

# frontier

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## Endless War

**W**AR IS NOT AN OPTION FOR EITHER PAKISTAN OR INDIA'. That was Shehbaz Sharif, Prime Minister of Pakistan. He was talking to a group of students from Harvard University in Islamabad. The delegation consisted of students from diverse origins and academic backgrounds. He emphasised on achieving 'permanent peace' in the region through dialogue. What he said to students who are likely to join the ruling elite club in future was anything but nonsense. Lasting peace in South Asia is next to impossible unless both India and Pakistan agree not to disagree on maintaining the status quo along the contested line of control (LoC). The sub-continent remained a flash point in the yester years and it will remain so in future as two parallel perceptions on territorial boundary cannot meet. Ironically in the same meeting Mr Sharif didn't forget to place a rider saying in no uncertain terms that sustainable peace in South Asia was linked to the resolution of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK).

India and Pakistan had already fought four wars over the control of territory, and permanent mistrust, not an atmosphere of co-operation and accommodation was created as a result of bloody partition. People in both countries live in a perennial state of animosity, not friendship. The enemy syndrome in both countries is so strong and deep rooted that a single spark can really start a prairie fire. People on both sides of the fence are living dangerously. The on-going argument over the future of what had originally been independent Kashmir before a part of it being absorbed by Pakistan and part by India is not going to end soon. The Kashmir insurgency backed by Pakistan is actually a proxy war. In other words it is an endless war and there is no solution. Diplomatic niceties cannot resolve the vexed question of Kashmir. What is required is political honesty and willingness but the sub-continents show no urgency to improve their status in that area.

It is the legacy of partition. Around 16 million people made the move at the time of partition or in the years immediately after. The number of dead was about two million, according to a conservative estimate while women abducted or raped numbered 100,000, if not more. With so many people forced to move, and so many killed in the process, it was inevitable that the act of partition would have lasting impact for later generation. Partition triggered a series of events the consequences of which millions are still living with today. They talk of peace for the sake of talking. When it is the issue of Kashmir they would prefer to play with the gallery. At one

stage there was hope of settlement when they signed the Shimla agreement but the late Bhutto simply backed out and the Shimla spirit was shelved forever.

Not for nothing both India and Pakistan maintain massive armies that face each other. Both countries are increasing their defence expenditures every year and modernising their armed forces by inducting sophisticated and costly military gadgets, at the expense of the people, poor people. In terms of global parameters both are at the bottom of the list. That is not their concern, what matters most to them is how to boost military budget. As per the report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute—SIPRI—Pakistan holds about 100-120 atom bombs while India has about 90-100 nuclear weapons. So the fifth war between two most populous nations in Asia is likely to be

nuclear. Whether the persons in power will resort to collective suicide is a different matter but once some personnel attached to the military establishment of Pakistan made it clear to Pervez Huidhoy, the renowned anti-nuke activist that they would not hesitate to use nuclear options in case of a defeat.

For one thing the world is full of wars. War is the permanent scenario, not peace. And war is in reality state business. The global ruling elites cannot allow the people to live in peace and prosper. They will create enemy to justify their action. The military-industrial complex of America and other countries, not excluding Pakistan, will go bankrupt if there is no war. They need war—cold war or hot war. In Pakistan it is military that decides how long a civilian government even if elected through proper adult franchise, can survive. Interestingly, not

a single prime minister in Pakistan since 1947 completed full term. The present turmoil in that hapless country illustrates among other things that military is the last word in Pakistani politics. Almost all military generals of Pakistan settle in foreign countries after retirement, with huge fortunes. The military establishment needs escalation, not tranquillity along the LoC. They spend huge amounts on military to keep tensions alive. The people of South Asia have no respite from being haunted by uncertainty and curse of war which may be limited or full-fledged. Then there is the emerging China factor. With the changing geo-strategic equation in the region, as America now backs India and China finds an all weather friend in Pakistan, tensions are likely to mount in the coming days, no matter what Shehbaz Sharif is saying, or not saying for public consumption. □□

## COMMENT

### Against all Orthodoxies

**O**RTHODOXIES ARE IDEAS, beliefs, traditions, knowledge, institutions, policies, processes and practices that domesticate people and the planet. The cultural, religious, political and ideological orthodoxies are driving the world towards a dangerous situation, where reactionary forces dominate politics, society and economy. It also creates and facilitates oligarchical monopolistic environment. The oligarchical political and economic systems destroy democratic and secular values to realise individual liberty. The resurgence of flag-waving bourgeoisies' nationalisms and false patriotisms are inadvertent but natural outcomes of dominance of different varieties of orthodoxies. The immersive culture of orthodoxies and its knowledge traditions domesticates individuals, communities and envi-

ronment to normalise slavery, inequalities and exploitations of human beings and nature.

The economic orthodoxies and its unnatural narratives have not only established capitalism but also normalised it as if there is no alternative to capitalism as a system. Similarly, political orthodoxies domesticate citizenship rights and dismantle democratic traditions in the name of nationalism and patriotism. The cultural and religious orthodoxies facilitate the political and economic orthodoxies to strengthen ruling and non-ruling elites' control over natural and human resources. All orthodoxies colonise the humanity to sustain and expand subservient knowledge traditions supported by institutions and processes designed by people in power for profit. Orthodoxies are not natural but a product of socialisation

with social, cultural, religious and political belief systems are created and disseminated to different generations to practise and normalise it.

Class, gender, caste, race and all other forms of inequality, discriminatory and divisive practices are products of orthodoxies. The culture of orthodoxies normalise consciousness by creating and socialising with the idea of Puritanism and otherness at the same time. It facilitates knowledge traditions concomitant with hierarchy based on inferior and superior knowledge, culture, society, religion, people and state. Puritan knowledge and hierarchy ensures reproduction of power, patriarchy and dominance. Orthodoxies are against human happiness as it instils different forms of fear.

The culture of surrender and adherence to a defined set of ideas or a single doctrine diminishes human creative abilities and domesticates human consciousness in a monolithic direction that destroys dynamism of

human potential. Dogmas and narrow silos are natural outcomes of all orthodox traditions and practices. All orthodoxies are assaults on science, reason, innovation, equality, liberty and human sensibilities. It justifies war, terror, conflicts and all forms of authoritarianisms in the name of peace and order. In reality, all orthodoxies create and establish different forms of institutions, processes and systems embedded with structural and other forms of violence. It destroys the emancipatory power of people by creating divisive cultures based on religion and nationalism, the twin opium of the masses. Orthodoxies promote various forms of convenient dogmas that sustain hierarchy and power over people. Therefore, orthodoxies are obstacles in the path of progressive social, political and economic transformations and deepening of democracy.

