

NEWS WRAP

AGD

With ideology becoming more and more obscure in politics of West Bengal, political parties are exercising brute force to impose political control over students bodies. West Bengal state assembly elections are due in May 2011. The two opposing political camps, viz the ruling Left Front and the Trinamool Congress-led opposition are embattled in street violence, which has steadily engulfed the entire state. College and University students are fiercely engaged in the turf war. Since the beginning of Dec 2010, there has been a spate of violence in several colleges and university compounds. A few students have been killed, and another lost an eye, from showers of bricks and sticks. The principal of a college in Habra (North 24 Parganas) suffered a cardiac arrest, after enduring a gherao for more than twelve hours. The warring groups are alternately shutting down schools and colleges, in protest against campus violence. Traffic in Kolkata frequently comes to a standstill, as the dead bodies of supporters, are taken out in processions. Maybe, a re-run of 'hoodlum years' of '70s!

CHENNAI'S REAL ESTATE

Construction projects in Chennai employ around three lac migrant labourers, mostly natives of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. They are housed by contractors on site, or live in rented huts in the construction vicinity. High rise buildings and flyovers are symbols of a new economy in Chennai. The construction labourers working on the projects suffer from low-paid wages and insecure working conditions, often in conditions of bonded labour. The labourers, particularly women and children, work for almost ten hours everyday, digging earth and carrying mud filled baskets for the rest of the day. Protective legislation for migrant workers exist, but are never implemented. Many of the labourers are not even paid the minimum wages. Verification procedures with the Welfare Board are cumbersome, and a large section of workers are deprived of benefits. The male dominated building workers profession does not encourage women from learning masonry, painting, white washing, and other specialized trades. Women work right through pregnancy. Accident victims are never compensated nor rehabilitated. Increase in the price of construction materials and labour shortages have slowed down real estate work on almost 50% of the upcoming residential projects, in and round Chennai. The city needs an additional 20 to 25% labour to complete existing projects.

TUITION FEES IN UK

Nick Clegg, UK's deputy prime minister and leader of the Liberal Democrats—the smaller partner in the Conservative—Lib Dem coalition—has proposed that fees for top universities in Britain be raised from current cap of 3300 pounds on annual fees to 6000 pounds a year, or 9000 pounds for top universities, provided they allow access to poor students. At a time when government support has been cut by 3 bn, about 40%, as part of an austerity package, the British coalition has chosen to increase fees, to maintain the quality of Britain's University system. This is the deepest spending cut endured by Britain, since the second world war. In the last two months, tens of thousands of students have taken to the streets, demonstrating against the rise in university tuition fees.

CONFUCIUS PEACE PRIZE

In a snub to the Nobel Committee, which outraged Beijing by awarding its most famous peace prize to a Chinese dissident, a mysterious Chinese group has initiated the Confucius Peace Prize. The 2010 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Liu Xiabo, a democracy activist serving an eleven-year jail sentence for "subversion". The Confucius prize, named after the

ancient Chinese philosopher, has been won by Lien Chan, the former vice-president of Taiwan, who helped bring about the rapprochement between Beijing and Taipei. The organizers explained that since China was the most populous country in the world, "it should have a greater voice in world peace". The Confucious prize committee raised the Rmb 100,000 (\$15,000) peace prize money from companies and private supporters. The short list covered names of Qiao Damo, a poet, Bill Gates, Nelson Mandela, Jimmy Carter, Mahmoud Abbas and The Panchen Lama. □□□