

Liberation

CENTRAL ORGAN OF CPI(ML)

JUNE 2026
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Fascist Takeover of Bengal Governance and the Left's Resolve to Fight Back



May 21: Protest meeting yesterday near Sealdah railway station against statewide eviction of hawkers, demolition drive and the post-poll spell of violence and vandalism in West Bengal



May 08: On a day BJP finalised hate-spewing Suvendu Adhikari as West Bengal's next CM, left activists took out a march in Kolkata against the BJP's campaign of post-poll terror and violence



May 07: Hundreds of Left activists and progressive citizens to assembled in front of the statue of Lenin at Dharmatala (Esplanade), an iconic landmark of Kolkata for the last five decades, on the call of CPIML (Liberation) and SUCI(C) to register their protest against the post-poll spell of terror and violence in West Bengal and reiterate their resolve to maintain communal harmony, protect minority rights and political liberty of all citizens.

Liberation

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A for Austerity, B for Bulldozer, C for Cockroach, P for Protests



The Modi government can no longer be in denial mode about the economic crisis which is becoming increasingly severe with every passing day. Prices of all essential commodities and services are constantly rising. Meanwhile unemployment is on an all time high and real earnings are on a steady decline. This is the real life everyday story of the overwhelming majority of Indians whether they belong to India's vast army of rural and urban poor or are still struggling to retain a place in India's middle classes.

Unable to ignore the crisis any more, Narendra Modi is now asking the people to deal with it by following an austerity package for at least one year. Like demonetisation and Covid period lockdown, this austerity package also appears to have been designed as yet another citizenship drill or patriotic test. For the rich and the powerful, it may be fun to occasionally swap their cavalcade mode of travel with a well publicised metro ride, but how can daily wage earners work from home? Clearly, Modi's 'austerity drive' has different meanings for different classes. For the affluent minority, it is about showcasing their patriotic sacrifice, but for the poor and middle classes it is an enforced imposition of increased hardship.

From prosperity to austerity, from 'achhe din' and 'amrit kaal' to a newly discovered 'decade of disasters' - the economic narrative of the Modi government now suddenly follows a changed script. The government wants us to treat the economic crisis as a sudden accident caused by the US-Israel war on Iran. Narendra Modi is repeatedly invoking memories of the Covid pandemic to make people accept the economic crisis as an unavoidable global reality and not look for its domestic causes and hold the government to account for its policy failures.

This is a complete mockery of facts. There are two popular parameters of the economy which had been widely invoked by the BJP during Modi's 2014 election campaign: the exchange value of the rupee vis-a-vis the US dollar and the price of petrol per litre. Both hovered around Rupees sixty then. The promise was to bring the level back to Rupees fifty, but both had crossed the Rupees ninety mark before the US and Israel attacked Iran on February 28. Since then the rupee has deteriorated further, now

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it is close to one hundred rupees per dollar. Petrol has crossed the hundred rupee per litre mark in most states.

For much of the Modi era, crude oil prices had been significantly low in the global market. The pandemic and the consequent economic disruption and slowdown had actually triggered a veritable crash in global oil prices. But the benefits of this price drop were never transferred to the ordinary Indian consumer. Even when India was buying cheap crude from Russia before bowing down to Trump's embargo, it was the Ambani group which reaped a hefty windfall by selling the refined petroleum back to the western world which had imposed sanctions on Russia following the Ukraine war. All this while the Modi government continued to collect hefty oil revenue from Indian consumers to balance the sharp reduction in corporate taxes.

Inasmuch as the Iran war is responsible for the escalation of the current economic crisis, the question we must first ask is why did the Modi government side with the US-Israel axis in this patently unjust war on Iran? Why has the Modi government succumbed to American dictates on India's sovereign economic and trade decisions? Is this sacrifice of India's strategic autonomy and economic interests a price that the Modi government has inflicted on India to bail out the Adani Group from punitive action for corporate fraud charges in the US?

Instead of taking responsibility for the crisis resulting from the government's own policies, especially pro-corporate economic policies and pro-US foreign policy, the regime is busy transferring the burden of the crisis onto the common people. And wherever people are taking to the streets demanding living

wages, as witnessed in powerful workers' demonstrations in Noida, Manesar and other places, the state is resorting to mass arrests of protesters and even invocation of the draconian National Security Act against activists. While a bench of the Supreme Court has criticised this repressive response of the government and defended the rights of workers to ask for fair wages, the Chief Justice of India describes India's protesting youth as cockroaches and parasites attacking the system.

As ordinary Indians feel the pinch and cry for relief and justice, the Modi government believes it can coerce the people into silence by invoking the power of manufactured mandates, propaganda blitzkriegs and bulldozer governance. While the Assembly elections were on in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, the government kept telling us that there were no reasons for worry. Immediately after the poll, we had a massive hike in the price of commercial cylinders of cooking gas followed by continuing serial increase in fuel prices for all consumers. During the poll season we had Modi's 'jhalmuri reel' in West Bengal and after the poll we are witnessing widespread eviction of street vendors across the state.

Meanwhile, having delivered his austerity sermon for fellow Indians, PM Modi was quick to fly off on yet another multi-country trip, this time to Europe. His much publicised visit to Norway, the first visit by an Indian PM in 43 years attracted global attention for how he ran away from the Norwegian media even as analysts point to the hidden Adani agenda. Norway had dropped Adani Green Energy from the investment portfolio of its \$1.2 trillion sovereign wealth fund, the world's largest, following corporate fraud charges levied on the group in the US. But with the Adani group

having struck a settlement deal with the US Department of Justice and the Trump Administration, Modi's Norway visit is believed to be aimed at getting Adani reinstated.

From the demonetisation drill to the austerity drive and from the 'jhalmuri reel' in West Bengal to the 'Melody toffee moment' with Italian PM Giorgia Meloni, Narendra Modi is recycling a tired repertoire. The BJP Chief Ministers, meanwhile, from Yogi in UP and Himanta Biswa Sarma in Assam to Samrat Choudhary in Bihar and now Suwendu Adhikari in West Bengal, are all busy brandishing their bulldozers and outdoing each other in anti-Muslim hate campaigns. Following the latest round of SIR-engineered electoral victories, the BJP now has its own Chief Ministers in as many as sixteen states with its NDA allies ruling in another five, taking the total to twenty-one or three out of every four. The BJP's capture of West Bengal and the disruption of the settled political pattern in Tamil Nadu mark major challenges for a divided opposition. On top of this, almost all constitutional bodies and the dominant media are now ideologically aligned with the RSS-BJP establishment.

Yet there are new sparks of unexpected popular protests. The order restricting cattle slaughter in West Bengal has run into serious opposition from Hindu cattle traders. Students are up in arms against yet another NEET paper leak, the 89th instance of a paper leak in the last ten years. And the CJI's 'cockroach' remark has ignited unprecedented social media protests propelled by an increasingly vocal, disillusioned and digitally defiant GenZ. India's anti-fascist fighters must urgently pick up all these threads and weave a more energetic and vibrant canvas of resistance. ■

From Digital Explosion Of Anger To The Generation Of Collective Hope And Change

▲ DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA



The Cockroach Janata Party storm continues to rage across digital platforms in India. Given the disappointment generated by the 2011 anti-corruption movement, the launching pad for both the rise of AAP and the ascent of Narendra Modi to power in 2014, it is natural to expect doubts and debates about the CJP phenomenon, its implications and possible trajectory.

While the storm rages and observers watch and discuss the phenomenon, a few points perhaps can and need to be made at the outset.

There would have been no Cockroach Janata Party had CJI Suryakant not contemptuously used words like cockroach and parasites for dissenters who use social media platforms and tools like RTI to demand greater transparency and accountability.

And the storm would not have perhaps acquired this intensity had we not experienced just the other day yet another paper leak affecting the future of more than 22 lakh NEET applicants and their families.

We have seen this digital revolt

grow in a few hours and days from an idea of an individual to a concerted digital initiative amplified by millions of netizens. Beyond the immediate triggers let us also not lose sight of the larger environment that made the CJP strike such a massive chord with India's GenZ - the puncture of the Modi government's balloon of promises of ushering in 'achhe din' and turning India into a global power, systematic successive stealing of elections, crumbling of India's institutions, especially the dominant media and the judiciary, and the stark decline of the Aam Aadmi Party experiment.

We can also clearly see a rattled Modi government and the Sangh brigade are trying to deal with this digital revolt by blocking the X handle of the CJP, demonising it as a destabilising conspiracy against India by foreign-based elements and threatening it with metaphorical extermination by spraying black and red 'Hit' cockroach repellents.

The five-point 'manifesto' of the CJP focuses on five most deeply felt maladies of our times and their solution - safeguarding the fundamental right to vote for all eligible voters, protecting the

freedom of the press and autonomy of institutions, the judiciary in particular, 50% reservation for women in legislatures and cabinets and a 20-year disqualification to check defection by elected representatives and stop the BJP washing machine.

The immediate campaign demand of resignation of Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan endorses a point already being raised by students across India along with more basic questions like the dismantling of NTA and scrapping of the centralised NEET examination system.

The point of course remains as to if and how this digital anger and action would translate into palpable collective pressure for change. We have witnessed digital amplification of physical struggles and vice versa in recent past. For example, the equal citizenship movement popularised the reading of the preamble to the Constitution as a manifesto or the singing of 'Ham Dekhenge' or 'kagaz nahi dikhayenge' as anthems. The historic farmers movement gave rise to tractor and tricolour marches and solidarity convergences of diverse struggles.

Will the digital anger now manifesting itself in the shape of the CJP connect with the workers' protests for living wages and eight hour work, with the pains of the common people reeling under enforced austerity, with the demand for release of all prisoners of conscience or for stopping the bulldozers that are demolishing homes and shops and destroying lives and livelihoods or the hate campaign targeting millions of Indian Muslims? It is for activists who are already connected with all these struggles to connect the dots and strengthen the links whereby digital anger and resolve can grow into collective hope, confidence and solidarity. ■

Paper Leak, Jail & Cockroaches: Systemic Contempt Against Youth and Democracy

▲ V. ARUN KUMAR



Protest in Jharkhand by AISA- RYA against NEET Paper Leak

Cockroaches and parasites. These were the words used by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant while referring to unemployed youth and lambasting those who become “media”, “social media”, “RTI activists” and “activists” and who dare to “attack the system”. The invocation of insects and parasites for human beings is the language of dehumanisation, historically seen in fascist hate speeches since the days of Hitler, where people who question power are first stripped of dignity before being marked as enemies of the system. After massive outrage on social media against these unconstitutional and derogatory comments, the CJJ claimed that the media had misquoted him and that his reference was only to people with fake and bogus degrees.

These derogatory observations by the CJJ against the youth and the Gen Z generation are not isolated incidents, but part of a wider pattern of institutional contempt against people who dare to raise questions, organise struggles, defend rights

or imagine a better and more democratic society. Recently, on May 11, in a case concerning environmental concerns, the CJJ slammed “environmental activists” saying that such litigations are filed only to stall development projects when the country is progressing well. Earlier, on January 29, 2026, in *Penn Thozhilalargal Sangam v. Union of India*, the CJJ said that “jhanda unions” are “largely responsible for stopping the industrial growth in the country.”

What we are witnessing here is not merely a remark from the bench, but the convergence of judicial arrogance with the wider political culture of contempt to the democracy cultivated in Modi’s India. While the CJJ uses the language of cockroaches and parasites, the Prime Minister calls protesters “andolanjeevi” and asks youth crushed by skyrocketing unemployment to sell pakoras in the streets in the name of self-employment, even as everyday street vendors face bulldozer demolitions of their livelihoods.

Amid the derogatory and privileged

rhetoric of those in power or occupying positions of authority, we also witness criminal silence and complete lack of accountability when the lives and hard work of millions of youth are thrown into chaos. The recent NEET UG paper leak has not only pushed tens of thousands of youth into despair, but has once again exposed how institutions under the Modi regime have repeatedly damaged the future of the youth. Again, this is not an isolated incident. A staggering 89 incidents of paper leaks have been reported in the past 10 years. From JEE Mains 2021, NEET UG 2024, UGC NET 2024 and several other examinations, Modi’s dubious private agency NTA has proven its incompetence and utter disregard for students’ education and hard work. Year after year, the saga of paper leaks continues across competitive examinations, but no serious action has been taken by the government. Instead, the corrupt and incompetent NTA is shielded and provided political immunity.

At least four students have died by suicide since this paper leak, including a 22-year-old from Jhunjhunu who expected high marks. These young lives lost to systemic corruption now add to the already horrifying suicide crisis among students, with a record high of 14,488 student suicides in 2024, marking a 4.3 percent rise from 13,892 cases in 2023. As investigations dig deeper and Rajasthan emerges as an epicentre, the names of big coaching centres and a BJP leader, Dinesh Biwal point towards a deeper nexus between the private coaching mafia and people close to the BJP.

In the face of this assault on their future, the students and youth of the country have rightly demanded that Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan must take direct accountability for

this failure and resign. They have also reiterated that NTA must be disbanded and the long-standing demand to end the centralised NEET examination system, which has repeatedly undermined federalism and equal access to medical education. Furthermore, they have demanded that the role of the private coaching mafia be exposed and those responsible be held accountable not only for the series of paper leaks, but also for their role in the systematic destruction of public education.

The same regime that refuses accountability for destroying the future of students does not hesitate to jail youth and activists who question the system. We already have the cases of Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, incarcerated under the stringent and draconian UAPA for more than five years merely for questioning a system of religious bigotry and majoritarian politics. Recently, when young workers in Manesar, Noida and other places rose up demanding labour rights and minimum wages, resisting the modern slavery and exploitative conditions that the Modi regime

has been selling as “ease of doing business”, hundreds were arrested, put behind bars and branded as conspirators. In fact, the exact number of workers arrested is still not clear, and many have faced humiliation and custodial torture. Several have been charged under another draconian law, the National Security Act, including 25-year-old Aakriti Chaudhary, a history graduate from Delhi University who hails from Durgapur in West Bengal, for standing with the workers’ struggle.


While the CJI minces no words in slamming youth and activists again and again, we see complete silence when it comes to the repression unleashed by the state against those merely asking for a better future for all. In fact, on May 17, the Supreme Court bench comprising Justices B V Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan rightly questioned the denial of bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, where a two-member division bench of the Supreme Court had earlier rejected bail and failed to properly follow the larger bench ruling in the 2021 K A Najeeb case, which recognised

prolonged incarceration as grounds for bail. The BJP government has been using these draconian laws as a political weapon to keep dissenting voices, youth and even workers asking for their labour rights incarcerated for years.

What we clearly see is the seepage of fascist narratives and rhetoric across institutions, along with complete contempt for the voices of the youth. It seems that for the regime and those occupying positions in institutions that are supposed to be independent, any youth who is not part of the gangs of street hooligans spreading communal-fascist poison, or assaulting the poor in the name of region, food, dress or religion, is not their youth. The system being created is one that despises those who dare to question and defend democracy.