Resistance against all forms of orthodoxies are crucial for the eman-

ipation of human beings and natural world. Individuals and communities must come together to challenge and overcome all orthodoxies for their own freedom to realise themselves as individuals, citizens, as members of communities and as social, political, cultural and spiritual beings. The peace, progress, prosperity, harmony, equality, justice and individual liberties can be realised only by defeating all forms of orthodoxies prevailing in the society, culture, politics, state and economy. The working-class masses are the worst victims of all orthodoxies. Different forms of class divided societies are products of orthodox ideological practices that destroy all conditions of human emancipation. Therefore, it is imperative for the working class struggles to ensure and defeat all forms of orthodoxies. End of all orthodoxies are the immediate necessities of present time for human emancipation, creativity and happiness. □□□ [Contributed]

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### NOTE

## Travelling with Fidel Castro

*E P Menon writes:*

**W**AY BACK IN 1966 WHEN I received an invitation to join the Indian Delegation to Cuba for participating in the first ever Tri-Continental Conference involving only those countries from Latin America, Africa and Asia, I was delighted and agreed immediately. It was a 14-member group under the leadership of Aruna Asaf Ali and endorsed by the Government of India.

More than 1500 delegates were accommodated in the majestic Hotel Havana Libre for two weeks and after the 10-day events we were all given a country-wide tour for two weeks which was indeed very educative and forward-looking for building better human solidarity and world peace. Two specific events can never

be erased from my mind.

One morning as the huge dining hall was full by breakfasting participants, Fidel Castro suddenly appeared with a surprise announcement : "Dear friends, is there anyone interested in joining me for four hours to climb a mountain and think about the fate of the world. All those interested, please come, most welcome."

I immediately got up and raised my hand, saying, "Yes comrade Fidel, I want to come." So also about 30 young people raised their hands. In the next 15 minutes we were all packed into a waiting military truck and sped away, Fidel and his secretary ahead in a car. After half an hour drive in the beautiful sunshine we reached a military base camp

near the mountain where we were all provided with warm jackets and started climbing, Fidel in front.

About an hour and half we reached on top of a flat hill with lots of trees and birds circling above. "Here we are," said Fidel pointing us to sit in a circle, "now we shall discuss world events. Before that I would tell something about the hills and forests that played a major role in Cuban Revolution". And our curious eyes and ears focused on him.

"Now I have a special question in mind. I need your response and advice to me what should I do? You see we in Cuba have very little production of rice. So China has agreed to supply us 50,000 tons of rice which is already on the way scheduled to reach our ports next week. But I feel today people of Vietnam need more food than us. You know they are already suffering under American attack and starvation. So, what should I do? Shall I

direct that ship to go to Vietnam? Please advise me.”

Without a moment delay all of us said to him clapping our hands, “Fidel, please send it to Vietnam. Let them survive and fight the Americans.”

That very evening, in the huge gathering of Cubans and foreign visitors in the city playground, Fidel Castro announced the decision to redirect the ship to Saigon. “Send it Fidel, send it to Vietnam”, such cries and applause reverberated in the atmosphere for several minutes.

Another unforgettable event was in a magnificent campus of an en-

gineering college 100 miles away from Havana, during our country tour. A young dynamic interpreter narrated its history with joy and pride. “This whole place was a huge jungle 4 years ago. We had no engineering college. So Fidel suggested to the experts to first recruit few hundred aspiring students, and let them join the construction experts and build the college for themselves as part of their experiential education. For two years the students worked during the day, and slept in the night with cloths hung on strings tied between two trees.

More than 400 students thus became builders of their own college which made them engineers after 3-4 years. Credit goes to Fidel and Che Guevara who have taught us the value of self-reliance. Nobody can defeat the Cuban revolution.”

With such valuable philosophy of education and promoting people’s commitment to the cause of revolution and reconstruction, indeed, who can defeat the Cuban revolution? How many leaders can we find in the so-called democratic world today who can match the spirit and dedication of Fidel and Che? □□□

#### MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE

## ‘Bilkis’ is not an Exception

*Subhash Gatade*

**H**INDU MYTHOLOGY ACCORDING to ‘Vishnu Purana’ talks about gods getting ‘Amrit’ (nectar) and asuras (demons) getting Vish poison) after the SamudraManthan of Kshirsagar.

Well, in the ‘AmritKaal’ of Azaadi-as the government calls it—perhaps it has proved to be exact opposite for Bilkis Bano—the 41-year-old woman / survivor from a village Limkheda near Godhra, who saw her perpetrators walking free from jail—thanks to remission of their sentence by the state government—and she again left rather alone to fight for her ‘right to live without fear and in peace’.

It would be an understatement to say that for Bilkis the sole survivor of a brutal gang rape and witness to a horrific massacre of 14 of her relatives, who stood her ground and embarked upon a brave and long battle for justice, who became an icon of sorts of all women who are struggling for their dignity and truth, this decision has come as a bolt from the blue.

The brazenness with which the state government took this decision

can also be understood from the fact that it did not even deem it necessary to inform Bilkis or her husband Yakoob—who has stood by her all these years—how and why it intends to release these gangrapists and murderers prematurely, why there is going to be remission in their sentences of life imprisonment.

Whatever might be the claims of the state government—this decision would not have been possible without getting nod from the highest authorities at the centre—which decided to remit their sentence violating the central government’s own rules which had barred people convicted of heinous crimes like rape and murder getting any remission in their sentence.

This kid glove treatment to rapists and murderers by the ruling dispensation in the home state of PM and deputy HM, not only brings forth the deep rooted misogyny in the Hindutva Supremacist world view which drives the government but inadvertently or so it has also exposed hollowness of PM’s rhetoric around Nari Shakti spun in his long

speech on 75 th anniversary of Independence day, whose minions had no qualms in setting free eleven convicts of murder and gang rape under amnesty scheme within few hours.

This decision has created uproar in a section of the civil society and there is growing demand that this pre-mature release of these eleven gang rapists and mass murderers be revoked and Supreme Court is being called upon to undo this grave miscarriage of justice.

What is rather troubling that this outrage is not widespread as one witnessed during earlier cases, may it be the Nirbhaya Case (2011) or many earlier cases.

Does it mean that outrage is also getting limited to faith of the victim / survivor nowadays?

Whether these convicts whose sentence to life imprisonment have been remitted on ambiguous grounds would be again sent back to jail is an open question?

