 Self Help

Groups (SHG) have fallen into the Non-Performing Assets (NPA) category, and 144,257 into the Pre-NPA category. Consequently, the directive to place the entire burden of honorarium payments on financially unviable SHGs implies the conversion of contract-based Jeevika Cadres into commission agents on the one hand and to institutionalise the exploitation of their labour, and to gradually dismantle this ambitious project that is aimed at providing livelihood for rural women. This is the reality of Bihar CM Nitish Kumar's 'self-reliance' narrative, which he has so dearly copied from PM Modi.

Naturally, this arbitrary order has sparked outrage among the already marginalised and distressed Jeevika Cadres. The Jeevika cadres organised under the banner of Bihar Pradesh Jeevika Cadre Sangh have given prior notice to central rural development ministers, the Chief Minister of Bihar, the departmental minister, and associated higher officials, to withdraw this arbitrary order. Around 150,000 Jeevikas have gone on an indefinite strike since September 9, 2024, which continues till date. However, the Bihar CM Nitish Kumar, who has been continuously using the Jeevika Cadres and self-help group women to run governance obligations and thereby to stay on political power, has not only refused to address the demands of the striking workers but has also declined to meet their union representatives. This attitude of the Nitish government has exposed the class character of his administration among Jeevika Cadres and women associated with self-help groups.

The CPIML raised the issue of Jeevikas during the 'Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra' that has traversed all

across Bihar from October 16 to 25. AICCTU has urged the government to engage in meaningful dialogue with the union representatives without further delay. The Union has announced a protest on 26 November in Patna during the winter session of the Bihar Assembly. The protest aims to draw attention to the Bihar government's decision to phase out honorariums for Jeevika cadres, a move the union said is part of a broader plan to dismantle the Jeevika programme under pressure from private microfinance companies.

The major demands of Jeevikas in Bihar include to scrap the arbitrary order declining the honorarium, provide appointment letters and identity cards to all cadres of Jeevika mission, a minimum monthly honorarium of Rs. 25,000. Jeevika workers have criticised the government for issuing threats of dismissal for asking their due rights. Other demands also include Rs. 3,000 as a field travel allowance, meeting allowances of Rs. 500 for all presidents, secretaries, and treasurers at the Cluster Level Federation (CLF), Rs. 300 at the village organisation level, and Rs. 200 at the self-help group level, along with a 50% increase in travel allowances. The Jeevika union also demands waiver of loans of all SHGs that are five years old, besides a promotion system for them after completing three years in the project and social security benefits, leave, special leave for women cadres, Rs. 2 lakh medical claims, and Rs. 5 lakh death claims for all cadres. ■

Court Quashes Externment Order of Comrade Arjun Lal

In a significant legal victory, the six-month externment order against CPIML leader and Sitapur District Panchayat Member Comrade Arjun Lal, issued by the District Magistrate on the basis of false charges made by the police, has been quashed by the Commissioner Court in Lucknow. The order was issued on November 11, in which the Commissioner questioned the basis of the externment order and noted that such are not in accordance with the law.

The order of externment, based on fabricated cases filed two years ago, was publicly served to Comrade Arjun Lal on 29 September 2024 outside the Hargoan Block Development Office by the local police. Comrade Arjun Lal subsequently appealed the decision before the Commissioner Court on 6 October.

Earlier on October 8, 2024, CPIML held protests across Uttar Pradesh against the continued police repression and demanded the revocation of the externment order against Comrade Arjun Lal and the release of Comrade Ramdaras, another party leader being persecuted in Lakhimpur Kheri district. A CPIML delegation, including

AIARLA national president and Bihar MLA Satyadev Ram, UP party secretary Sudhakar Yadav, and central committee member Shriram Chaudhary, had also met with the District Magistrate of Sitapur to demand the immediate revocation of the externment notice against Arjun Lal.

Arjun Lal, a member of the CPIML UP state committee, comes from a Dalit, landless family and is known for his unwavering commitment to the struggles of poor villagers. In 2022, members of the upper-caste Rajput community launched an attack on a Dalit basti. When Arjun Lal went to the Hargaon police station to lodge a complaint, he, along with other Dalits, was beaten up by the police. Instead of filing an FIR for the attack on Dalits, a false case was lodged against Arjun Lal, and he was sent to jail. Again, on September 21, 2024, the same police station filed a report against Arjun Lal, which became the basis for his externment from the district. The police action against Comrade Arjun Lal is an act of retaliation by feudal elements, backed by the police administration, attempting to silence growing movements for the rights of marginalised communities. ■

obituary

Comrade Subhash Kakuste

Comrade Subhas Kakuste, veteran leader of Lal Nishan Party of Maharashtra and senior Vice President of All India Kisan Mahasabha passed away on November 10, 2024. Born in 1940, Comrade Subhas Kakuste became a prominent leader of Sugar factory workers in Maharashtra and a leader of the farmers. He was also a journalist. Comrade Kakuste's life was marked by an indomitable spirit and dedication to the cause of social and economic justice. With his death Maharashtra has lost a fearless champion of the toiling masses and crusader against corporate loot and communal hate. He was also a great well-wisher of CPIML and stood for closer unity among LNP and CPI(ML).

Red Salute to Comrade Subhas Kakuste. More power to his communist legacy.



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