At the same time, it is reassuring to see the youth vociferously resisting, whether against the NEET paper leak, workers’ rights violations or the dehumanising rhetoric of the CJI, both in the streets and on social media, refusing to bow to this contempt against democracy. ■

Left Parties Hold Joint Protest at Jantar Mantar in Support of Workers

 In a joint call by CPI(ML) and other Left parties, a protest demonstration was held at Jantar Mantar in Delhi on April 24, 2026 in support of workers from Noida, Manesar, Panipat, Bhiwani and Faridabad. Workers, students and citizens from various parts of Delhi participated in large numbers.

Raising slogans demanding withdrawal of false cases against workers and immediate release of all arrested workers and activists,

protesters also called for the implementation of a minimum wage of Rs 26,000 and guarantee of an eight-hour workday.

Addressing the gathering, AICCTU leader and CPI(ML) Central Committee member Shweta Raj said that CPI(ML) stands in solidarity with workers’ struggles across the country and strongly condemns the repression and arrests of workers and activists. She said that on the eve of the birth anniversary of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the working class of the country has shown that workers’ unity cannot be broken and that the modern-day slavery being imposed by the BJP-corporate nexus will not go unchallenged. Workers have risen in resistance to assert their

rights and dignity.

She added that repression will not break the strength of workers in their struggle against the anti-people policies of the BJP regime. The working-class movement will continue to grow stronger and break these chains of exploitation.

The protest put forward clear demands, including unconditional release of all workers, withdrawal of false cases, implementation of an eight-hour workday with a minimum wage of Rs 26,000, immediate repeal of the labour codes, measures to control price rise, and cancellation of licences of companies violating workers’ rights. ■

Umar Khalid: A Prisoner of Conscience

[This introductory address was delivered by *Clifton D'Rozario* at a panel discussion on the book *Umar Khalid and His World: An Anthology*, co-organised by AILAJ along with PUCL-K and Bahutva Karnataka on 28 April 2026 in Bengaluru. The event also featured readings from the anthology by *Anirban Bhattacharya*, *Banojyotsna Lahiri*, and *Shuddhabrata Sengupta*, followed by a panel discussion with *Janaki Nair*, *Ramachandra Guha*, and *Prakash Raj*. The discussion was moderated by *Arvind Narrain*.]

The true measure of a democracy is not reflected in the pomp of Parliament or the spectacle of elections, but in how it treats those who dissent. This is why the political prisoner must be understood not as an isolated legal category, but as a mirror held up to the State itself. The book through the life of Umar Khalid and the manner of his incarceration holds a mirror to the way the Indian state deals with its dissenters right from Khurram Parvez in Kashmir to Suneeta Potam in Chhattisgarh to Surendra Gadling of the BK-16 to the recently arrested workers and activists in the Noida workers protest.

As Dr. Ramchandra Guha writes in essay in the Book, "I must note that he is one of many fine, upright men and women, who are languishing in jail under dubious charges hastily filed by the police under orders from their political masters. Some of these Indians are also scholars and researchers. Others are social workers and civil society activists, who have in their life and work shown themselves to be steadfastly committed to non-violence and the founding values of the Indian Constitution. It is this commitment to pluralism and democracy and perhaps nothing else that has made them fall foul of the authoritarian and majoritarian tendencies of the ruling regime."

The novelist Milan Kundera once

said that the struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. This powerfully captures what the state tries to do with political prisoners. The prison becomes not merely an institution of confinement, but one of erasure of public conscience itself. The State seeks not only to incarcerate persons, but to delegitimize political struggles and, by locking those who speak the truth away, sever dissent and resistance from our public memory. In Umar Khalid's own words spoken in 2016 at JNU, "They fear us," he had said, referring to the government. "They fear our struggles and they fear us because we think."

This has been the case throughout modern history. From colonized Ireland to apartheid South Africa, from Latin American dictatorships to occupied Palestine, prisons have long been the site where the most brutal aspects of state power are laid bare. The prison is also where the contradiction between the state's professed democratic freedoms and actually-existing unfreedoms is laid bare.

Nelson Mandela, reflecting on the anti-apartheid struggle, famously reminded the world: "It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails."

This observation is especially relevant to our discussion today. If one wishes to understand the

moral and democratic condition of a society, one must look not first at its constitutional promises, but at those whom it imprisons in the name of order, security, and law, and the conditions that persist within those four walls.

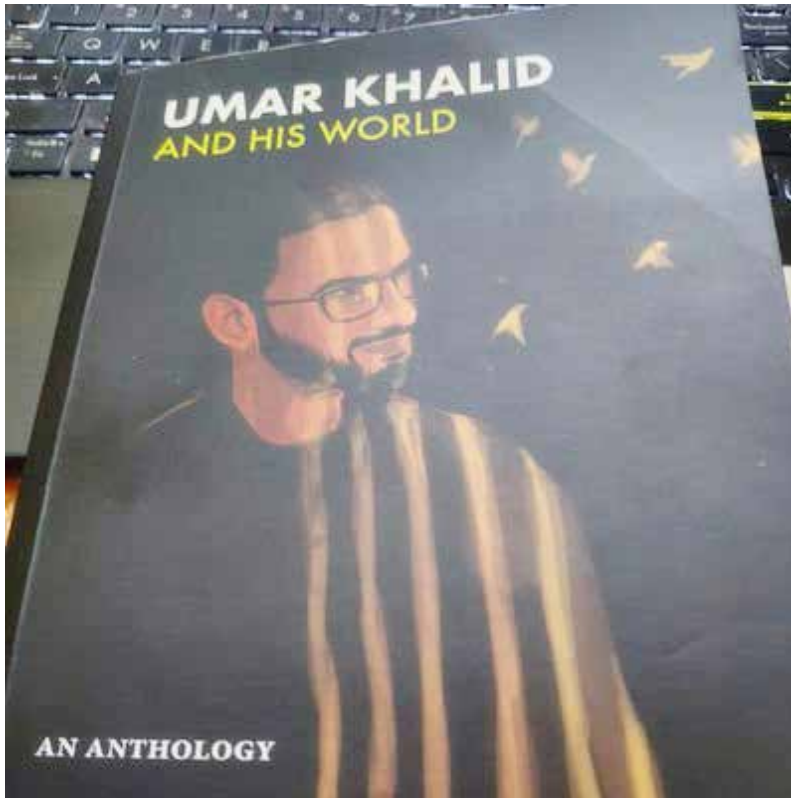
Mandela's own twenty-seven years in prison, much of it on Robben Island, transformed the prison into a political archive of anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance. In this sense, the history of political prisoners is inseparable from the history of liberation movements across the world.

In Ireland, Bobby Sands and the 1981 hunger strikers fought not merely for better prison conditions, but for recognition that they were political prisoners and not common criminals. Their insistence on political status reflected a larger struggle over legitimacy: who has the authority to define resistance as crime?

In South Africa, Mandela and countless anti-apartheid activists were imprisoned precisely because they challenged the racial sovereignty of the apartheid state.

And in Palestine, the question of political prisoners remains central to the ongoing struggle against occupation. The extensive use of administrative detention, prolonged incarceration without trial, solitary confinement, and the imprisonment of political leaders, students, journalists, and children has made the prison one of the defining institutions of the Palestinian experience under occupation. Palestinian prisoners' movements and hunger strikes have repeatedly invoked the legacies of Bobby Sands and Nelson Mandela, placing their struggles within a shared global tradition of anti-colonial resistance.

This reminds us that the political prisoner is not simply a domestic



legal issue. Rather, it is a recurring feature of regimes confronted by movements for justice, equality and self-determination.

The Indian context exists within this broader history. During the anti-colonial struggle, figures such as Bhagat Singh, among others insisted on being recognised as political prisoners because their incarceration arose from ideological conviction and collective struggle rather than criminal conduct.

This distinction remains vital.

Post-Independence India inherited not only the physical architecture of the British prison but also the legal grammar of exceptionalism. From the suppression of communist and peasant movements to the repression following Naxalbari, from the Emergency to the use of draconian laws including NSA, TADA, sedition law and now UAPA, incarceration has repeatedly functioned as an instrument of

political discipline.

Every phase, every era, has produced its resistance and its brand of political prisoners. In contemporary India, the category of the political prisoner acquires renewed urgency. The incarceration of academics, journalists, students, human rights defenders, trade unionists, Dalit intellectuals, Adivasi organisers, and Muslim activists is in an India, which the introduction to the book characterizes as a period marked by the dynamics of a fascism of the 21st century with distinctly Indian characteristics. This, Umar Khalid succinctly describes as the "cocktail of Manuvad and Market".

Umar Khalid's PHD thesis titled "The Contesting Claims and Contingencies of Rule: Singhbhum 1800-2000", is instructive in understanding the challenges faced by the adivasis right from colonial rule to present-day neo-liberal globalization. Today,

the resistance of these Adivasi communities is viewed as a threat, which the state persecutes and silences through state repression and criminalization of democratic protest.

Being Muslim is sufficient for an increasingly egregious assault by Hindutva organisations and the State itself. Since 2014, we have repeatedly witnessed the troubling use of ordinary criminal law as an instrument of social targeting, where the process itself becomes a form of punishment for many Muslims who find themselves accused, arrested, and incarcerated not on the strength of credible evidence, but on the weight of prejudice and political expediency.

As Ufaque Paiker notes in their essay in the Book, "Umar's politics and identity are perceived as a threat to this government. He is not the kind of citizen, Muslim or student this current dispensation could be comfortable with. Unapologetic about his Muslim identity, he has been a left activist who has started engaging with political issues during the Batla house encounter".

Whether it is Bhima Koregaon, or the anti-CAA protests or Adivasi struggles, Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act has become the toolkit to imprison dissenters. The UAPA stands as one of the most enduring remnants of colonial rule. Under the British, laws of this nature existed for one purpose alone: to criminalize resistance and imprison those who dared to speak against the coloniser. It is a matter of profound shame that more than seventy-five years after Independence, in a Republic that claims fidelity to liberty, constitutional morality and democratic dissent, the State continues to preserve and weaponise the very architecture of repression once used by our

oppressors.

UAPA is characterized by vague allegations sufficing for registration of cases, prolonged pre-trial incarceration since bail is extraordinarily difficult (through Section 43D(5), which allows courts to deny bail if the allegations appear prima facie true on the prosecution's version alone), extended investigation periods and trials that move at a painfully slow pace. Three UAPA detainees Fr. Stan Swamy (from among the BK-16), Pandu Narote (co-accused with G.N. Saibaba) and student activist Kanchan Nanaware died in detention due to medical negligence which the editors note in the introduction to make the point that prison conditions make it lethal for political prisoners.

This is where Kafka's "The Trial" becomes an uncannily relevant framework.

Prolonged incarceration without trial, repeated denial of bail, and the use of vague and expansive legal categories convert procedure into coercion.

The process becomes the punishment.

Draconian laws and an increasingly pliant judiciary have served as the regime's best friends in executing its political vendetta. Given that the cases that have been foisted have scant or false evidence, and will in all probability not withstand legal scrutiny, the rule book of the State has been to make the process the punishment. This we also see in the case of Umar Khalid, where the Supreme Court itself abdicates its duty to protect civil liberties. It held that prolonged incarceration is not the sole determinant in granting bail while devising a dubious theory of distinguishing Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam's role as "masterminds" and others as "local level facilitators".

At this point, Ambedkar's conception of constitutional morality becomes indispensable.

Ambedkar repeatedly insisted that democracy cannot survive merely as an institutional arrangement; it requires a public ethic grounded in liberty, equality, fraternity, and what he called public conscience. They will try to erase our public conscience by imprisoning our very best, but we must not let them.

When dissent itself is criminalised, when critique is interpreted as conspiracy, when protest is recast as terrorism, we are compelled to ask whether constitutional morality itself is under siege.

The question of political prisoners is therefore, at its core, a constitutional question since a democracy secure in itself does not fear dissent. So when a State increasingly turns to prison as a response to critique, it reveals not strength, but a crisis of its legitimacy.

So why was Umar Khalid imprisoned after all?

Bobby Sands', the Irish revolutionary, once said: "Our revenge will be the laughter of our children." One always goes back to this statement. A slogan of defiance, for sure, but also a deeply philosophical and political understanding of dissent and resistance. The political prisoner does not endure incarceration only as an individual. Their struggle is directed toward a future beyond the prison walls — toward a society in which freedom, dignity, and justice are no longer criminalised. A brighter future will emerge from the resistance of Umar Khalid and so many others; no struggle goes in vain.

On 5th January, 2026 the Supreme Court denied bail to Umar and Sharjeel Imam when other including Gulfisha were granted bail.

Justice Sudhanshu Dhulia's statement is extracted in the book where he says, "as a citizen, and like many other people, I, too, had hoped that they would get bail... I could not see much of a difference between those who got bail and those who did not".

Umar Khalid writes after the 5th January 2026 bail rejection:

But what I really want those, who express solidarity with me, to understand is that I reject the victimhood that I'm often identified with by others. There is pain in this seemingly endless wait, indeed: but there is also a beauty to this pain. I'm content where I am, in spite of what I'm being subjected to, because there is beauty in knowing that this is not about me alone. My incarceration is not merely to target me as an individual; it is to teach my fellow comrades a lesson that anyone who dares to ask uncomfortable questions to the powers that be can, and will be, forcefully silenced without respite. Therefore, this battle that I'm fighting, too, is larger than me as an individual. This is why the language in which those, who believe in what I have to say, speak of me and others in this case needs to change. Ours is a battle for a vision of a time in our society when some will not be more equal than others. This conviction is what makes this pain bearable. It's almost Christ-like, or Bhagat Singh-like. Both sacrificed their lives for causes of the oppressed and there is beauty in knowing that this is the lineage of which I'm a part, in a history that shall be penned for the future.

This is why I wake up every day to the lines of Bhagat Singh that I've etched on my prison wall: Every tiny molecule of ash is in motion with my heat. I am such a lunatic that I am free even in Jail. ■

Assembly Election Takeaways: DMK Loses in Tamil Nadu, BJP Grabs West Bengal

The outcome of the Assembly elections in the five states of Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry marks a major advance for the BJP in its expedition towards maximising its centralised political control over all parts of India. The BJP's capture of power in West Bengal in particular brings a tectonic shift to the political landscape of the state where the party remained a marginal player till as recently as 2019. The party's own direct gains in terms of vote share and seats has not been significant in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, but the resounding defeat of the DMK, one of the most vocal ideological opponents of the Modi government, marked a major gain for the BJP in the south of India.