Whether the highest court which itself had ratified the sentence meted out to these culprits earlier and which was instrumental in directing the case to be shifted to Mumbai high court earlier, to ensure delivery of justice outside would suo moto intervene to not only ensure Bilkis’s

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right to live without fear and in peace but also to ensure every woman's right to belief in the criminal justice system who is also faced with sexual harassment and violence at various levels, remains to be seen.

Looking at the growing claims that there is an ideological shift in judiciary itself the possibility remains much dim.

Of course, one thing is quite certain that in coming days various affiliated organisations of the Hindutva family, activists would keep meeting these eleven people or they would be even felicitated here and there, basically to create a pressure that there is no rethinking on their release.

The way all of them received warm welcome in front of the jail, were offered sweets, were garlanded and few of them were even offered 'aarti' just goes to show the impunity with which their long stay behind bars for ghastly crimes against humanity are being viewed in Hindutva circles. Reports have appeared in a section of the media how all these eleven convicts went together to a prominent hall in the city for similar 'felicitation'.

Any civilised society would abhor glorification of such persons who were found engaged in such a brutality against innocents, forget think of felicitating them and it would be considered a very despicable act.

Such things are passe at least in New India

For one thing since last more than eight years such glorification / felicitations of people accused of murder, rape and other crimes against humanity or sanitisation of their images has become quite common.

One can easily recall how Jayant Sinha, then a cabinet minister garlanded lynching convicts or how the alleged killers of Pehlu Khan, a Muslim dairy farmer from Haryana, a

self-proclaimed band of cow vigilantes, were compared to the likes of Bhagat Singh or how body of one of the accused in the Dadri lynching case was covered with the Indian tricolour. One can even recall how a Twitterati even 'celebrated' journalist, activist Gauri Lankesh murder' on his twitter handle.

It is also a sign of changing circumstances that the way justice has been systematically sabotaged in case of Bilkis is not an exception.

Instances galore which show how in the last eight years girls, women who faced sexual assaults have consistently received raw deal.

May it be the case of rape and murder of an eight year old Bakkarwal girl Asifa in Jammu, when BJP's own ministers came out on streets demanding release of the accused who were put behind bars for their alleged role in the Sexual assault of this little girl or even the Unnao case where a local MLA belonging to BJP had come under scanner of the police for his alleged role in the rape of a teenaged girl in 2017 and it took a long time for the ruling dispensation to formally dissociate from him or how the Dalit girl from Hathras—who faced gang rape at the hands of her neighbours—was cremated in her own village in the dead of the night without even allowing her parents and others to attend the cremation.

It may be a puzzling question that what makes such impunity towards rapes, sexual violence and murders possible among Hindutva Supremacists.

Whether it would be proper to say that it flows from the way in which Sangh's second supremo Golwalkar talked about religious minorities and communists in his famous book 'Bunch of Thoughts' where he categorised them as internal threats.

Or it would be more proper to

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say that this attitude has roots in the way Savarkar the 'pioneer ideologue of Hindutva' has talked of politics of revenge in general and the way he talks about rape and sexual violence against the others in his 'magnum opus' *Bhartiya Itihasa til Saha Soneri Paane* ('Six Golden Epochs in Indian History'). In this much discussed book Savarkar propounds the thesis of the 'collective guilt of Muslims'. He lays down the thesis that Muslims need to be punished not only what they themselves have done but what their coreligionists had done.

One of the most reprehensible

but also the least known part of Savarkar's life is the way he criticised Shivaji for his chivalry towards the daughter in law of Nawab of Kalyan who was captured and brought before him by his army. He calls this act perverted virtue. The legend goes that when one of his enthusiastic assistants presented before him the daughter in law of Nawab expecting to get some special favour, Shivaji not only reprimanded him for such act but also punished him and sent back the woman to her place with full honour. (*Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, P. 461, Delhi, Rajdhani Granthagar, 1971)

Savarkar condemns this act by Shivaji and says that he was wrong as this cultured and human treatment could not evoke in those fanatics the same feelings about Hindu women.

For a layperson also it is easy to comprehend that his condemnation of Chhatrapati Shivaji, a great icon of Hindu-Muslim unity inadvertently or so provides a theoretical justification for brutalisation of women when fighting the 'enemies'

Gangrapes and sexual violence against women and girls in every other communal riot in India are a living testimony to this worldview. □

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ILA MITRA

## Leaving Behind a Unique Legacy

*Aarushi Agrawal*

**I**N HER CHILDHOOD, ILA Mitra was a recurring face in local Bengali dailies for her achievements as an athlete. Born to a well-to-do family, she was encouraged from a young age by her father to pursue her dream to be an acclaimed sportswoman in undivided India.

For a while, it seemed like that was indeed where her future would head, given that in 1940, she was qualified to compete in the Olympics.

Instead, fate would have it another way, and her life took a surprising pivot.

In the history of undivided Bengal, Ila is better recognised today as Rani Ma, or queen mother, of peasant farmers in the region, and for her monumental role in the Tebhaga Uprising. Hers is a story that's turbulent, heartbreaking, and inspiring at the same time. And above all, worthy of being told and heard.

Born in 1925 in Calcutta (Kolkata), Ila was the eldest of six children. Her father, Nagendranath

Sen, the Accountant General of Bengal, encouraged her to engage in basketball, swimming, and track. From 1937 onwards, she was a well-recognised name in the region for her sports abilities.

It is said that the proud father would take her for swimming practice and escort her to several track competitions all through the city, while managing his office schedule. He even kept a scrapbook of her achievements, filled with newspaper clippings that celebrated her.

In 1937 and 1938, she earned junior championship titles for girls in Bengal from the sports club Jatiya Juba Sangha. Counted among the best athletes of the Bengal presidency, she had collected over 47 trophies by this time.

Her big break was to come in 1940 when the world was preparing for the 12th Olympics. Ila was 15 and being considered for the contingent that would represent British India. However, this golden opportunity would never arrive—the games were cancelled owing to World War II.

Meanwhile, after completing her schooling from Bethune School, Ila went on to pursue a degree from Bethune College. Shortly thereafter, her marriage was arranged to Ramendranath Mitra, who belonged to a zamindar family and worked with the Communist Party of India.

"When I got admission in Bethune College, I joined the Girl Students Committee—there we began to discuss Marxism," Ila said in Kavita Panjabi's book *Unclaimed Harvest*. "We did this secretly. Gradually, through my relief work, I became a party member."