In Assam, the BJP had already consolidated its prospects by a very targeted and skewed delimitation exercise; and the revision of the electoral roll, even though not as 'special' and 'intensive' as in other SIR-scarred states, especially West Bengal, further reinforced it, resulting in a massive majority for the BJP-AGP-BOPF coalition. Coupled with the BJP now having its own Chief Minister in Bihar, its Assam and West Bengal victories will give the Sangh brigade a much greater domination in the entire eastern region. The BJP's 2026 victory in West Bengal is thus certainly its biggest electoral gain since the ascent of the Modi government in 2014.

The victories have been achieved not by the standard and familiar electoral rules of the pre-SIR era. In West Bengal, it took a mass disenfranchisement of nine million

electors, especially of nearly three and a half million names pending before the tribunals of which only 139 names were cleared before the first phase and 1,468 before the second phase, to produce this result. The first round of deletion of six million names wiped out the BJP's 2021 deficit of six million votes (when it had polled 2,29,05,474 votes as against the TMC's total vote of 2,89,68,281) while the targeted exclusion in the name of 'adjudication' and arbitration by tribunals created the BJP's 2026 lead of a little over three million votes (2,92,24,167 over the TMC total of 2,60,13,379 votes).

This surgical electoral purge executed in the name of the SIR laid the ground on which the BJP has scripted its unprecedented victory in West Bengal. Complementing this statistical surgical strike was the actual conduct of the election process right up to the phase of counting when the Election Commission shed every notion of neutrality and central paramilitary forces were brought in on an unprecedented scale. The complaints of irregularities in the polling and counting process coming to light from various constituencies, most notably from Mamata Banerjee's own constituency Bhabanipur where she was leading till round 14 before BJP leaders allegedly disrupted the proceedings with full support of the central forces and duty officials, are serious and both the BJP and the EC itself must be held to account. The TMC has complained about large-scale electoral fraud and as a mark of protest, Mamata Banerjee has refused to step down.

In terms of the political messages emanating from the overall poll outcome in five states, the results from Kerala and Puducherry may be seen to be in conformity with the established electoral patterns. Kerala has an alternating or rotational pattern where governments usually change every five years. The LDF had defied that trend in the 2021 election held in the wake of the Covid pandemic and a change of guard was perhaps overdue. However, it is significant that the LDF figures have fallen to their lowest level since 1982 in terms of both vote share and number of seats. In Puducherry, the NR Congress has effectively replaced the Congress and has retained power as a stable ally of the BJP in the NDA bloc. The opposition on the other hand was a divided house between the DMK and the emergent TVK blocs.

More than Kerala and Puducherry, the results from Tamil Nadu, Assam and West Bengal surely merit much closer attention. The phenomenal rise of TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam or Tamil Victory Party) as a new force rallying around the charismatic film actor Joseph Vijay Chandrasekhar was on display for the last couple of years, but few could have predicted the intensity of the build-up and the result it produced.

The new party has tapped spectacularly into the simmering anger of the people against the entrenched domination of the DMK and the popular yearning for change away from the DMK-AIADMK duopoly of last six decades. With the overwhelming support of the youth and women, the TVK emerged as the largest party with a tally only marginally short of the majority mark. It now remains to be seen how the TVK actually fares in terms of its professed commitment to 'people-centric politics through concrete

welfare-driven actions' and what social and political realignment it triggers in Tamil Nadu.

The Assam and West Bengal outcomes have been scripted around a more or less shared narrative of 'saving Hindus from the threat of infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslims'. While the BJP invoked this anti-Muslim hate to overcome anti-incumbency in Assam, in West Bengal, it mixed anti-Muslim hate with the accumulated anti-incumbency of an increasingly discredited fifteen-year-old regime. In Assam the delimitation of constituencies had already been carried out in such a way that significantly diminished the power of the minority vote (both religious and linguistic minorities) by spreading it thin. The electoral roll revision process further dented the opposition prospects. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma ran a virulent, hate-driven campaign targeting the Bengali-speaking Muslims of Assam and won an unprecedented tally of 102 seats (80 percent strong majority) in a house of 126 in alliance with the AGP and the Bodoland People's Front.

Suvendu Adhikari in West Bengal ran an equally shrill anti-Muslim campaign, portraying Muslims as the internal enemy and a permanent threat to the existence and interests of the majority Hindu community. Because of the BJP's open disowning of the Muslim community (the party almost as a rule does not field Muslim candidates or nominate Muslim ministers wherever it is in power), Muslim representation is now concentrated in the opposition camp. For instance, 18 among the 19 Congress MLAs in Assam now belong to the Muslim community. In West Bengal, 32 of the 38 newly elected Muslim MLAs belong to the TMC, which is 40 percent of the party's reduced strength in the

Assembly. Suvendu Adhikari now bluntly celebrates the BJP's victory as a victory of Hindus, pledges to work only for Hindus, and asks Hindus supporting opposition parties to switch to the BJP for further Hindu consolidation and Hindu-Muslim polarisation.

This level of open communal mobilisation is unprecedented in West Bengal. Targeted disenfranchisement of Muslim voters, systematic marginalisation of elected representatives from the Muslim community and open call for ethnic cleansing and communal consolidation - this is the new plane of communal politics in this era of SIR and systematic theft of adult suffrage and other citizenship rights from India's minorities and marginalised groups. From periodic riots and attacks on places of worship to mob lynching and now mass disenfranchisement, communal fascism is busy developing a template of permanent electoral domination through a sinister subversion of India's electoral system.

Against the backdrop of the powerful anti-corporate farmers' movement, the welcome 2023 victory of the Congress in Karnataka had served as an impetus for an energised unity of the opposition. The unity took shape under the all India banner and framework of INDIA. The environment and understanding generated by the INDIA initiative successfully reduced the BJP's 2024 Lok Sabha tally to 240. With its string of victories from Haryana and Maharashtra to Bihar and now West Bengal, the BJP has tried its best to disintegrate the emerging unity of the opposition. The opposition needs to regroup again to foil this bid before the next round of elections in UP, Uttarakhand and Punjab. Also we need to focus urgently on

the bread and butter issues of the common people, and take up the challenge of their survival amidst growing economic crisis and political disempowerment, and to simultaneously confront Hindutva's brand of fascism and its supremacist ideology head-on and uncompromisingly. This is the only way to defeat the game plan of the BJP and its attempt to obliterate the opposition in India's electoral system.

Intriguingly enough, Amit Shah not only deployed an unprecedented 2.4 lakh CAPF personnel for the two-phase West Bengal elections, 70,000 of them were asked to stay on in West Bengal for a period of two months after the elections. Even as votes were being counted on May 4, reports of attacks on TMC and other non-BJP counting agents started coming in from many counting centres. Reports of attacks on party activists and offices and on Muslim shops and localities, including bulldozer demolitions accompanied by mob violence, while the central forces stood by are also being heard from many places. Progressive forces must step in to stop this terror and insist on peace, communal harmony and the protection of minorities from persecution, without allowing any leeway to the vandal brigades of the saffron camp. Freedom fighters, cultural activists and communist-led struggles of workers, peasants, students and women had played an extraordinary role during the traumatic period of Partition of Bengal. Today when the BJP is desperate to reopen the wound of Partition and fling the state back into communal fascist violence, the communist movement must once again rise to the occasion with the banner of communal solidarity and political liberty, to keep, in Tagore's words, the mind without fear and the head held high. ■

Changing Political Situation in Tamil Nadu

▲ TN STATE STANDING COMMITTEE, CPI(ML)

The emphatic message of Tamil Nadu election results is that the people have categorically rejected the BJP and its allies. The BJP's four seats in 2021 elections have dramatically reduced to one in 2026. Despite an increased overall voting percentage, BJP's vote percentage, unlike Keralam, has dipped in 2026 elections in Tamil Nadu. The notable victory of AIADMK in northern Tamil Nadu is attributable to the comparatively better votes' transfer from PMK in the same NDA alliance. But, the performance of AIADMK in its so-called fortress, the western Tamil Nadu (Kongu region), has declined.

The DMK led Secular and Progressive Alliance (SPA) faced a major defeat by winning only 70 seats. But, its difference in vote share compared to the victorious TVK (Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam – Tamilnadu Victory Party) is only 3.5 percent. The anti-incumbency votes of five years of DMK rule has gone over to TVK instead of AIADMK. By winning over 14 percent votes from DMK, 15 percent from AIADMK, 4 percent from NTK (Naam Tamilar Katchi led by Seeman) and the remaining from others, the TVK has emerged as a single largest party, albeit without independent majority, by securing around 35 percent votes.

The elections are not merely about voting percentages and statistics but also about the realities, expectations, quests

and pulse of the people. In the last 5 years of DMK rule, the state economy grew in double digit, corporates amassed wealth and simultaneously the problem of unemployment, unaffordability of education and anger among youth also scaled up. The casteist attacks on dalits and honour killings reached unprecedented levels. This period also witnessed endless number of agitations, right from sanitation workers and scheme workers to part time teachers and differently abled, for permanency and wage increase. The promise of restoration of the Old Pension Scheme was not honoured. In popular perception, the officials were controlling the affairs of the state more than the Chief Minister himself, which in turn, fuelled the dissatisfaction among government employees and teachers. The DMK government was unwilling to pass a resolution in the floors of the assembly against the four anti-labour Codes of the Modi government. In this backdrop, the anti-incumbency, coupled with the people's long drawn quest for a change and omissions and commissions of the state government together led to the fall of the DMK alliance in the elections.

The pro-RSS and right wing forces are in a jubilant mood that the rise of Vijay and TVK signifies the end of Dravidian movement in the state, which is far from the truth and reality. Interpreting the rise of Vijay as an end of Dravidian movement in itself is

fundamentally flawed because neither the limited victory of Vijay nor the vote share of DMK and AIADMK conform to such an interpretation. The fact that Vijay is upholding Periyar and Ambedkar as his ideological icons and the socio-economic realities of the state do not corroborate to any end of Dravidian movement in the state.

Some others call it a beginning of a post-Dravidian era in state politics and they also append it saying that the post-Dravidian is not necessarily anti-Dravidian but not much of discussions about various facets and dimensions of such an era. The vote percentages of so-called Dravidian parties and the proclaimed nature of TVK do not corroborate such an analysis. Moreover, we should not hurry to offer such labels and should not forget that the communist movement and Ambedkarite movement too, have their roots in the legacy of the movements for self-respect, social justice and equality.

The people of the state were fatigued with alternatively voting for two Dravidian parties, DMK and AIADMK. The entry of Vijay only facilitated such a long drawn quest of the people.

Sensing such a mood for change, various forces, including Vijayakanth, Kamalahasan and also Seeman, have attempted to exploit it in various ways and at various phases. Seeman has not yet given up. The communist parties too try their level best to emerge as an alternative. The BJP is making herculean efforts to transform the political landscape and ideological moorings of the state.

The present quest for a change does not really indicate any quest for an alternative politics and remains only at the level of

a regime change and change of guards. It should not be misconstrued as a quest for any fundamental change in the left or right direction. In the era of technological advancements, the growth in the economy also leads to growth in unemployment and other associated problems. Vijay has emerged victorious mainly in this backdrop. Various studies and pollsters suggest that 70 percent of youth and women below 40 years and 30 percent above 40 years have preferred Vijay. TVK has predominantly won more seats in urban areas all over the state, in districts surrounding metropolitan cities like Chennai and in sweeping some southern districts. TVK is successful in mustering the support of not only the urban elites and middle classes but also dalits and the poor across the state.

It is completely unfair to mock the victory of Vijay as the victory of illiterates ('Tharkuri' is the popular slang being used in Tamil) and de-politicised youth. The aggressive implementation of neo-liberal policies and the emergence of all pervading world of social media have led to the emergence of a section of youth and people who display a value system different from conventional perceptions, whose needs and expectations do not conform to the established norms. It should be understood in the context of changing expectations of social justice beyond reservations, changing issues of women safety with the rise of women workers, against the normalisation of all pervading corruption, etc. We should be able to comprehend it as a departure from conventional value systems to the quest for new political values in the changing objective situations. It is such a quest for change that has taken the shape of the politics of anti-corruption, anti-narcotics and for women

safety in new conditions. It has also taken shape against the increase in electricity tariff, which is a fallout of privatisation. Vijay, after assuming the mantle of Chief Ministership, first inked the orders of 200 units of free electricity in 2 months, the force of Lioness (for women safety) and anti-Narcotics force.

It is a very important, unavoidable, question whether Vijay can be a real answer to all those problems. Only time can provide an answer to this question. Vijay wants to replace DMK with TVK by staking claim for another Dravidian party in the state. His first visit to Periyar memorial to pay respects, immediately after becoming the Chief Minister, signifies such a narrative.

The foremost objective and a considered political tactic of the BJP is to destroy the progressive tradition and values of the state in order to make the soil fertile for the growth of right-wing politics. The BJP will never relent in its efforts to exploit all mass based political forces – Vijay's TVK to DMK/AIADMK - in the state to achieve its own ends. The role of Governor in the government formation in the post-poll scenario amply demonstrates the intentions of the BJP. Even the so-called rumours of DMK backing a government of its arch rival AIADMK in order to halt the onward march of Vijay also points to the same. We cannot conclusively assess the probable direction of the journey of Vijay and TVK in the coming days as it is too premature now.

The politics of TVK is yet to take a comprehensive shape. If we look at their election promises, they are keen in continuing the welfare policies and are engaging in competitive populism like all other parties in the state, including BJP. But, Vijay's maiden

speech, as a Chief Minister, about empty treasury, report on state's finances and seeking time for implementing promises raises questions and suspicions. He says, "an era of real secular social justice starts now". But, pertinent questions are still crying for an answer: Whether Vijay will rise as an anti-BJP force or will choose the opposite or any other different direction? Whether the TVK will uncompromisingly fight or choose a different path to secure its proclamations on safeguarding Tamil interests, Tamil pride and federalism? TVK will definitely work for the economic and industrial development but what could be its approach towards workers' interests and their rights is yet to be seen. Overall, TVK is a party in transition.

The responsibility of the opposition, including us, is to point out, criticise and fight against the mistakes of the incumbent government as a part of democracy. We fought against DMK too while in power, despite DMK being part of the INDIA bloc.

In the changed political situation, our decisions will be compatible with the strategy of anti-fascist, anti-BJP resistance and with our consistent struggle against the anti-people measures of the ruling party.

We expect TVK to articulate its voice against the politics of hate and communalism, against the denial of rights of toiling masses, against caste discrimination and domination and for state's rights, genuine federalism, social justice and equality. CPIML Liberation will be the first to join hands with the left, democratic and progressive political forces to wage a determined struggle if the expectations are belied. ■

Fascist Take-Over of Bengal

▲ SAMPRITI

Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in West Bengal on 4 May 2026, winning 206 of the state's 294 Assembly seats, what has unfolded points not merely to a transfer of electoral power, but to the rapid consolidation of a majoritarian-authoritarian political order marked by institutional capture through electoral design, disenfranchisement as a tool of social exclusion, bulldozer raj, the repression of dissent, and the systematic intimidation of minorities, workers, women, and democratic voices.