She joined the Communist Party of India's (CPI) Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS), which was formed in 1942 to protect women from being trafficked to Allied Forces' soldiers. Their work slowly extended to issues like hunger, poverty, and gender-based violence.

Throughout the 1940s, there were also several reports of food shortage and rising prices for essentials. But the British government was expending all its resources and efforts on the war. In 1942, a deadly cyclone hit Medinipur, making matters worse. Between 1943-44, the official death toll had reached three million.

All these events further influenced

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Ila, who was also ably supported by her husband, who, despite his background, understood well the plight of peasant workers under the firm grip of landlords.

Meanwhile, in 1943, a devastating famine ravaged the Bengal region leaving millions dead due to starvation, poverty, malnutrition, and lack of healthcare.

As the population reeled from its effects, Ila and her husband worked closely with peasants and members of the santhal community, living among them to understand their conditions better. They mobilised them to pay only one-third (*Tebhaga*) of the harvest to landlords instead of half, which was the norm. This went a long way in safeguarding against hunger and poverty.

This would form a larger part of the *Tebhaga* Movement, an integral uprising in undivided Bengal that saw the coming together of landless labourers, artisans, and members of the tribal community to secure two-thirds share of their crop and reduce the rent they paid to jotedars, or wealthy farmers.

Under the leadership of the Kisan Sabha (a peasant front of the CPI), thousands upon thousands of landless workers and farmers mobilised to call for *tebhaga*. As workers began taking their harvest back home instead of handing them over to jotedars, police action was called for, and violence broke out across several Bengal districts.

The uprising was quelled by authorities and the police within a year, without any legislative outcome or changes. However, it is said that about 40 per cent of peasants were able to secure *tebhaga* rights.

In 1950, Ila organised a peasant and Santhal uprising in Nachole. Police were sent to thwart the protest, but things turned violent and four policemen were killed. Ila escaped with the other peasants,

dressed as a Santhal herself. But at the Nachole railway station, an officer noticed the watch on her wrist and arrested her.

In lockup, she underwent brutal torture. In *A History of Bangladesh*, history professor Willem van Schendel wrote, “[The] 24-year-old woman found herself being interrogated, tortured, and raped by police in the western district of Rajshahi [Bangladesh].”

She was offered no food or water, and the policemen beat her with the butt of their rifles, smashing her legs with their lathis. They also reportedly inserted foreign objects in her, and kicked her in the stomach till she lost consciousness.

This level of torture continued for four days, until Ila was transferred to the Nawabganj jail. The jail warden there arranged for a doctor to see her, and she finally received medical treatment.

Her 1951 testimony of being raped was published in a pamphlet that inspired people from East Bengal to protest. Poets like Subhas Mukherjee and Ghulam Khuddus wrote poetry in her name.

She couldn't be held guilty of the murders because of lack of evidence, but was sentenced to seven years in jail for causing the violence that led to the death of the four policemen. She remained in jail till 1954.

Suffering from ill health owing to her time in jail, Ila slowly began rebuilding her life once released. By 1962, she completed a Masters in Bangla literature and culture from the Calcutta University, and got a job as a teacher in the Sivanath Sastri College. She had also won an election from the Maniktala constituency and became MLA, which she represented till 1977.

“She remained unfazed,” recalls her son Ronendranath. “She went to the party office every afternoon

after college, scolded the office bearers often, and held forth at home about everything the party was doing wrong. It was never about herself.”

Meanwhile, her son Ritendranath Mitra recalled, “She believed she had survived the torture she faced because of her fitness.”

Although her career as an athlete had ended years prior, sports always remained close to her heart, even days before her passing in 2002.□□□

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টাকা মাত্র ও ‘পূর্বাশা এখন’ ২৫ টাকা মাত্র।

‘শুধু পূর্বাশা’-এর বার্ষিক গ্রাহক চাঁদা ১৭০

টাকা। ‘পূর্বাশা এখন’-এর গ্রাহকরা অতিরিক্ত

১০০ টাকায় পাক্ষিকটিরও গ্রাহক হতে পারেন।

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## KILLING THE MARTYRS

## PM Modi Idolises Savarkar

*Shamsul Islam*

**A**UGUST 15, 2022 DEMOCRATIC-secular India completed 75 years of its eventful journey. It was a great occasion being celebrated as Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav [Nectar of grand celebration]. However, it was sad as well as shocking that Prime Minister Modi chose this very day to idolise V D Savarkar by elevating him to the pantheon of great martyrs and freedom fighters of the Indian freedom movement in his customary address from the ramparts of Red Fort. PM Modi expressed indebtedness “to Pujya Bapu, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Babasaheb Ambedkar and Veer Savarkar, who devoted all their life on the path of duty towards the nation. The path of obligation has been their sole life path. This country is grateful to Mangal Pandey, Tatyia Tope, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru, Chandrashekhar Azad, Ashfaqulla Khan, Ram Prasad Bismil and countless such revolutionaries who shook the foundations of British rule. This nation is grateful to those brave women, be it Rani Lakshmi Bai, Jhalkari Bai, Durga Bhabhi, Rani Gaidinliu, Rani Chennamma, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Velu Nachiyar, who showed the mettle of women power of India”.

The truth is that by equating Savarkar with the above named martyrs and freedom fighters PM was not only resorting to terrible lies but also denigrating the true freedom fighters. His claim that Savarkar too “devoted all their life on the path of duty towards the nation who shook the foundation of British rule” is bereft of any truth. It is tantamount to the 2nd killing of true martyrs and freedom fighters.

It is true that Savarkar penned THE INDIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE 1857 in 1907 in which he glorified the joint struggle of Hindus and Muslims in the 1857 rebellion. In this tome, proscribed by the British rulers, he underscored the fact that Hindus and Muslims “were both children of the soil of Hindusthan. Their names were different, but they were all children of the same Mother; India therefore being the common mother of these two, they were brothers by blood”. He went to the extent of praising the Jehadi spirit of Moulvi Ahmed Shah in the liberation war of 1857. “The great and saintly Ahmed Shah had woven fine and cleverly the webs of the Jihad—the War of Independence—through every corner of Lucknow and Agra.”

However, Savarkar’s incarceration at the Cellular Jail brought fundamental change in his idea of India. His first official biographer, Dhananjay Keer corroborated the fact that while leaving the Cellular, he gave this mantra: “One God, one country, one goal, one race, one life, one language” which was later concretised as Hindutva. The reason for discarding commitment to an all-inclusive India and turning Islamophobic was provided by Savarkar himself: “A large number of the wicked warders consisted of Mussalmans... And the prisoners under them were mostly Hindus. The Hindu prisoners were persecuted...”