SIR, Electoral Engineering, and the Capture of State Power

The SIR process became central to a broader project of electoral engineering and the capture of state power. The BJP's rise was facilitated through administrative manipulation, militarised fear, extensive financial expenditure, media-driven anti-Muslim propaganda, and the exploitation of anti-incumbency sentiment against the Trinamool Congress. Concerns regarding institutional collusion between the BJP-led central government and the Election Commission by introducing changes in the appointment process of the Chief Election Commissioner in 2023, which increased executive influence over the Election Commission by removing the Chief Justice of India from the selection committee. In Bengal, the deployment of special observers and micro-observers during the SIR deepened apprehensions of

selective targeting and political bias, which could be observed in the near absence of intervention in cases of open hate speeches by heavyweight BJP candidates, including the current chief minister, Shuvendu Adhikari, during their electoral victory.

These concerns were reinforced after the election, when Election Commission special observer Subrata Gupta was appointed advisor to Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari, and Chief Electoral Officer Manoj Agarwal was made Chief Secretary of the government, blurring the line between electoral administration and partisan state power.

Post-Poll Violence: Fear-Mongering, Communal Targeting, and Misogyny

The atmosphere of administrative impunity and majoritarian aggression cultivated during the election rapidly spilt into the streets after the results were declared. The post-poll violence that followed reflected not isolated incidents of political retaliation, but a broader pattern of communal targeting, patriarchal violence, and the public assertion of majoritarian dominance. Across several districts, saffron-clad groups vandalised public spaces, attacked religious and political symbols, and renamed Muslim-associated localities. In North 24 Parganas, decorative gateways on Masjid Bari Road in Barasat were destroyed and replaced with majoritarian signboards, while Siraj Udyan was renamed "Shibaji

Udyan." In Murshidabad, the Lalbagh Eidgah was vandalised, while mobs marched through public spaces chanting "Jai Shri Ram" as a performative assertion of intimidation and control. Videos from multiple incidents showed police personnel and deployed central forces remaining passive spectators during attacks, deepening perceptions of state-enabled impunity. Symbols associated with the Left and indigenous movements were also targeted. Statues of Vladimir Lenin in Jadavpur and Murshidabad were vandalised, followed by attacks on memorials of tribal freedom fighters Sidhu Murmu and Kanhu Murmu, where BJP flags were planted after desecration. Offices of Left parties, trade unions, and grassroots organisations were attacked in multiple districts.

More alarming was the organised communal violence directed against Muslims. According to the Association for Protection of Civil Rights (APCR), at least 34 incidents of anti-Muslim violence were documented between 4 and 7 May across districts, including Cooch Behar, North and South 24 Parganas, Kolkata, Howrah, and Murshidabad. Muslim-owned homes, shops, mosques, cattle markets, and meat businesses were specifically targeted. More than fifty Muslims reportedly faced assault or intimidation, dozens of properties were vandalised, and at least two deaths were reported, including that of a Muslim man attacked while attempting to protect a mosque in Gosanimari.

The post-poll climate was equally marked by the normalisation of misogyny and gendered violence. Women, particularly Muslim women and those associated with opposition groups, faced rape threats, public humiliation,

online abuse, and physical assault. Educational institutions also became sites of intimidation. Campuses associated with student dissent and progressive politics, including Vidyasagar University, witnessed unrest and vandalism carried out by ABVP supporters, reflecting attempts to impose ideological conformity through fear and public intimidation.

The New Government: Old Politics of Fear-Mongering and Seizing Rights in the Shiny Wrapper of Development

The BJP government formally assumed office in West Bengal on 9 May 2026, presenting itself as a regime committed to development, nationalism, administrative efficiency, and the restoration of the "rule of law." Under Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari, the government quickly launched aggressive investigations into corruption, recruitment scams, "cut money" networks, and financial irregularities linked to the previous regime, projecting itself as a force of accountability and institutional cleansing. However, the selective nature of this anti-corruption narrative remains evident, particularly in the absence of similar scrutiny of controversies involving the BJP or central institutions, including the NEET scam and the continued exclusion of the PM CARES Fund from the ambit of the Right to Information Act. The character of the BJP regime in West Bengal becomes clearer and increasingly familiar in the context of BJP governance in other states when viewed alongside several measures and governing tools introduced immediately after assuming office. These developments indicate not merely a change in

administration, but the emergence of a governance model rooted in exclusion, securitisation, punitive state power, and ideological restructuring of public life.

a. Turning voter disenfranchisement into a tool for excluding marginalised citizens from welfare while sustaining the "Bangladeshi infiltrator" narrative

On 14 May, the Bengal government ordered the re-verification of caste certificates issued since 2011, bringing nearly 1.69 crore SC, ST, and OBC certificates under scrutiny. Crucially, the order stated that caste certificates belonging to individuals and dependents whose names had been deleted from electoral rolls during the recent SIR exercise would also be examined and could potentially be cancelled following due process. A similar pattern emerged in the newly announced Annapurna Yojana. Through a gazette notification, the government confirmed that ₹3,000 per month would be transferred to all existing Lakshmir Bhandar beneficiaries except those dead, shifted, deleted, or identified as absentee electors during SIR-2026. Women and Child Development Minister Agnimitra Paul further stated that benefits previously distributed to "Bangladeshi illegal encroachers" and "non-citizens" would be recovered with interest. From senior leaders to grassroots cadre, the BJP is portraying deleted voters as "illegal infiltrators" and undeserving claimants to welfare. This is despite recent Supreme Court directions clarifying that the Election Commission cannot determine citizenship through electoral roll revisions. Yet these developments in West Bengal demonstrate how voter disenfranchisement is

increasingly being weaponised to deny access to welfare schemes, caste-based reservation, and socio-economic entitlements, particularly targeting vulnerable and marginalised populations.

b. Eviction of the working class, demolition of homes, and redesigning urban lands through "Bulldozer Raj"

The BJP government's early urban governance measures in West Bengal signal the emergence of a "Bulldozer Raj" model familiar from several BJP-ruled states, where demolition drives and anti-encroachment campaigns function not merely as administrative exercises but as visible demonstrations of punitive state power. Soon after assuming office, the government announced restrictions on religious activities on public roads in the name of regulating traffic and public order, while simultaneously launching sweeping eviction and demolition drives across Kolkata and adjoining urban areas. A joint operation involving railway authorities and the police administration demolished nearly 150 informal shops and structures around Howrah Station, while an estimated 500 hawkers and street vendors were evicted from the Howrah and Sealdah railway station areas, with similar drives extending to other parts of West Bengal. Although the government justified the hawker evictions as necessary for easing congestion and improving passenger movement, hawkers, informal workers, and economically vulnerable populations dependent on public-space economies for their livelihoods were left without any alternative arrangements or rehabilitation support.

The most significant crackdown unfolded in the Tiljala-Topsia belt following a deadly fire in an unauthorised leather goods

factory that killed two workers. In response, the government launched large-scale demolition operations against alleged illegal constructions, disconnected water and electricity supplies, and deployed bulldozers against both factory premises and adjacent residential buildings. The demolitions were carried out without prior notice, rehabilitation discussions, or due process, forcing several families to vacate overnight. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation subsequently identified nearly 3,000 buildings across six designated "red-zone" boroughs for scrutiny over alleged construction-rule violations, including around 1,000 buildings in the Tiljala-Topsia area alone, many of which are likely to be targeted in the coming days. These aggressive demolition and eviction operations indicate a broader attempt to redesign urban spaces by displacing working-class settlements, informal economies, and politically marginal communities from strategically valuable areas of the city.

c. Curtailing religious freedom and harming cattle traders and rural livelihoods

Within two weeks of assuming power, the West Bengal government enforced Animal Slaughter Control Act, 1950, ahead of Eid-ul-Adha, framing it as part of a "total crackdown" on cattle smuggling. Under the law, cattle can only be slaughtered if certified by a government veterinary doctor as permanently incapacitated or above 14 years of age, with violators facing imprisonment of up to six months. The abrupt enforcement of the law immediately generated fear and disruption across Bengal's livestock economy. Reports emerged from several districts of Muslim cattle traders being

harassed and assaulted by vigilante groups linked to the BJP and Bajrang Dal. In one incident in North 24 Parganas, four Muslim men transporting cattle were brutally beaten on suspicion of cattle smuggling before being handed over to the police. In Hingalganj, a BJP MLA intercepted a cattle truck and controversially demanded "birth certificates" for cows to verify their age, while reports of harassment and torture of cattle traders also surfaced from Durgapur and surrounding industrial belts.

The crackdown disproportionately targets Muslims, curtails freedom of religious practice and choice of food, and threatens Bengal's long-standing culinary and occupational diversity. However, its impact extends far beyond, severely affecting thousands dependent on the livestock economy, including dairy farmers, transport workers, traders, meat sellers, and rural women engaged in cattle-rearing and allied activities. Hindu dairy farmers and cattle traders also reported severe financial distress as the climate of fear and restrictions caused a sharp decline in cattle trade ahead of the peak Eid market season. Many affected dairy farmers have demanded that the BJP government either withdraw the restrictions or take responsibility for their mounting debts and family livelihoods, arguing that the sudden imposition will severely reduce their income and push already vulnerable rural households deeper into financial distress.

d. Repression of democratic voices and shrinking space for dissent

Garga Chatterjee, a professor at the Indian Statistical Institute and a leader of the Bengali nationalist movement, has remained under

arrest since 12 May for posts alleging EVM tampering. The arrest was an attempt to silence dissent by creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. On 14 May, police denied permission for a protest in Kolkata demanding his release and heavily deployed police and central forces around the protest site.

On 19 May, protesters opposing bulldozer demolitions, evictions without notice, and restrictions on religious practices in Park Circus faced police repression, resulting in the arbitrary arrest of 48 demonstrators, including civil and human rights activist Faridul Islam. While Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari publicly labelled sections of the protesters as "anti-national" and "anti-social," he also defended the arrests and police lathi-charge as necessary for imposing the "rule of law." The large number of arrests within a span of just a few days reflects an increasingly familiar pattern in which dissent is delegitimised through criminalisation, securitisation, and nationalist rhetoric.

Taken together, these developments reveal that the BJP's takeover of Bengal is a rapid consolidation of a fascist governance model already visible in several other BJP-ruled states. It's an attempt to fundamentally restructure the state's democratic and social fabric through fear, exclusion, surveillance, majoritarian nationalism, coercive state power, and the expanding influence of corporate interests. The resistance emerging from the left & democratic sphere, therefore, carries significance beyond immediate electoral politics; it represents an ongoing resilient struggle over the democratic future of Bengal itself. ■

Whose Belts Will Be Tightened?

▲ RUPEE INDIA

On May 10, addressing a BJP rally in Hyderabad, Telangana, the Prime Minister issued seven appeals to the nation: to work from home; avoid buying gold for one year; reduce petrol and diesel consumption; cut down the use of cooking oil; reduce use of chemical fertilisers by 50 per cent; buy Indian-made goods in place of foreign brands; and avoid foreign travel for one year. The purpose of these sacrifices, he said, was to conserve foreign exchange.

It might seem puzzling that the Prime Minister is asking people to conserve foreign exchange, whereas the RBI Governor, the Finance Minister, the Informal Group of Ministers, sundry economists and the media have been reassuring the public, day after day, that the country has ample foreign exchange reserves. Paying no heed to this flood of assurances from the powers that be, both the rupee and share prices fell sharply the day after the Prime Minister's speech.

The foreign exchange market and the share market know what officialdom and the media prefer not to mention: that India's foreign exchange reserves are not the accumulated surpluses from trade, i.e., earned from exporting more goods and services than we import. In fact we consistently run deficits on our current account. Instead, the reserves are made up of liabilities – i.e. they are the sums of money that we owed to other countries/persons abroad. If foreign creditors decide not to roll over debt, and foreign investors decide to withdraw their investments, the foreign exchange reserves will fall. In that sense,

they are not really 'reserves' at all: they are not a buffer against distress.

In that sense, the Prime Minister is quite right to raise the alarm. However, his remedy appears to be for the people at large to sacrifice, and lower their standard of living. For example, his appeal to cut down the use of cooking oil is addressed to every household; his appeal to halve the use of chemical fertilisers is addressed to farmers, the single largest section of the country's workforce.

Such exhortations are unlikely to inspire the desired self-sacrifice, but they lay the ground for imposed sacrifices. The Informal Group of Ministers, while assuring the public of adequate oil, gas and fertiliser supplies, also indicated that the burden of keeping prices at their present level was weighing heavily on the fisc, and may not be sustainable if the international crisis got prolonged.

In other words, the people are being told: prepare to tighten your belts.

But it is not the common people who have created the present foreign exchange crisis.

Who is responsible for the outflow of foreign exchange?

1. It is not the common people that account for the sudden rise in gold imports, which rose by 24 per cent last year, to nearly \$72 billion. World Gold Council data for calendar 2025 indicates that 40 per cent of India's gold imports were accounted for not by jewellery, but by investment demand. That is, wealthy financial investors bought gold to protect their wealth against a fall in the

value of the rupee – and indeed furthered the fall of the rupee in the process.¹

2. It is not the common people that send large sums of money out of the country. It is India's globalised upper classes who have spent over \$202 billion in foreign exchange under the Liberalised Remittance Scheme since May 2014, about half on foreign travel and the remainder on other heads. In just the last four years (up to February 2026), they spent \$112 billion.

3. The common people of India do not set up 'family offices' abroad to manage their global wealth. It is India's super-rich, people like the Ambanis, that do so. By 2023, the super-rich transferred \$130 billion to their family offices in Singapore and \$105 billion to those in Hong Kong. (We could not locate a figure for Dubai, another favoured site for this activity.) Some of these funds may be transferred legally.