It will be interesting to know that Savarkar was the only one at Cellular Jail who presented the persecution at the hands of the warders as a Hindu-Muslim issue. Barindra Kumar Ghosh (known as Barin, younger brother of Aurobindo Ghosh)

in his memoirs, THE TALE OF MY EXILE made it clear that Muslim prisoners too suffered at the hands of these Cellular Jail officials. “In the Andamans it is they [warder, petty officer, jamadar etc.] who are in-charge of everything and have the authority... Ramlal sits a little cross-wise in the file, give him two blows on the neck. Mustafa did not get up immediately he was told to, so, pull off his mustache. Baqaullah is late in coming from the latrine, apply the baton and unloose the skin of his posterior—such were the beautiful proceedings by which they maintained discipline in the prison.”

Barin was also witness to the fact that there were kind hearted Pathan warders who on many occasions “secretly brought out a dish of meat... I do not know whether any food prepared by the famous Draupadi herself could have been as savoury as that dish with suh a gusto did I devour it”.

The truth is that Savarkar used the persecution by the Muslim jail officials as an alibi to legitimise his abandonment of commitment to Indian nationalism. The renowned historian R C Majumdar who is regarded as a true ‘Bhartiya’ by the Hindutva brigade while sifting heaps of official papers relating to the Cellular Jail in the course of writing of his landmark book on the CJ, Penal Settlement in Andamans could not avoid commenting, “that the incarceration in the Andamans had produced a great change on the great revolutionary leaders [Savarkar, his brother and Barin] and their attitude towards the British Government and their view of destroying it by revolution or secret conspiracies had suffered a radical change”.

Muslim League [ML] under MA Jinnah demanded Pakistan in March 1940. Long before it Savarkar had laid down two-nation theory. In his



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book HINDUTVA (1923) he declared India to be the homeland of Hindus only and Muslims could not be part of Indian nationhood. He declared: "The root meaning of the word Hindu, like the sister epithet in Hindi, may mean only an Indian, yet as it is we would be straining the usage of words too much—we fear, to the point of breaking—if we call a Mohomedan [sic] a Hindu because of his being a resident of India."

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Savarkar took over the leadership of Hindu Mahasabha [HM] in 1937. While addressing the 19th Session of Hindu Mahasabha at Ahmedabad in the same year stated: "As it is, there are two antagonistic nations living side by side in India... India cannot be assumed today to be a Unitarian and homogenous nation, but on the contrary there are two nations in the main: the Hindus and the Moslems, in India."

Hindu Mahasabha led by Savarkar declared unconditional support to the British government during Quit India Movement.

The Quit India Movement began on August 9, 1942 as per Gandhi's call to 'Do or Die' in order to expel the British from India. The British rulers swiftly responded with mass detentions on August 8th itself. Over 100,000 arrests were made which included the total top leadership of

Congress including Gandhi, mass fines were levied and demonstrators were subjected to public flogging. Hundreds of civilians were killed in violence, many shot by the police and army. Congress was banned. It is not generally known that during these times of repression Savarkar announced full support to the British rulers. Addressing the 24th session of the HM at Kanpur in 1942, Savarkar outlined the strategy of the Hindu Mahasabha of co-operating with the rulers in the following words: "The Hindu Mahasabha holds that the leading principle of all practical politics is the policy of Responsive Co-operation [with the British]." He called upon HM councillors, ministers, legislators and conducting any municipal or any public bodies to offer "Responsive Co-operation which covers the whole gamut of patriotic activities from unconditional co-operation right up to active and even armed resistance..."

Hindu Mahasabha led by Savarkar ran coalition governments with Jinnah led Muslim League during Quit India Movement.

What it meant at the political front was unambiguous. HM and ML joined hands in running coalition governments in Bengal and Sind (and later NWFP). Defending this collusion between HM and ML against Congress Savarkar stated, "In practical politics also the Mahasabha knows that we must advance through reasonable compromises. Witness the fact that only recently in Sind, the Sind-Hindu-Sabha on invitation had taken the responsibility of joining hands with the League itself in running coalition Government. The case of Bengal is well known. Wild Leaguers whom even the Congress with all its submissiveness could not placate grew quite reasonably compromising and socialable [sic] as soon as they came in contact with the HM and the

**As Timir Basu is still seriously ill, he is not in a position to communicate with contributors and subscribers. Please bear with us.**

—Fr.

Coalition Government, under the premiership of Mr. Fazlul Huq and the able lead of our esteemed Mahasabha leader Dr Syama Prasad Mookerji, functioned successfully for a year or so to the benefit of both the communities."

It is to be noted that Mookerji was deputy premier and held the portfolio of suppressing QIM in Bengal.

The Savarkar rehabilitation squad wants people to forget about the terrible betrayal of Netaji by Savarkar. When Netaji was planning to liberate India militarily, Savarkar offered full military co-operation to the British masters. Addressing 23rd session of Hindu Mahasabha at Bhagalpur in 1941, he declared: "our best national interests demands that so far as India's defence is concerned, Hindudom must ally unhesitatingly, in a spirit of responsive co-operation with the war effort of the Indian government in so far as it is consistent with the Hindu interests, by joining the Army, Navy and the Aerial forces in as large a number as possible and by securing an entry into all ordnance, ammunition and war craft factories...Again it must be noted that Japan's entry into the war has exposed us directly and immediately to the attack by Britain's enemies... Hindu Mahasabha its must, therefore, rouse Hindus especially in the provinces of Bengal and Assam as effectively as possible to enter the military forces of all arms without losing a single minute."

According to HM documents Savarkar was able to recruit one lakh Hindus in the British armed forces.

Veer Savarkar submitted at least 5 mercy petitions [MP] in 1911, 1913, 1914, 1918 and 1920. Savarkarites claim that these were submitted not as an act of cowardice but “as an ardent follower of Shivaji, Savarkar wanted to die in action. Finding this the only way, he wrote six letters to the British pleading for his release”. A perusal of the two available mercy petitions will prove that there cannot be a lie worse than the claim that Savarkar’s Mercy Petitions were in league with the tricks which Shivaji used to hoodwink the Mughal rulers successfully. The mercy petition dated 14th November, 1913 ended with the following words:

“[Therefore] if the government in their manifold beneficence and mercy release me, I for one cannot but be the staunchest advocate of constitutional progress and loyalty to the English government which is the foremost condition of that progress. ...Moreover my conversion to the constitutional line would bring back

all those misled young men in India and abroad who were once looking up to me as their guide. I am ready to serve the Government in any capacity they like, for as my conversion is conscientious so I hope my future conduct would be. By keeping me in jail nothing can be got in comparison to what would be otherwise. The Mighty alone can afford to be merciful and therefore where else can the prodigal son return but to the parental doors of the Government?”

The petition dated 30th March 1920 from this prodigal son of the British masters ended with the following words: “The brilliant prospects of my early life all but too soon blighted, have constituted so painful a source of regret to me that a release would be a new birth and would touch my heart, sensitive and submissive, to kindness so deeply as to render me personally attached and politically useful in future. For often magnanimity wins even where might fails.”

There was nothing wrong on the part of the CJ detainees in writing mercy petitions to the British. It was an important legal right available to the prisoners. Apart from Savarkar, Barin, H K Kanjilal, and Nand Gopal too submitted petitions. However, these were only Savarkar and Barin who sought forgiveness for their revolutionary past. Kanjilal and Nand Gopal did not demand any personal favour but status of political prisoners.

Savarkar was incarcerated at Andamans on July 4, 1911 for two life terms [50 years]. On May 2, 1921 [after NINE years TEN months] he was transferred along with his elder brother, Babarao, to the mainland. He was finally released conditionally on January 6, 1924 [total imprisonment TWELVE years SIX months] from Yeravda Jail.

Savarkar is glorified as a ratio-

nalist and crusader against Untouchability. He declared Manu to be the lawgiver for Hindus and emphasised that once people “re-learn the manly lessons” he taught with others. According to him “our Hindu nation shall prove again as unconquerable and conquering a race as we proved once” when lawgivers like Manu ruled. He declared Manusmriti to be “most worship-able after Vedas... Today Manusmriti is Hindu law”.

He gave personal guarantee that “the Hindu Maha Sabha shall never force any legislations regarding the entry of untouchables in the ancient temples or compel by law any sacred ancient and moral usage or custom prevailing in those temples. In general the Mahasabha will not back up any Legislation to thrust the reforming views on our Sanatani brothers so far as personal law is concerned”.

Savarkar was a great defender of the Hindu princes ruling native India. According to Savarkar, the Hindu princes were not only co-religionists but also descendants of the brave Hindu kings in the past and thus their ‘power in emergency’. In fact, Hindu Mahasabha and RSS both proudly described the Hindu princes ruling native India in league with the British rulers as ‘Shakti-sthan’ (centres of power) of Hinduism. It surely meant that Hindu sectarian leadership had neither any idea about the aspirations of toiling Hindu masses nor believed that Hindu princes were nothing but fifth column of Britain in India. The crucial fact should not be missed here that only those princes (both Hindu and Muslim) who remained absolutely loyal to foreign rulers by contributing men and material in suppressing the ‘Mutiny’ were retained as native rulers by the colonial masters in the post 1857 period. □□□

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“MY CLOTHES, MY CHOICE”

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## Voices behind the Veil

*Fatima Khan*

**W**HEN 18-YEAR-OLD A H Almas was stopped from entering her classroom along with five other students in late December last year, she didn't think that she would find herself running from pillar to post several months later to regain access to her classes.

“We never thought this issue would drag so much. Giving us permission to wear the hijab was in our principal's hands. If he had allowed us at the beginning itself, this issue wouldn't have become so huge,” said Almas.

In these seven months, not only have the number of hijabi girls barred from entering their classes swollen from six to many thousands, the victims of Karnataka government's hijab ban in educational institutions have also faced several death threats and have found their closest friends turn against them. Teachers too haven't been spared, with many having to choose between either removing their hijab before taking their classes or quitting their jobs.

What started as a ban in one college quickly snowballed into a series of colleges across Karnataka barring hijab-clad students from entering. Hijabi students took to the streets to protest against this ban, but were soon countered by protests by saffron-shawl wearing students—many from the right-wing student body, Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP).

On 5 February 2022, the Karnataka government issued an order banning the Hijab in government educational institutions, saying that ‘clothes which disturb equality, integrity and public law and order should not be worn.’ On 15 March 2022, the Karnataka High Court upheld the

state government's ban on hijab in government educational institutions—pushing the future of several Muslim girls into further jeopardy.

“If our Hindu brothers and sisters can sit inside the classroom and study, why can't we? Because of just hijab? What exactly is everyone's problem with our hijab? Do we carry any weapons inside our hijab? We just want to wear the hijab and study with respect and dignity,” said Shaheen, a student in Karnataka's Shivamogga.

Since she was a little girl, Hiba Sheik has known she wants to be a police officer. In 7th grade, she began preparing for the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examination. “There are so many crimes that happen against women, no one does anything about them. I want to become a police officer and change that,” she said.

In March 2022, Hiba stepped into a police station for the first time—not as a police officer, but as a 19-year-old filing a complaint against boys from her own college. In a video that subsequently went viral, Hiba and other hijabi students can be seen being accosted by some boys from the right-wing student body, the Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). Hiba can be seen fighting back.

“I questioned him, why did you ask me to go out of the college? Who are you to tell me? He started arguing with me, harassing me, and pushing me. I kept questioning him—who are you to ask me to go out of college? No one was helping us, even police were helping the boys and telling us to go away,” Hiba recalled.

But just days after Hiba filed the FIR, to her shock; an FIR was in turn

registered against her for “causing tensions on campus.”

But that isn't it. The hate and harassment that many of these girls face online is far more pervasive.

Hiba said she gets threatening messages on Instagram and Facebook—some by anonymous accounts, but many by her college seniors.

“I get messages saying that they will kill me and my parents will never get my body,” Hiba said.

Since the hijab ban has been implemented, many girls have been looking for alternatives—either online education or private colleges where no such rule is to be adhered to. However, a vast section of those affected cannot afford anything but governmental educational institutions.

Ayesha, a 19-year-old in Mangaluru, is the daughter of an auto-rickshaw driver.

“I have a desire to study, get a good job. When the hijab issue came, my family got scared. They began saying, ‘whatever you have studied is enough.’ But I have a desire to study further,” she said.

Her mother, Kulusu, said that as much as she and her husband want to support Ayesha's decision to study further—they are hard-pressed by their circumstances.

“I have three daughters. My husband is a rickshaw driver. Because it is difficult to rent a place, we stay as a joint family in one house. We sent our children to a government school since paying fees for a private school is difficult for us. My wish is that she studies in a government college. But on the hijab issue, I am scared what will happen. We don't have enough money to send her to a private college,” she said.