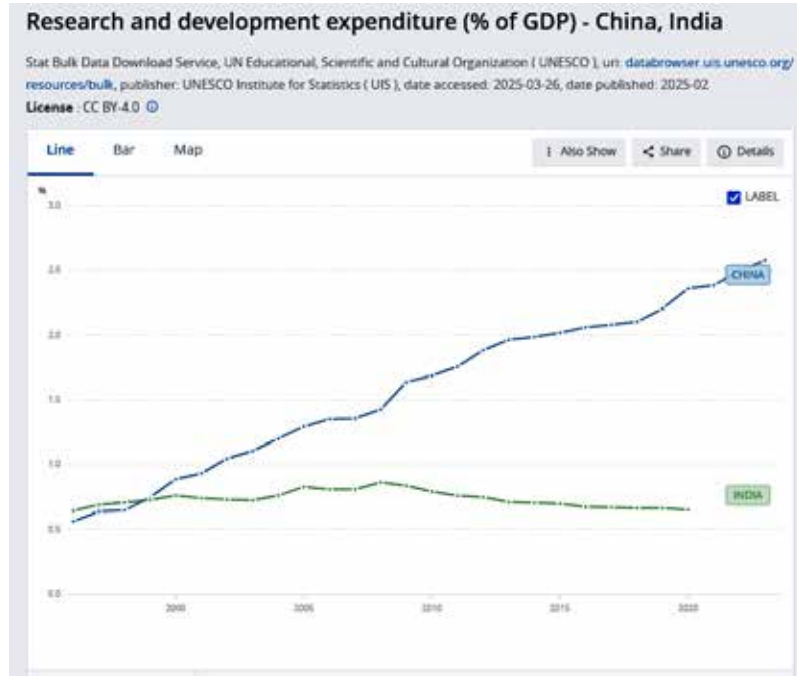
The super-rich also carry out vast illicit transfers of wealth from India, bringing back sums illicitly when they wish, a process called 'round-tripping'. Studies have found the sums flowing in and out in this fashion run into the hundreds of billions of dollars, but the powers that be are uninterested in investigating. The sums are staggering: to cite just one type of potential illegal transfer: "orphan imports", where import payments are made, but no goods were ever despatched, totalled \$659 billion over 2000-2018. That is nearly as large as India's present foreign exchange reserves.

These flows may explain how Indian billionaires manage to accumulate vast funds in offshore tax havens. The Ambanis (not only Anil, but

Mukesh), the Adanis, and Agarwal of Vedanta are only a few of the most prominent names. They do not live in fear of being arrested. The much-celebrated digitalisation of India's tax machinery is being used to hunt the smallest fishes, while giant fishes roam freely. "It will take a long time for us to move ahead in this particular case," said an official of Mukesh Ambani's offshore accounts. Mr Adani has emerged spotless from regulatory inquiries. Mr Agarwal lives unmolested in London, where his company is headquartered. (Meanwhile the Indian government actively ousts tribals from their forests and hills, to turn these assets over to Mr Agarwal.)

4. It is not the common people of India who have piled up \$292 billion of external commercial borrowings (ECBs). It is the corporate sector which has done so.

Among other things, available



Source: World Bank Database

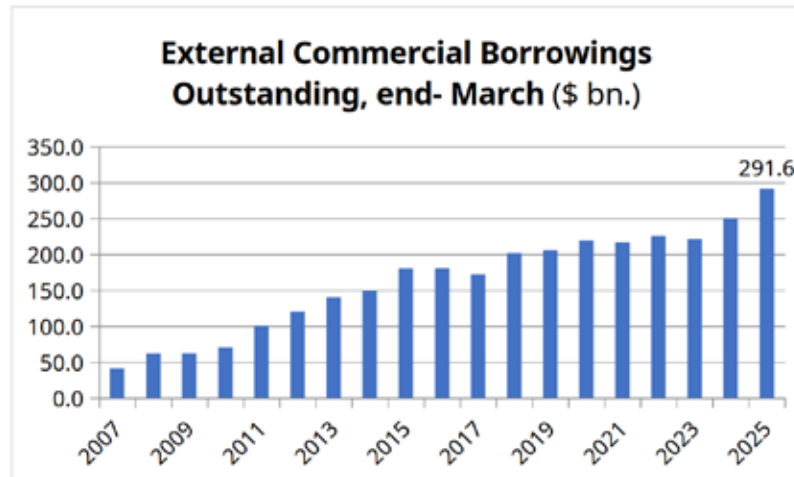
the size of Tata Steel itself, and thereby catapulting themselves into the world's top 10 steelmakers. The Tatas initially bid \$8 billion,

to service its foreign borrowings. Thus India's natural wealth and surplus flowed to foreign banks.

(As an aside, one might ask where, in these times of foreign exchange stringency, Mukesh Ambani plans to obtain the \$300 billion he has promised Trump he will invest in a refinery in Texas – a deal Trump calls "THE BIGGEST IN U.S. HISTORY".)

5. The corporate sector might try to justify these borrowings by saying they are necessary for importing capital goods and making Indian industry more efficient. However, in this entire period, the trade deficit of India's manufacturing sector has continued to balloon.

Even as it has raked in handsome profits, Indian industry has failed to invest in research and development (R&D), and has preferred to go in for repetitive technology imports, all paid for in hard currency. India's R&D expenditure is a meagre 0.6-0.7 per cent of GDP; indeed it has been falling since 2010. Within this meagre spending on innovation, only 36 per cent is in the private



Source: RBI database.

foreign borrowings (ECBs) fed the dreams of India's corporate chieftains in the boom of the 2000s. They went on a vanity shopping spree of companies abroad. Each such loan-backed acquisition added to India's external debt. Tata Steel made the most outlandish buy, picking up Corus, a U.K.-Dutch firm four times

but entered a bidding war with another buyer, and finally splurged over \$12 billion. The acquisition saddled Tata Steel with foreign loans of \$8-9 billion, implying annual interest charges of over \$700 million. Corus promptly made steady losses, but the Indian operations of Tata Steel kept generating the cash needed

sector – the rest is in Government labs. It is telling that the private corporate sector's R&D spending is about half of what India pays out at present on royalties to foreign firms.

Thus India's celebrated 'telecom revolution', near-universal coverage of mobile telephony, has come and gone, without India's private corporate sector making anything – neither the equipment nor the software nor even the mobile devices. India's software giants, TCS, Infosys, and the rest have raked in profits at a hectic pace over the years, but actually shrunk their capital expenditure as a share of their cash from operations. Little wonder that they are now facing a question of their existence.

So it is India's special class of corporate chieftains who have rendered India permanent dependent, causing it to bleed trade deficits indefinitely. This dependent corporate class drains foreign exchange, and indeed the surplus, from India.

6. Fundamentally, over decades of neoliberal policy, India has been increasingly exposed to flows of international speculative capital. Foreign portfolio investment (FPI) in India's share market is particularly volatile, but foreign direct investment (FDI) too now consists mainly of speculative financial investments by private equity firms and the like, routed through places such as Singapore and Mauritius. India's outward FDI too goes to such tax havens. As India's economy enters more turbulent times, FPI investors are pulling out their money, and FDI net inflows have plummeted. In recent years the Government also opened up government bonds for foreign investors; these investors too are now exiting, and the Government is contemplating giving them tax concessions to lure them back.

All this underlines the fact that capital account liberalisation, i.e., the opening up of the economy to unrestricted capital inflows and outflows, has rendered India more vulnerable. It is thus State policy which is responsible for the present situation: Not the Iran war, nor the consumption needs of India's common people.

Who is responsible for the shortage of essential commodities?

7. India's kisans are now told to halve their fertiliser use, as if it were like taking less sugar in one's tea. This exhortation subtly implies that the kisans are responsible for India's fertiliser crisis, by their wasteful application. In fact it is the Indian rulers, of both Congress and BJP varieties, that are entirely responsible for the crisis. By 2000, India was self-sufficient at least in urea (on a predominantly public sector base). Thereafter, successive neoliberal governments stopped public investment, even closing down several public sector plants. The private corporate sector made meagre investments. Although the BJP government eventually decided to revive five public sector fertiliser plants, even this was too little to ward off the shortage and import dependence we see today.² India is staring at possible shortfalls just as sowing operations are about to start

India's rulers received ample warnings from three recent international shocks. The first was during Covid, when urea prices tripled. The second was when fertiliser prices again soared with the Ukraine war. In these years, shortages of fertiliser in various regions resulted at times in riots as well as peasant suicides. Finally, in June 2025, when the US and Israel attacked Iran, it was clear that the Hormuz Strait might at some point be closed, blocking shipments of fertiliser as well as LNG (a feedstock for fertiliser). All

these warnings were ignored by the Indian authorities.

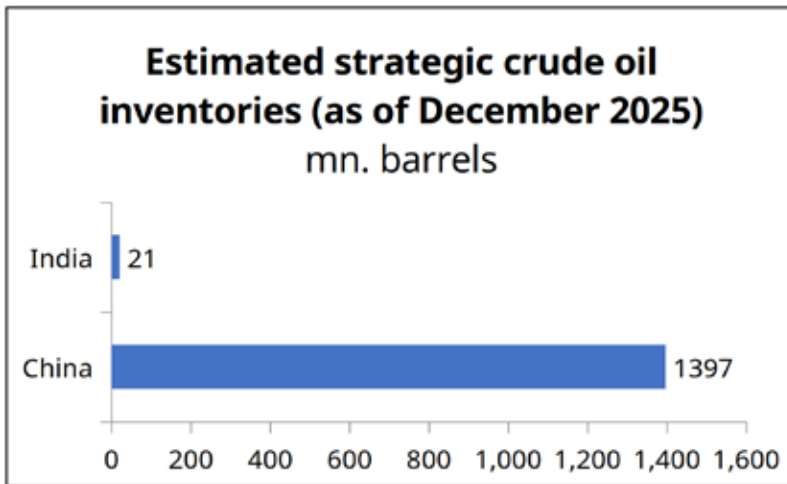
So kisans are told today to simply make do with less. In fact, since 50-55 per cent of the present yield of foodgrains is attributed to the addition of chemical fertilisers, any such drastic step would simply lead to a fall in output.³

8. India's common people are instructed to eat less edible oil, in the cause of saving the country foreign exchange. But the people are certainly not responsible for the country's gigantic dependence on imports of edible oils. India's peasantry had made the country self-sufficient in edible oilseeds in the 1990s, with help from the National Mission on Oilseeds of 1986. However, with India's entry into the WTO, the protection for domestic oilseeds was dismantled, and Indian growers could not compete with cheap palm oil imports. Thus India, a country of 1.4 billion, is now the world's largest importer of edible oil, and depends on imports for 56 per cent of its consumption! Successive Indian governments have failed to promote domestic production of oilseeds with a procurement policy. This critical part of people's diet is left to the vagaries of international trade and our supplies of foreign exchange.

9. The common people of India, who are asked now to minimise their use of petrol and diesel, may well wonder whether the Government had made any plans for the present contingency. The contrast with China is striking.

However, the Indian government cannot take all the blame for its petroleum policy, since it does not formulate that policy. That job has been left entirely to the US government. After Trump, in his first term, demanded India stop buying Iranian or Venezuelan oil, India promptly obeyed in May

Source: USE Information Administration.



2019. In his second term, Trump demanded India end all imports of Russian oil (which India got at a discount), failing which he would add an extra 25 per cent tariff on top of his existing 25 per cent. India duly started to cut its Russian oil imports. After the US kidnapped the Venezuelan president, and got control of Venezuelan oil, Trump pushed India to buy it. India started importing Venezuelan oil.

The US gave India a temporary waiver for Russian oil when the war with Iran started, and India once again began buying it, but when that waiver expires, it may have to stop again. Despite India's being in desperate need of liquefied natural gas (LNG), and despite Russia's offering to provide it on a long-term basis, India has declined Russia's offer.⁴ Instead the US is compelling India to buy US LNG at exorbitant prices.

As the Indian government has discarded even the fig leaf of sovereignty over its own oil policy,

all that remains for it is to exhort its citizens to use less petroleum products (including fertilisers), and preferably stay at home.

10. As mentioned earlier, the Informal Group of Ministers, in its press release of May 11, hinted that the present price levels could not be borne by the Government if the war got prolonged. After all, they pleaded, India's oil marketing companies have absorbed losses of close to Rs 1,000 crore a day, so that "the burden of global astronomical prices is not passed on to the Indian citizens." The Finance Ministry more frankly says that "Pass-through of higher import prices to end-users will also moderate demand growth, and, with it, the pressure on the current account [i.e., the broadest measure of trade deficit]."⁵

This ignores the fact that the Centre alone rakes in Rs 3.5 lakh crore in taxes on crude oil and petroleum products in a year, and it raked in over Rs 19 lakh in the five

years ending 2024-25. This is an extremely regressive tax, extracted from all the citizens of India, even the poorest of the poor. Why can the Centre not now protect the people from a price hike?

While the Government prepares to tighten the belts of the people, it is worth remembering how it loosened the belts of the corporate sector in 2019, by handing it a giant cut in direct taxes. The share of corporate tax revenue in gross tax revenues of the central government fell from 32 per cent in 2019 to 25 per cent in 2025. A parliamentary committee estimated the revenue loss in just the first two years after the cut at Rs 1.84 lakh crore. The loss would have risen thereafter, as corporate profits rose further.

The supposed purpose of driving India's corporate tax rates to among the lowest in the world was to spur investment; but in fact, as India's chief economic advisor recently remarked, "Corporates and the second or third generation entrepreneurs chose to accumulate those cash profits and probably set up family offices elsewhere [i.e., business families' offshore wealth management firms] rather than investing in real assets on the ground."⁶ As the big bourgeoisie have made off with lakhs of crores, India's common people are being asked to tighten their belts yet further. The recent eruption of working class protests indicates they may not be willing to do so.

(Reproduced from
rupeindia.wordpress.com) ■

1. The common people do purchase gold out of traditional compulsions, including for dowries, but in fact they bought less gold in 2025 – they simply paid a higher price for it.
2. It is true that some level of imports is required as India has no domestic source of potash. The point is that the dependence today is much greater than it need be.
3. No doubt there is a case for reducing unbalanced and unscientific use of urea at many places, as well as introducing organic manures and bio-fertilisers. However, any blanket advice may cause grave harm, as soil conditions vary greatly and proper testing is required – for which a major public sector effort is essential.
4. Russia has also reportedly offered to supply India fertilisers such as potash, phosphorus and urea. These too, however, would have to be cleared by Washington.
5. Department of Economic Affairs, Monthly Economic Review, March 2026. Emphasis added.
6. T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan, "After govt. pulls up private firms on investment, CII says capex grew 67% in September 2025", The Hindu, May 11, 2026.

INTERVIEW | The Need of the Hour Is to Build the Broadest International Solidarity Among the Peoples of the Global South

In this second part of our interview series on developments in West Asia, Liberation speaks with *Abdol Hamid Shahrabi*, a veteran Iranian left-wing activist, writer, and researcher whose decades of political work span the struggle against the Shah's dictatorship, solidarity with liberation movements in Latin America and Africa, and ongoing campaigns defending Iran's sovereignty, peace, and justice.

Following the US-Israeli aggression against Iran, what is the everyday situation like where you live since this aggression began?

HAMID SHAHRABI: The war imposed on Iran by one of the most powerful militaries in history has been devastating. Before the so-called ceasefire, in Tehran, as in many other cities across Iran, there was a constant uncertainty about who might be the next target of US or Israeli bombs. Will it be your neighbour, a family member, or even yourself?