In April 2022, the Karnataka government officially extended the hijab ban to teachers as well. But even before that, many colleges had be-

gun asking hijabi teachers to not enter the educational institutions with their hijab. Visuals of hijabi teachers taking off their hijab outside their colleges went viral.

But Chandni, a teacher in Karnataka's Tumkur, refused to comply.

"On 16 February, I went to the college to engage my classes. Principal Sir asked to meet me in his office. I went there. He told me that he has received some letter from authorities that from that day itself, teachers as well as students will not be allowed to wear hijab, which is a religious attire. I asked him if this is only confined to students. But he said that 'this has been discussed in some meetings and even teachers can't wear the hijab'. I was shocked," Chandni recalled.

But she was not okay with such a dictum, so she resigned that very day.

"It's very hard for a woman to strip herself on the road for education. Look, it's completely nonsense to ask someone to choose between their livelihood and their religion, or between their education and their religion," she said.

"People say we are a backward community and then they should help us to become developed. They shouldn't push us back again, because of a piece of cloth," she added.

After knocking on many doors, Aliya and Almas decided to file a petition against the hijab ban in the Karnataka High Court. While they returned disappointed from there too, but the struggle only made their friendship stronger.

But the friendships within the classroom have taken a real toll.

When asked if any of their non-Muslim classmates reached out to them for support, most of the hijabi girls replied in the negative.

"No, there are no such friends. They did reach out...but only to say, 'What is the use of doing all this? You are wasting your life.' They are just giving lectures. No real support," said Almas.

Aliya said that many of her classmates even refused to share class notes with them, as they continue to miss classes.

Afra recalled how her classmates didn't want her to enter the class to take her books after the controversy erupted.

"They were like 'don't enter the class...no. Principal will yell at us.' They didn't let us enter. 'Go outside, we will give you.' That really hurt," she said.

Many girls also witnessed their classmates and former friends participate in the saffron shawl protests against the hijab. "Many of those outside my college wearing the saffron shawls and protesting shouting 'Jai Sri Ram' were my classmates. They used to be like my brothers and sisters. But today, it doesn't even feel like we ever spoke to them," said Shaheen.

"The government has actually ideated this...that they shouldn't wear the hijab. But many of my friends are Muslims. Whatever ideas the government takes up, it will be for the good of India itself. Everything is advancing, so sometimes I guess you will have to give up your religion stuff," said Srma, an 18-year-old student in Udupi.

But it isn't just Hindus and Muslims who have drifted away from each other. The controversy has even created a rift among Muslim students.

While many hijabi students have stopped attending their classes due to the hijab ban, many others have decided to give up the hijab to enter the classrooms.

"In the beginning, everyone was together, supporting. We will not enter the classroom without hijab. Now due to the exam pressure, more than half of the girls gave up on hijab and sat inside the class," said Afra.

Another student, Afsheen, said she has had a fight with her hijabi

friends who have given up the hijab to enter the classes.

"They asked me...no, they told me that 'you also come with us. It's only for some days or some months. We will just remove and after that you can wear.' So I told them, don't do this. We fought also. We had that conversation. At last, I gave up. I said you go, but I will not remove my hijab," said Afsheen.

"We had 200 hijabi girls (in my college) on first day. Then later on, slowly, the number decreased. When the verdict came, we were 50. And now I guess we are not more than 15. The rest have all entered the classes without the hijab," she added.

Many colleges have made arrangements for hijabi students to take off their hijab in a room right at the entrance, and then they can attend their classes without the hijab.

"They didn't even recognise me without the hijab, I felt very uncomfortable," she said.

Many of the hijab-wearing girls who are now barred from entering their colleges excel at academics. But they are also a pool of talents and interests beyond that.

Both Aliya and Almas, the lead petitioners in the case against the hijab ban, are trained karate players.

"I didn't go to national level. But she (Aliya) went. She was so tiny. Her pictures were shown on the banner when she went to national level. We were so proud," said Almas.

Aliya is also a keen wildlife photographer and has an instagram page dedicated to her clicks.

Meanwhile Almas aspires to become a pilot—but before she flies a plane, she has learnt how to ride everything on the ground: a car, a bike, a scooty.

Hiba has won several awards for her singing and can sing in 5 different languages—Hindi, English, Kannada, Malayalam, and Korean.

Shaheen wants to become a vol-

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leyball player, and her inspiration is Wilda Siti, an Indonesian Hijabi volleyball champion.

“I feel that if a girl can wear the hijab and play volleyball at an international level, why can’t we in India? Why are we being neglected?” she asked.

While hijabi students and teachers have been the direct victims of this ban, no hijabi in Karnataka has remained unaffected by it.

Jasmeen is neither a teacher nor a student, but she has been protesting the hijab ban regularly at this

square in Karnataka’s Davanagere. She is out in the scorching heat, while her 14-month-old daughter sits tight in her lap. She holds a poster in her hand, which says ‘My Clothes, My Choice’, in Kannada.

“My main intention is to spread awareness. People have given us the title of being a passive community, who will not speak up no matter what atrocity is committed on them,” she explained.

A woman passing by stopped and her attention was immediately caught by the protest. “Correct! She is cor-

rect in protesting,” the woman declared.

But such is the extent of polarisation in the state, that even Jasmeen’s non-violent protest irked many. A man, passing by on his bike, stopped to tell her to “not do such things in public.”

“But I can’t let these things bog me down. My protest must continue,” she said.

For many, the right to wear the hijab isn’t just a religious struggle, but also a feminist one.

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## SCIENCE VS FAITH

# A Holy Conspiracy?

*Anjan Basu*

**I**N A LITTLE TOWN CALLED Hillolganj, the science teacher in a church-run school is suspended from his job. The school/church management believes he had disobeyed a vital injunction: not to teach the biology class Darwin’s theory of Evolution without first expounding the Bible’s story of Genesis. His colleagues protest against what they think is unfair punishment. A fracas ensues, and there is violence. Some school property is ransacked. The school now dismisses the teacher from his job and has him arrested by the police. Authorities proceed to criminally prosecute the man for disturbing the peace, instigating violence—and ‘for spreading Maoist propaganda’. As the case opens in the local court, two heavyweights of the legal profession find themselves pitted—fortuitously—against one another. One of them is a practising Christian, indeed an ordained clergyman, widely recognised as a redoubtable defender of the faith in many legal battles. He is a member of parliament, too. The other man, once one of the country’s best-known human rights lawyers, is now settled in quiet retirement in a village near Hillolganj. He had given

up on the law out of frustration at how slowly the wheels of justice turn in the country, but is now brought around to defending the accused by the dogged persistence of a newspaperman who had first broken the story. Also some of the former teacher’s colleagues. Saibal Mitra’s new film *A Holy Conspiracy* is a narrative of the courtroom drama that follows, at the end of which the judge—seemingly against the run of the proceedings—pronounces the accused not guilty. The conspiracy to frame the man for imaginary offences comes unstuck—for now.