Initially, they claimed they would only target military commanders and government officials. However, when they ruthlessly killed 168 children in Minab, the world witnessed their lies and deception.

In such a dire situation, one might assume that fear and panic would grip the entire nation. While there is certainly a level of fear and anxiety among the people, it is not the only sentiment. Above all, there is a profound sense of hatred toward the aggressors and a strong desire for revenge against those who have killed our supreme leader, high-ranking military commanders, brilliant scientists,

and innocent children.

When discussing public reactions to the war, it's essential to distinguish between ordinary working people—who make up the majority of the population—and the wealthy capitalists, who represent a privileged minority. These two groups have vastly different perspectives on the conflict. The former views it as a threat to their homeland and sovereignty, something worth sacrificing their lives for. In contrast, the big capitalists see this imperialist war as an opportunity to extract more concessions from the state and bolster their positions within the Islamic Republic. In fact, they often act as agents of foreign capital, contributing to instability in the country.

Additionally, there exists a sizable middle class that aligns itself with one of these two major camps. Among this group, the poorer segments tend to side with the working class and resistance movement, while the wealthier members often support the aggressors or vacillate between opposing sides.

However, what best illustrates the people's response to this imperialist-Zionist war is the mass

gatherings in the squares and streets of Iranian cities since the conflict began. This phenomenon is remarkable and unprecedented. Hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets at night to chant slogans of resistance, condemning the killing of the supreme leader, show support for young Khamenei, and denounce those who seek to compromise Iran's sovereignty through humiliating deals with imperialists. As of May 16, these rallies have continued uninterrupted for 78 nights!

This marks a significant change and a growing consciousness among the people, signalling a shift toward a more radical stance against imperialism.

What are your thoughts on ongoing fragile ceasefire and continued threats by Trump?

HAMID SHAHRABI: The so-called ceasefire is tenuous and has been repeatedly violated by the US since its inception. A clear example of this is the naval blockade imposed on Iran by the US. Their interpretation of ceasefire seems to be that US adversaries must stop attacking while they prepare for their next round of military aggression. And in reality, they have been doing just that—deploying more troops and military equipment to the battlefield during this so-called ceasefire. They even sent a nuclear submarine close to Iran while Trump threatened that "one big glow will come out of Iran!"

However, rather than demonstrating strength, such language reveals desperation. Despite their assertions of having destroyed Iran's military capabilities, those who are aware of the realities on the ground—including military experts in the United States—acknowledge that mighty US imperialism has faced significant setbacks. They will tell you that

this war has not only failed to achieve the objectives of the US and Israel in bringing about regime change in Iran, but it has also resulted in an opposite outcome: the Islamic Republic of Iran now enjoys greater support among the Iranian populace than it did when the conflict began.

What Iranian people think about Trump's justifications for war against Iran, including claims about Iran developing nuclear weapons and the need to support the Iranian people for "freedom"?

HAMID SHAHRABI: Both claims are unfounded, and we should not need to provide extensive arguments to refute their validity. Regarding the development of nuclear weapons, the entire US intelligence community has repeatedly testified that there is no evidence to suggest that Iran is pursuing such plans. However, in light of the ongoing US and Israeli military attacks on Iran, there is now a growing demand among the Iranian people for the country to acquire nuclear weapons as a deterrent against future aggressions. Let us not forget that we are discussing the United States and Israel, both of which possess nuclear arsenals, with one having a documented history of using such bombs.

As for Trump's assertion that he wishes to support the freedom of Iranians, do we really need to respond to such an absurd claim! A man now known as the butcher of Iranian children is claiming to act in our best interest! Does anyone take that claim seriously?

Amid the ongoing aggression, there are claims that Iran has launched attacks against neighbouring countries?

HAMID SHAHRABI: Iran has not attacked any of its neighbouring countries. This position has been



Hamid Shahrabi at a protest in Tehran against U.S.-Israeli aggression.

clearly articulated by Iranian officials. It is important to note that the United States maintains military bases in several countries surrounding Iran, and these bases have been used to launch attacks against Iran. In response to such aggression, Iran has targeted these bases as a defensive measure, which is entirely legitimate. If Iran aims to defend itself, which it has done, it had no choice but to respond to the sources of these aggressions.

In light of the global energy crisis, how do you analyse the situation in Strait of Hormuz?

HAMID SHAHRABI: We must consider international law regarding waterways, which stipulates that both international and territorial waters should not be used by any nation to infringe upon the sovereignty and territorial integrity of another. How can it be justified for the United States to deploy its naval fleets and nuclear submarines in waters near Iran while threatening the Iranian people with a "return to the Stone Age," and then expect the Islamic Republic to remain silent in the face of such aggression? What is happening in the Strait of Hormuz is Iran's defence of its sovereignty—nothing more,

nothing less.

How do you assess current status of the Left movement in Iran, and analyse the situation in the context of imperialist aggression alongside the rising voices for liberty within Iran?

HAMID SHAHRABI: The essence of the Iranian people's struggle over the past two centuries has been centered around three intertwined principles: freedom, independence, and social justice. These elements form a singular movement that has manifested through various significant events, such as the protest against the tobacco concession with Britain in 1890, the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, the widespread campaign for oil nationalization in 1951, and the successful revolution of February 1979. Each of these pivotal moments, along with the current national resistance against U.S. and Israeli aggression, has been rooted in these fundamental demands.

It would be both a mistake and a failure to appreciate the dynamics of the Iranian struggle to believe one can advocate for one of these three core principles while disregarding the others. Doing so would be a grave error—one that has had dire consequences

Photo: Special Arrangements

in the past. For instance, consider the protests that erupted in Iran earlier this January in response to the drastic devaluation of the Rial, Iran's national currency, and the subsequent rise in consumer prices. Initially, this movement was driven by a legitimate cause. However, it was soon hijacked and distorted by counter-revolutionary forces.

It has even been acknowledged by Israeli intelligence that Mossad played a direct role in instigating the violent protests in January. This "movement," ultimately set the stage for a military attack on Iran just two months later, in March.

While discussing various movements within Iran, I would like to highlight a crucial point regarding certain leftist perspectives on the relationship between national movements and class struggles—not only in Iran but also more broadly in the Global South, where many nations are striving against imperialist dominance. One cannot advocate for liberty and social justice without an anti-imperialist orientation. This is precisely what some leftist political factions overlook when assessing different movements in these countries. By neglecting this critical aspect, they risk blurring the lines between their supposedly progressive and revolutionary positions and those of imperialism, which has a long history of suppressing national liberation movements under the false pretence of defending "democracy" and "human rights."

A genuine leftist perspective acknowledges the critical importance of advocating for freedom of expression, political rights, and civil liberties. However, it also recognizes that imperialism has historically been a primary force depriving nations of their liberty. Therefore, it is essential to confront imperialism while

simultaneously striving for people's democracy.

This principle applies equally to the struggles of the working class. Workers in the Global South cannot effectively pursue their class demands without clearly distinguishing themselves from imperialist influences. A compelling example of this can be seen in Iran, where the leadership of the South Pars gas field workers has successfully mobilized thousands of workers on two fronts: defending the nation against imperialist aggression and fighting for workers' rights, including fair wages and job security.

How do you understand this aggression in the context of the Palestinian cause, especially given that people in Iran have often been at the forefront of expressing solidarity with Gaza?

HAMID SHAHRABI: This is fundamentally the same struggle, united by a common cause and a shared enemy. The rhetoric surrounding Iran's nuclear program serves to obscure the truth: Iran's unwavering commitment to defending the right to self-determination for Palestine. At its core, this is about more than just sovereignty; Iran has emerged as a source of inspiration for liberation movements globally, and particularly in West Asia.

We are witnessing what many describe as an attempt by the Trump–Netanyahu axis to impose a new colonial global order—from Palestine to Venezuela and now Iran. What impact do you think this will have across the world, especially on the Global South?

There should be no doubt that imperialism aims to impose a new colonial order on the countries of the Global South. This is not merely our assessment; they openly declare their intentions,

even announcing plans to revive the Monroe Doctrine. However, it is essential to recognize that they seek to implement this agenda at a time when they are increasingly weakened. While they have perpetrated horrific acts of genocide in Gaza and demonstrated some military strength in Venezuela, they have also faced significant setbacks.

Yes, they assassinated numerous Hezbollah commanders in Lebanon, as well as key figures in Iran's military leadership. Yet, despite these actions, we must ask: have they succeeded in restoring a unipolar world order? When we examine the other side of this conflict, we see the limitations of imperialism. Russia and China's rise as a major global power, the emergence of BRICS, and the ongoing resistance movements in Palestine and Lebanon all illustrate that resistance remains vibrant. We also witness the heroic actions of the Houthis in Yemen and Iran's steadfast resistance, which plays a crucial role in undermining American hegemony.

As an Iranian, what message do you have for people and progressive forces around the world?

HAMID SHAHRABI: The message is straightforward and clear: Iran is fighting not only for its own sovereignty but also for the broader cause of liberty shared by all freedom-loving people worldwide. Iran stands in solidarity with all countries in the Global South that aspire to live free from imperialist dominance. Everyone has a stake in this struggle, and we call for the broadest international solidarity—especially from working people in the U.S. and other imperialist nations who can play a decisive role in bringing this cruel war to an end. ■

The First International and its Contemporary Relevance

▲ MARCELLO MUSTO

To mark the 154th anniversary of the Paris Commune — the revolutionary workers' government that held Paris from March 18 to May 28, 1871 — we are reproducing *Marcello Musto's* essay. The article revisits the history of the International Working Men's Association and its enduring lessons for today: working-class solidarity, internationalism, anti-capitalist struggle, and the need to build broad movements against exploitation, war, and inequality.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

With the most recent crises generated by capitalism—that have sharpened even more than before exploitation, poverty and inequalities—the legacy of the organisation founded in 1864 has regained relevance, making its lessons today more relevant than ever.

The Origins of Internationalism

After its first meeting, on September 28, 1864, the International Working Men's Association (better known as the "First International") quickly

aroused passions all over Europe. It made class solidarity a shared ideal and inspired large numbers of women and men to struggle against exploitation. Thanks to its activity, workers were able to gain a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production, to become more aware of their own strength, and to develop new, more advanced forms of struggle for their rights.

When it was founded, the central driving force of the International was British trade unionism, the leaders of which were mainly interested in economic questions. They fought to improve the workers'

conditions, but without calling capitalism into question. Hence, they conceived the International primarily as an instrument to prevent the import of manpower from abroad in the event of strikes. The second group in importance of the International were the mutualists, long dominant in France. In keeping with the theories of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, they opposed any working-class involvement in politics, and the strike as a weapon of struggle. Then there were the Communists, opposing the existing system of production and espousing the necessity of political action to overthrow it. At its founding, the ranks of the International also included a number of workers inspired by utopian theories, and exiles having vaguely democratic ideas and cross-class conception who considered the International as an instrument for the issuing of general appeals for the liberation of oppressed peoples. Therefore, in the beginning, the International was an organization in which coexisted different political traditions and in which the majority of them were reformist and not revolutionary.

Securing the cohabitation of all these currents in the International, around a programme so distant from the approaches with which each had started out, was Karl Marx's greatest political accomplishment. His political talents enabled him to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. It was Marx who gave a clear purpose to the International, and who achieved a non-exclusionary, yet firmly working class-based, political programme that won it mass support beyond sectarianism. Marx was the political soul of its General Council (the body that worked out a unifying synthesis of the various tendencies and issued guidelines for the organization as a whole), he drafted all its main

resolutions and prepared almost all its congress reports.

Nevertheless, despite the impression later created by the Soviet Union's propaganda, this organisation was much more than a single individual, even one as brilliant as Marx. It was a vast social and political movement for the emancipation of the working classes: not, as it has often been written, the "creation of Marx". The International was made possible first of all by the labour movement's struggles in the 1860s. One of its basic rules—and the fundamental distinction from previous labour organisations—was "that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves". The view that Marx mechanically applied to the stage of history a political theory already forged in the confines of his study is divorced from the historical reality. Marx was essential to the International, but also the International had a very positive impact on Marx. Being directly involved in workers' struggles, Marx was stimulated to develop and sometimes revise his ideas, to put old certainties up for discussion and ask himself new questions, and to sharpen his critique of capitalism by drawing the broad outlines of a communist society.

Theories and struggles

The late Sixties and early Seventies in the 19th century were a period rife with social conflicts in Europe. Many workers who took part in protest actions decided to make contact with the International, whose reputation quickly spread widely. From 1866 on, strikes intensified in many countries and formed the core of a new and important wave of mobilisations. The International was essential in struggles that were won by workers in France, Belgium and Switzerland. The scenario was the

same in many of these conflicts: workers in other countries raised funds in support of the strikers and agreed not to accept work that would have turned them into industrial mercenaries. As a result, the bosses were forced to compromise on many of the strikers' demands. These advances were greatly favoured by the diffusion of newspapers that either sympathised with the ideas of the International or were veritable organs of the General Council. Both contributed to the development of class consciousness and the rapid circulation of news concerning the activity of the International.

Across Europe, the Association developed an efficient organisational structure and increased the number of its members (150,000 at the peak moment). For all the difficulties bound up with a diversity of nationalities, languages and political cultures, the International managed to achieve unity and coordination across a wide range of organisations and spontaneous struggles. Its greatest merit was to demonstrate the crucial importance of class solidarity and international cooperation.

The International was the locus of some of the most famous debates of the labour movement, such as that on communism or anarchy. The congresses of the International were also where, for the first time, a major transnational organisation came to decisions about crucial issues, which had been discussed before its foundation, that subsequently became strategic points in the political programmes of socialist movements across the world. Among these are: the indispensable function of trade unions; the socialisation of land and means of production; the importance of participating in elections, and doing this through independent parties of the working

class; women's emancipation; and the conception of war as an inevitable product of the capitalist system.

The International also spread outside Europe. On the other side of the Atlantic immigrants who had arrived in recent years began to establish the first sections of the International in the United States of America. However, the organisation suffered from two handicaps at birth that it would never overcome. Despite repeated exhortations from the General Council in London, it was unable either to cut across the nationalist character of its various affiliated groups or to draw in workers born in the "New World". When the German, French and Czech sections founded the Central Committee of the International for North America, in December 1870, it was unique in the history of the International in having only "foreign-born" members. The most striking aspect of this anomaly was that the International in the United States never disposed of an English-language press organ. At the beginning of the 1870s, the International reached a total of 50 sections with a combined membership of 4000, but this was still only a tiny proportion of the American industrial workforce of more than two million.

Peak and crisis

The most significant moment of the International coincided with the Paris Commune. In March 1871, after the end of Franco-Prussian War, the workers of Paris rose against the new government of Adolphe Thiers and took power in the city. Henceforth, the International was at the centre of the storm, and gained enormous notoriety.

For capitalists and the middle classes, it represented a great threat to the established order,

whereas for workers it fuelled hopes for a world without exploitation and injustice. The labour movement had an enormous vitality and that was apparent everywhere. Newspapers linked to the International increased in both number and overall sales. The insurrection of Paris fortified the workers' movement, impelling it to adopt more radical positions and to intensify its militancy. Once again in history, France showed that revolution was possible, clarifying its goal to be building a society different from that of capitalism, but also that, to achieve this, the workers would have to create durable and well-organised forms of political association. The next step to take then, as stated by Marx, was understanding that "the economic movement of the working class and its political action are indissolubly united". That led the International, at the London Conference of 1871, to push for the foundation of a key instrument of the modern workers' movement: the political party—although it should be stressed that the understanding of this was much broader than that adopted by communist organisations after the October Revolution.

When the International dissolved itself after The Hague Congress of 1872, it was a very different organisation from what it had been at the time of its foundation: reformists no longer constituted the bulk of the organisation and anti-capitalism had become the political line of the whole Association (including new tendencies like the anarchists led by Mikhail Bakunin).

The wider picture, too, was radically different. The unification of Germany in 1871 confirmed the onset of a new age, with the nation-state the central form of political, legal and territorial identity.

The initial configuration of

the International thus became outmoded, just as its original mission came to an end. The task was no longer preparing for and organising Europe-wide support for strikes, nor calling congresses proclaiming the usefulness of trade unions or the need to socialise the land and the means of production. Such themes were now part of the collective heritage of the organisation. After the Paris Commune, the real challenge for the workers' movement became how to organise to end the capitalist mode of production and overthrow the institutions of the bourgeois world.

Internationalism: Then and today

The 156th anniversary of the First International (in 2020 -ed.) takes place in a very different context. An abyss separates the hopes of those times from the mistrust so characteristic of our own, the antisystemic spirit and solidarity of the age of the International from the ideological subordination and individualism of a world reshaped by neoliberal competition and privatization.

The world of labor has suffered an epochal defeat and the left is still in the midst of a deep crisis. After a long period of neoliberal policies, the system against which workers fought, and had won important victories, has returned to conditions of exploitation similar to those of the 19th century. Labor market "reforms"—a term that has changed its original progressive meaning—that have introduced year after year more "flexibility" and easier termination of workers, have created deeper inequalities. Other major political and economic shifts have succeeded one another, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Among them there have been the social changes generated by globalization, the

ecological disasters produced by the present mode of production, the growing gulf between the wealthy exploitative few and the huge impoverished majority, one of the biggest economic crises of capitalism (the one erupted in 2008) in history, the blustery winds of war, racism and chauvinism, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a context such as this class solidarity is all the more indispensable. It was Marx himself who emphasized that the confrontation among workers, including that between the native proletarians and the foreign ones (who are moreover discriminated), is an essential element of the domination of the ruling classes. New ways of organizing social conflict, political parties and trade unions must certainly be reinvented, as we cannot reproduce schemes used 150 years ago. But the old lesson of the International that workers are defeated if they do not organize a common front of the exploited is still valid. Without that, the only scenario we have before us is a horizon of war between the poor and unbridled competition between individuals.

Today's barbarism of the "world order" imposes upon the contemporary workers' movement the urgent need to reorganize itself on the basis of two key characteristics of the International: the multiplicity of its structure and radicalism in objectives. The aims of the organization founded in London, in 1864, are today more timely than ever. To rise to the challenges of the present, however, the new International cannot evade that twin requirements of pluralism and anticapitalism.

[Reprinted with the author's consent from a chapter in Ten Short Essays on Marxism (Aakar Books, New Delhi, 2025)] ■

On Intellectual Property, Patents and Voluntary Licensing

▲ SURYO

Illustration: Yogendra Anand / CSE



Since 2025, India has signed four free-trade agreements (FTA) – with the United States, United Kingdom, the European Union (EU), and the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) – which includes countries such as Switzerland and Norway. The terms and the extent to which the FTA with the US will be implemented is anybody's guess, but the agreements with European economies – themselves a result of a sharp escalation of US tariffs on Indian goods in 2025 – are likely to be more stable. These FTAs or trade deals, often emphasize the “intellectual property rights” of European companies trading with India, especially in the pharmaceutical sector. This could be a serious concern for Indian producers and consumers because intellectual property is one of the strongest instruments of imperialism.

Rather than ownership over

a physical object, Intellectual property (IP) is a state-guaranteed monopoly over the use of knowledge, inventions, designs, or cultural works. A patent is a temporary legal monopoly over the commercial use of an invention or a method which in reality, however, serves to restrict the very free competition that capitalism otherwise hails as supreme. Patent regimes allow firms to extract monopoly rents long after the direct costs of innovation have been recovered. Under most standard IP regulations, companies reserve the right to permit other producers to manufacture the commodity if they pay royalties to the patent-holding company. This system is called “voluntary licensing”, since companies can voluntarily decide whether other companies may produce the commodity.

Now consider what a patent

might mean for medicines and pharmaceuticals. Companies that discover drugs for diseases like cancer or AIDS are free to keep the prices of these life-saving drugs extremely high, while disallowing other companies from manufacturing them, even if another company would be able to deliver the same drug to patients at considerably lower prices. Historically, this has led to extremely high medication prices, such as during the AIDS crisis in many African countries, when life-saving antiretroviral medication existed but remained prohibitively expensive for most patients. In this regard, the Indian legal system has had relatively strong provisions to prevent the misuse of patents by pharmaceuticals, through a provision called compulsory licensing, where the government can force a pharmaceutical company to allow others to produce the drug if it is prohibitively expensive by Indian standards and the patent is deemed to have “not worked.” In a landmark case – Natco vs Bayer, 2012 – Indian pharmaceutical company Natco Pharma applied for a compulsory licence for the cancer drug Nexavar, sold by Bayer at around Rs. 2.8 lakh per patient per month, arguing that Natco could manufacture the same drug for about Rs. 8,800 per month. The Indian Patent Office (IPO) found that only 2% of the eligible patient population in India could realistically afford the drug at Bayer's prices and granted its first compulsory license of the twenty-first century. Natco could produce the drug at low prices after paying about a 6% royalty to Bayer.

India's relatively progressive IP regime itself is a product of a long history of post-colonial struggle. At the time of independence, India inherited the colonial Indian Patents and Design Act, 1911. The old Act

was considered to favor foreign, particularly British, patentees as opposed to Indian producers or consumers. The 1957 Ayyangar commission warned that foreign patent holders may even be able to use patents to capture Indian markets without manufacturing in India. In 1970, India passed the progressive Patents Act (1970) and the Patents Rules came into effect in April 1972, replacing the colonial law. The 1970 Act did not allow product patents for food, drugs, and medicines. It allowed only process patents in these sectors, with shorter terms for drug/food processes. It is with this act that the safeguards against pharmaceutical monopolies and the compulsory licensing provisions were introduced. The Act was instrumental in the development of the Indian pharmaceutical industry, in the 1970s and 1980s, which could produce drugs at extremely low prices without patent restrictions, giving India the title of the “pharmacy of the world.”

After economic liberalization in 1991 and India’s subsequent entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO), India became bound by TRIPS regulations in 1995, with a transition period lasting until 2005. Soon after, in 1997, the United States and countries in Europe pushed back on India’s IP laws that didn’t allow for a “mailbox system” and did not give foreign companies exclusive marketing rights for pharmaceutical and agrochemical patents during the transition period. The WTO ruled against India, and India had to concede. Multiple other concessions followed. In 2002, the NDA government modified the Patent Act to bring it closer to TRIPS regulations. This introduced the 20-year validity and restrained compulsory licensing provisions. In 2005, product patents – including food and drugs – were

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restored, and the government amended the previous law that only allowed patents for processes and not products. However, the Natco/Bayer case in 2012, and the Novartis case the subsequent year, showed that the Indian government was still willing, at least selectively, to use the public-health flexibilities available within the TRIPS framework.

The Narendra Modi government, however, has been weakening these institutions. In 2024, the government enacted the Patent (Amendment) Rules, which weakened Form 27 -- the mandatory disclosures that companies had to declare about how well their patents have “worked”, which they no longer need to do. The government is also partly implementing restrictions on pre-grant opposition to patents: Earlier patients and activist groups could oppose patents before they were granted, which they may not be able to do after the rule changes. Thus, by weakening rules, the government is subordinating the pharmaceutical market to foreign corporate interests despite the laws still allowing compulsory licensing.

Thus, recent developments by the government of India, such

as the emphasis on voluntary licensing of pharmaceuticals in recent trade deals with the UK, EU, and the EFTA is a cause for alarm. Critics have warned that these agreements may create a chilling effect around the use of compulsory licensing, even if they do not formally abolish it. If these agreements weaken India’s willingness to invoke compulsory licensing, life-saving medication could get prohibitively expensive.

Instead of weakening existing compulsory licensing regimes, the government should consider extending compulsory licensing provisions beyond pharmaceuticals, to other industries. One policy route is technology transfer requirements for foreign firms operating in the country. Technological transfer requirements have been one of the policy instruments that have allowed China to pursue industrial policy – using mandated technology transfers to develop domestic industrial capacity in manufacturing – especially, high value manufacturing. Another more controversial alternative is state-sponsored R&D and reverse engineering, which may ultimately be understood as a process of the democratization of access to advanced productive technology.

India must decide whether IP policy will serve imperial rent extraction or prefer public health, and industrial self-reliance. The recent direction taken by the government towards voluntary licensing arrangements, must be understood as a piece in the broader subordination of India’s economic sovereignty and national development to imperialist control. The people of India must continue to struggle for more affordable products and services against the monopoly of big corporations and multinationals. ■

12th Bihar State Conference of the CPI(ML)

The three-day 12th Bihar State Conference of the CPI(ML) concluded in Darbhanga on May 18, 2026, which had begun with the offering of tributes to the great icons of mass movements, social justice, and progressive cultural traditions and remembering numerous mass leaders and cultural figures, including Baba Nagarjun, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, Chandrashekhar Azad, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia to draw inspiration from their struggles.

Approximately 700 delegates and observers from across the state participated in this significant conference. Leaders of the INDIA alliance also attended the inaugural session. Bihar has long been the custodian of a rich tradition of social change, mass resistance, and democratic movements; this conference stood firmly to carry that very legacy forward.

On the first day of the conference, a massive and spirited march was organised, proceeding from Laheriasarai Chowk to the conference venue. Resounding with red flags, revolutionary songs, and slogans, the march saw the participation of a large number of people. The marchers raised slogans such as "Bulldozer Raj will not be tolerated," "Stop the attacks on democracy," and "Employment and education are our rights".

The conference began after paying tributes at the Martyrs' Memorial and observing a two-minute silence in their memory, and pledging to struggle to build Bihar as envisioned by the martyrs.

The conference venue was

adorned with symbols of mass struggles and progressive cultural consciousness. The city was named after the renowned writer Phanishwarnath Renu and people's poet Baba Nagarjun. The auditorium was dedicated to the memory of Comrades Rajaram, Ramdev Verma, and Lakshmi Paswan, while the stage was named after Comrades Madhu Mishra, Dayamanti Sinha, and Shahida Khatoon. Many entrance arches were erected in Darbhanga town in memory of the party's senior and departed leaders including Visheshwar Yadav, Manoj Yadav, Emanuel Haq, and Vishnudev Yadav, among others. The entire complex is festooned with red flags, posters, banners, and photographs depicting various mass struggles. Posters conveying messages of resistance against the "Bulldozer Raj," communalism, unemployment, and attacks on democratic rights have emerged as a special highlight of the conference. Reverent tributes were also paid to the eminent historians Ram Sharan Sharma, D.N. Jha, and Radhakrishna Chaudhary - scholars who provided a new direction to the ideological struggle against hypocrisy, superstition, and communal hatred.

CPI(ML) General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya addressed a seminar, held as an inaugural event, titled "The Question of Democracy and the Bulldozer Raj". He asserted that the people of the country must now wage a new battle for freedom and reclaim it once again. He remarked that people of Bihar are now living under the rule of the BJP where there is open discourse regarding the indiscriminate

use of bulldozers. The recent statement by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court proves that the ruling power has established a complete stranglehold over all institutions. He noted that the foreign policy adopted by the Modi government is tarnishing India's image on the global stage. Prime Minister Modi's call for austerity measures are merely a ploy to hide an existing crisis for which his own government is responsible. He is transferring the burden of his own failures onto the poor people of the country, even as the workers across the country are struggling to secure a minimum wage.

He said we must move forward with courage, resolving to champion truth against falsehood and to wage a struggle against oppression, to halt the BJP's "bulldozer". Citing Bhagat Singh, he asserted that the nation faces a dual task: to bring about a change within the country, and simultaneously defeat global imperialist forces along with their domestic collaborators. The various constituent parties of the INDIA alliance must collectively fulfill this singular mission while preserving their own distinct diversity.

RJD State President Mr. Mangnilal Mandal extended his best wishes to the conference, and stated that a struggle on the streets is essential to counter the situation where neither Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) nor the Election Commission can be trusted. Senior Congress leader Madan Mohan Jha while commending the role played by the CPI(ML), noted that threats to democracy, journalists, and dissenting voices have intensified. He emphasized that an organized struggle is imperative.

CPIML Politburo member Rajaram Singh observed that the elections in Bengal and Tamil Nadu have signaled growing threats to the Constitution and democracy. He called for the preservation of democracy by

opposing the BJP's intentions behind the delimitation exercise.

IIP party's I.P. Gupta launched a scathing attack on the government, criticizing rising unemployment, inflation, and the punitive actions taken against impoverished settlements. He asserted that the bulldozer is deployed exclusively against Dalits and the poor.

Meena Tiwari, AIPWA General Secretary, said people's resistances are gaining momentum across the country. She condemned the baton-charge on teachers, attacks on women, and the prevalence of anti-women politics. Citing the examples of Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh, she affirmed that women have secured their rights through struggle and are determined not to be deterred.

Raising critical issues concerning the escalating repression faced by working class, ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers, and students, and the non-payment of dues and the violation of rights, MLC and AICCTU leader Shashi Yadav declared that the CPI(ML) would further strengthen these ongoing struggles.

Lalan Chaudhary reminded the Central Government's broken promises, unemployment, the agrarian crisis, attacks on labor rights, and the propagation of hate politics. He asserted that both democracy and the Constitution are currently under grave threat.

The open session of the conference was also addressed by CPI State Secretary Ramnaresh Pandey, VIP Party leader Balgovind Bind, and Ara MP Sudama Prasad. The session was conducted by Dharendra Jha, party's in-charge of the Mithila Zone. The guests were welcomed by Surendra Suman, a renowned litterateur from the region.

Senior party leader Swadesh Bhattacharya, former Chairperson of the Women's Commission Manju Prakash, CC member Prabhat

Kumar, conference observer V. Shankar, and VIP's Umesh Sahni, were also present on the dais. The vote of thanks was delivered by Darbhanga District Secretary Baidyanath Yadav.

During delegate sessions, delegates discussed issues like social justice, communalism, demolition of the homes of the poor, suppression of the movements of students and youth, and stifling of dissenting voices. Questions were raised regarding the electoral process where the names of lakhs of people have been excluded from the voter lists. While their names ought to be reinstated, the government is, conversely, threatening to revoke their access to various public welfare schemes. This was a matter of concern that approximately 4.5 million people now face the looming crisis of losing their ration cards and other essential benefits. The voters had to previously elect the government, but now the government, acting through the Election Commission, appears to be selecting its own voters.

The issue of land also came for discussion as farmers' lands are under threat of acquisitions to hand them over to large corporate houses by the newly installed BJP regime in the state. Concern was expressed regarding the rising incidents of violence against women, which has further escalated since the elections, and victims are failing to receive justice. The conference condemned the Modi government for the NEET paper leak, which jeopardised the futures of 2.2 million students.

The conference concluded successfully following three days of extensive debate, where delegates discussed the work report and put forward several significant suggestions regarding the state's political landscape, organizational expansion, mass movements, and

upcoming struggles.

V. Shankar, Politburo member and the conference observer, remarked that Bihar has historically been a state that provides direction to the country's politics. He asserted that regardless of electoral outcomes, the people of Bihar are a resilient population, ever-ready to fight for the defense of democracy. He noted that progressive forces across the entire nation are looking toward Bihar with hopeful eyes. In his address, while referencing the DMK's defeat in Tamil Nadu, he emphasised the need for democratic and secular forces to forge an even broader unity.

On the last day of the conference, the election of the new 107-member State Committee was concluded, which unanimously elected Comrade Kunal as the State Secretary once again. This time, 27 new faces have been elected to the State Committee.

The state conference adopted a 10-point action agenda outlining upcoming struggles and campaigns, which included a call to ensure the widespread success of the rural and agrarian workers' strike scheduled for May 20th; and to launch a public outreach campaign to reach out to 1 million families across Bihar.

The key resolutions adopted at the conference included the immediate implementation of the Women's Reservation Act, the conduct of a caste-based census, the expansion of the Samata Movement, and to build a movement against bulldozer attacks. The conference also condemned the recent statement made by Bihar's Education Minister terming it antithetical to both education and democratic values.

The conference concluded amidst revolutionary slogans and a collective pledge to uphold and defend democracy, the Constitution, and people's rights. ■

Dharavi Bachao Andolan on a Warpath

Nasirul Haque

The Dharavi Bachao Andolan (Save Dharavi Movement) in Mumbai is on a warpath against the decision of Adani's company Navbharat Mega Developers Pvt. Ltd. (NMDPL), which has classified 85% of Dharavi residents as 'ineligible' or 'undecided' for the rehabilitation. Dharavi residents were promised by the Dharavi Redevelopment Project and Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) of Maharashtra government for land plots and other amenities in the Dharavi area itself, after conducting a proper survey. Now NMDPL has declared only 15% of residents eligible for rehabilitation!

On May 4, 2026, the Dharavi Bachao Andolan organized a 'Jan Akrosh Morcha' to protest against Adani's company. A delegation of Dharavi Bachao Andolan accompanied by leaders of all opposition parties of Maharashtra met SRA officials after the protest and submitted a memorandum. The Dharavi residents have been demanding that all approximately 120,000 shanties and structures across Dharavi's six sectors must be deemed eligible and all Dharavikars must be provided with a home measuring 500 square feet within Dharavi itself. All residents should be allotted an equivalent amount of space. All shops, factories, industrial units, and commercial establishments should be allotted space within Dharavi itself, by designating a dedicated economic zone for this purpose. All religious sites - including temples, mosques, and churches - as well as grounds, community spaces, schools, colleges, and

hospitals, should be redeveloped within Dharavi itself by allocating them appropriate locations.

They have also demanded to abolish eligibility cut-off date requiring documentary proof prior to December 31, 1999, and the final cut-off date should be adopted as 2011, which the SRA has accepted as the eligibility cut-off for slums in other parts of Mumbai.

During the tenure of the Maha Vikas Aghadi government, when Shiv Sena Chief Uddhav Thackeray served as the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, an international tender for the Dharavi Project was floated in 2018. Then, the highest bidder, a Dubai-based SecLink Technologies Corporation, was awarded the tender for a sum of ₹7,400 crore. Adani Realty had also participated in this tender at the time but failed to secure the contract.

This tender originally encompassed only 550 acres of land within Dharavi; it did not include a specific 48.7-acre parcel of railway land situated within the slum area. The then Chief Minister, Uddhav Thackeray, had requested the Ministry of Railways to allocate this 48.7-acre land parcel for the Dharavi Project. The Maharashtra government had even paid ₹800 crore to the Railways for this purpose, yet the then Railway Minister Piyush Goyal kept the matter in limbo. However, after the toppling of the Maha Vikas Aghadi government in June 2022, Eknath Shinde was appointed Chief Minister while Devendra Fadnavis became the Housing Minister, the aforementioned railway land was promptly handed over to the Dharavi Project.

Using this railway land issue as a pretext, the tender awarded to SecLink Technologies Corporation was cancelled. Subsequently, rules and regulations were manipulated to ensure that the Dharavi Project was awarded exclusively to Adani. It is widely alleged that the Uddhav Thackeray government was brought down precisely because Adani coveted the Dharavi Project. Moreover, Adani secured the project at a price approximately ₹3,000 crore lower than the original bid. The estimated market value of the 600 acres of land within Dharavi is believed to be a staggering ₹1.5 lakh crore. Furthermore, under the guise of the Dharavi Project, an additional 1,371 acres of prime land located across various parts of Mumbai were also allotted to Adani Realty. All these lands, estimated to be worth between ₹2 lakh crore and ₹2.5 lakh crore, have been handed over to NMDPL free of cost under the guise of the Dharavi Redevelopment Project, ostensibly for the rehabilitation of "ineligible" residents of Dharavi. Adani's subsidiary, Adani Realty, holds an 80% stake in NMDPL, while the Government of Maharashtra holds a mere 20% stake.

The survey done by Adani's former company - DRPPL (Dharavi Redevelopment Project Private Limited), now NMDPL, has extensively utilised local brokers and musclemen. They even employed certain retired police officers to intimidate and threaten the residents. Despite these tactics, they have managed to complete the survey for less than 40% of the area. Several major localities within Dharavi have refused to cooperate with NMDPL in the survey following a call to action by the Dharavi Bachao Andolan. The collective demand of all these residents is that the government must first issue a written declaration confirming

that all of them will be deemed "eligible" and will be provided with a replacement home for every home, and a replacement shop for every shop, located within Dharavi itself.

Until now, across the entirety of Mumbai, the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) has recognised only two categories: "eligible" and "ineligible." However, in Dharavi, a third category has been introduced: "undecided." By maintaining this "undecided" category, officials from NMDPL in collusion with SRA and BMC are engaged in corruption under the pretext of processing paperwork to grant "eligible" status, they are extorting large sums of money from residents.

The Dharavi Bachao Andolan has demanded the survey conducted by NMDPL should be annulled, and a fresh survey be conducted; and documentary proof should be requested only after a specific structure has been officially declared eligible for rehabilitation.

The residents of Dharavi firmly believe that Adani's company, NMDPL, is incapable of executing the redevelopment of Dharavi in a proper and satisfactory manner; therefore, a government-owned entity - such as MHADA, MMRDA, or CIDCO - should be appointed in its place. ■

Speaking a Thousand Words Through His Photographs... Goodbye Raghu Rai

▲ APAL



Photo: Raul Irani

Raghu Rai, the legendary Indian photographer, passed away on April 26th, aged 83. As is seen at most funerals, he was not sent off with flowers, but a camera and film roll was placed in his hands. It was a fitting tribute to a photographer who always had a camera at his side.

Raghu Rai, was a towering figure, literally and figuratively. Dubbed the "Amitabh Bachchan of Indian Photography" his peers recall his flamboyant style, enhanced by flowing robes that added to his commanding presence. However, behind the glamour was a tenacious professional who helped change the face of Indian photography. His disciplined work ethic spanned six decades and survived the transition from film to digital. With more than fifty photobooks to his name, Rai did not just click a photo, he created a dense archive by building a massive, tangible body of work. He demonstrated a level of productivity that remains unparalleled.

Initiated into photography in 1963 by his elder brother S. Paul – already a working photojournalist, Raghu Rai started his career working as chief photographer for 'The Statesman' newspaper from 1965 to 1976. This stint significantly shaped his photographic style and approach. It was here that he honed his skill of telling a story in a single image, a cerebral skill but, one built on hands on hard work. Many of the prints he made from that era still stand the test of time, showcasing his photographic skill and still exhibited in several museums and galleries India and across the globe.

Until the 1960s and 70s photography was not an easy way to make a living. Photojournalism was one of the few paths where a photographer was able to earn a respectful wage and newspapers and journals were the only platform for show-casing photographic work to an audience. Images were usually taken and disseminated, and then disappeared into the collective consciousness – this was especially the case with images that witnessed the

suffering of others. The work of mid-century photographers who worked in India, such as Sunil Janah and Margaret Bourke-White, largely vanished from public view. Magazines that published their work shut down and were forgotten. The few books photographers published went out of print.

At that time Indian photographers, particularly documentary photographers and photojournalists, followed the pictorial photography movement. A movement that started in Europe in the early 20th Century which was mastered in America, it was a style that Indian photographers adopted whole heartedly. Pictorial photography sought to be artistic and dreamy; but despite this photography wasn't considered worthy as art for nascent gallery space.

Raghu Rai is the photographer who perhaps did most to break that ceiling. He was both published and exhibited widely, everywhere. He was the first Indian and the youngest member of the prestigious Magnum Photo Agency.

In the second half of 20th Century the question of distance, not only optical, physical and psychological, but most of all political, became a common issue for critical discussion amongst documentary photographers and photojournalists - as Robert Capa said, "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough". "European grammar" as taught by Rai's mentor, Henri Cartier-Bresson prized subtraction and the isolated "decisive moment," but Rai argued this was insufficient for the Indian ethos. Instead of Robert Capa's tight, intimate proximity, Rai stepped back to capture "voices over voices". His frames were intentionally chaotic and layered, reflecting a country

where a "main subject" rarely remains the centre of attention for long. The European grammar, subtraction, clean geometry, isolated "decisive moment", was no help in India.

Raghu Rai belongs to the generation of photographers who turned controversial ideas into subjects for their own artistic and personal exploration. He constantly stepped back, and by using a very wide angle 20mm lens, he utilised the distance between himself and his subject. In essence, his wide-angle lens acted as a "magnifier of space," turning ordinary scenes into dramatic, three-dimensional stories. This allowed him to capture the tense, layered and chaotic essence of Indian life.

Raghu Rai's legacy is complex. It can be argued that his high-contrast, lyrical compositions risk "beautifying" suffering. By turning a horrific industrial disaster, the 1984 Bhopal Gas disaster for example, into a "poetic" image, it suggests the immediate political urgency can sometimes be softened by the photograph's artistic grace.

Yet, as the "Rock Star of Indian Photography," Raghu Rai's towering influence was matched by a growing body of critical scrutiny regarding how he framed, and perhaps distorted, the Indian reality. It is true that for decades, Rai was the unofficial eyes of the Indian state, standing at the right hand of Indira Gandhi or in the private sanctums of the Dalai Lama. In a country where photography was often restricted by economic controls and elite gatekeeping, his "courtly" access was undeniable. His focus on Sadhus, the Ganges, and crowded street scenes played into Western expectations of a "mystical, chaotic" India. His style is often described as "epic" and "romantic" and it can

be argued this sometimes led to a "flattening" of modern India's complexities in favour of a timeless spiritual narrative that ignored contemporary socio-economic shifts of a modernising nation. To some, this played directly into Western Orientalist expectations of a "chaotic yet spiritual" India, effectively turning the country's modern struggles into a timeless, exotic postcard.

Then there is his body of work of Mother Teresa. Rai's work could be seen as bearing witness to her work, but smacks of hagiography. While his images are visually stunning, they can be seen as spiritual romanticism. Raghu Rai played a major role in constructing the "saintly" narrative that ignored the more controversial aspects of her missions. By focusing on the "divine light" and the "epic" nature of her work, Rai's photographs arguably commodified poverty into a backdrop for spiritual drama, satisfying a global hunger for "mystical India" while ignoring the gritty, socio-political causes of the suffering he was framing.

The discourse surrounding Raghu Rai should be about acknowledging his technical mastery and scrutiny of his gaze. While he undeniably shattered the glass ceiling for Indian photography on the global stage, he did so by institutionalising a specific visual language – one that often prioritised the "epic" over the "urgent." By favouring a "timeless" narrative, his work frequently bypassed the raw, unvarnished pulse of a changing nation in favour of a curated, atmospheric reality. Ultimately, Rai did not just document India; he mythologized it, leaving a legacy that is as much a subject of aesthetic wonder as it is a cautionary study in the politics of the romanticised lens. ■

OBITUARY



Adieu Comrade Krishna Bandyopadhyay

VIET BANERJEE

Comrade Krishna Bandyopadhyay, an organiser of Naxalbari uprising, tireless activist in the struggles for human rights and women's rights passed away in Kolkata on 15 May, 2026.

Along with her elder brother, Comrade Byomkesh Banerjee, she had drawn other members of their family into the Naxalbari movement as well. During the 1970s, she dedicated herself to building organisation among agricultural labourers in Hooghly district. During this period, she was arrested and spent nearly two and a half years in prison.

After her release, she actively participated in movements for the release of political prisoners and in protests against every instance of state repression. She was associated with various democratic organisations, including APDR and the Anti-Communal Platform.

At the time of aggressive anti-Pakistan nationalist propaganda, she played an important role in building the "Pakistan India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy" in 1996 and also attended its conference in Lahore in 1998.

During the Gujarat riots, she travelled to Gujarat and visited relief camps for riot victims. On her return, she edited the book Gujarat Chhariye (Beyond Gujarat). She also regularly took part in many of our party's important programmes and initiatives.

She was uncompromising on the question of women's liberation and the dignity and respect of women within society and the family. For many years, she was associated with the editing of the women's journal 'Khonj Ekhon'. She also edited two important books: 'Women in the Naxalbari Movement' and 'Charu Mazumdar and Naxalbari'.

Even two days before her death, she appealed on social media for the unity of Left against the BJP.

The life, struggles, humanity, and uncompromising political commitment of Comrade Krishna Bandyopadhyay will continue to inspire our struggles.

Heartfelt tribute and Red Salute to Comrade Krishna Bandyopadhyay! ■

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