The film’s storyline was adapted from the script of the 1960 Hollywood movie *Inherit the Wind* (director: Stanley Kramer; starring: Spencer Tracy and Fredric March), which in turn was based on the eponymous 1955 Broadway play directed by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee. Both those works drew their inspiration from the landmark 1925 trial in a Tennessee federal courthouse that has gone down in history as the Scopes ‘Monkey’ Trial. John Scopes was a teacher of biology in a Dayton, Tennessee public school who had flouted Tennessee state law prohibit-

ing the teaching of Evolution theory in government-funded schools. The ensuing legal battle featured two of America’s best-known public personalities. Clarence Darrow, arguably the US’s foremost attorney, defended Scopes against the prosecution which was helmed by William Jennings Bryan, a famous evangelical publicist, lawyer and politician who had run thrice for US president, albeit unsuccessfully. It was an intensely fought contest, and though, in the end, Scopes was expectedly convicted, the lengthy legal and epistemological arguments enormously impacted the great debate around science versus faith that raged across the country. In course of his presentations, Darrow had taken the unprecedented step of asking Bryan to be himself a witness, so that he could be examined on the Bible’s teachings and their modern-day interpretations and relevance. To everyone’s surprise, Bryan had agreed, and a fascinating debate about the supposed primacy of faith or the individual’s right to question given wisdom had come to pass.’ *A Holy Conspiracy* follows this storyline meticulously—except to acquit the teacher in the end, somewhat unconvincingly. But this story serves as Mitra’s point of departure for a more layered, more nuanced narrative which foregrounds some of the most vexing intellectual,

social and political questions exercising India's imagination today. And this makes 'A Holy Conspiracy' an extraordinarily important film by an Indian filmmaker in recent years.

Mitra's script introduces several crucial new elements to the original faith-versus-science debate. One, his protagonist Kunal Joseph Baske is a Santal, a tiny ethnic minority comprising less than one percent of the country's population which has seen scant educational and livelihood opportunities come their way. Indeed, Santals are a largely disenfranchised community whose cultural and social identity is almost wholly unrecognised by the majority. Christian missionaries have sought to provide them succour, but may in the process have really deracinated them. The wider society's deep-running distrust and neglect of this indigenous community is brought out with great lucidity here. Secondly, the film posits a deeply troubling political nexus between Baske's accusers and the regime in power, so that the original charge against him of disrespect to a religious edict is conflated with political subversiveness. This conveniently makes a religious non-conformist a political rebel—a 'Maoist', no less.

Third, the regime's sinister cultural agenda is shown to be a function of its politics. Its antipathy to

Baske was exacerbated by his reluctance to teach a book on Vedic Science which was recently sneaked into the school curriculum, probably against the wishes of the school management. The book makes outrageous claims about the purported golden age of native Indian science, an age that puts the achievements of modern science in the shade. As a man of science, Baske could not countenance this travesty as a teaching aid.

Fourthly, the regime is seen as unmistakably aligned with Hindutva. It organises semi-religious processions of belligerent men who stomp intimidatingly through localities chanting Jai Shri Ram. A man, elaborately fitted out as Lord Ram, sits through much of the courtroom proceedings, presumably keeping an eye on what the different participants have been doing or saying. At other times, he is seen snooping around the court area. Finally, the regime—represented here by the pradhan of the local panchayat, clearly comes across as having a very long reach. Its presence is menacing, if often shadowy. The school principal as well as the pastor confess they did not wish to press criminal charges against Baske, or to sack him, but that they didn't have a choice. In the courtroom, when it looks as though the defence counsel

is about to summon telling witnesses, a note is sneaked to the judge asking him to disallow all defence witnesses—and the judge promptly obliges. All told, 'A Holy Conspiracy' manages to enlarge the core debate around reason versus faith to take in such critical components as hegemony, political power and the insidious links between that power and the dominant cultural narrative.

Much of the film's runtime is taken up with the very elaborate, at times a tad verbose, debates between reason and unreason, faith and science and homogeneity and individual rights. Potentially, these scenes could have been a drag, but the presence of two of India's finest dramatic actors—Naseeruddin Shah and (the late) Soumitra Chatterjee—has pulled off a near miracle. The courtroom remains a riveting spectacle. Actors playing the minor parts do their job competently. As the somewhat loudmouthed journalist, Kaushik Sen stands out from most of the rest. The camera is handled well, the eerie night-scenes adding the right touch of tension. The editing is adequate to the story's needs, as are the English subtitles of this multilingual film. The background score, though, could have been improved: it jars at times. Overall, this is outstanding cinema. □□□

[Source: *countercurrents.org*]

## LETTERS

### Deucha-Pachami

Thousands of tribal men and women protested in front of the Birbhum District Magistrate's office in West Bengal's Siuri recently demanding the cancellation of the coal mining project proposed by the state government in Deucha-Pachami.

At the protest, they raised the slogan, "We will not leave our forest and our land. We will not let it become a coal mine."

The indigenous people of 36 local villages from Deucha-Pachami area have been protesting for the last eight months demanding the cancellation of the coal mine project. The protesters have been

on a relay hunger strike in Baromesia's Dangal since February 20. Finally, the tribals came to the city and demonstrated in front of the DM's office. They also submitted a memorandum to Birbhum DM Bidhan Roy.

The protest was led by local tribal leader Teresa Soren. Expressing anger against the state government, he said, "Today, the government is very careful of the tribals! We don't need this. We are tribals, this land is ours, and this forest is also ours. We will not leave this land and forest under any circumstances."

A protesting woman said, "No one in the hills wants coal mining. We are

being threatened by the police for protesting. We will see to the end of this fight."

The agitators have said that they will continue a mass hunger strike until the project is cancelled.

Another leader of the movement, Ganesh Kisku, who submitted the memorandum to the District Magistrate, said, "Our main demand is to immediately cancel this open-pit coal mining project." He further said, "The Chief Minister announced from a Trinamool Congress event on July 21 that coal mining has started on Deucha Pachami. Around 75% people in this area don't want mining. With whose permission did this mining work start?"

Birbhum District Magistrate Bidhan Roy said, "The demands of the tribals will be conveyed to the proper place. The mining work has started after talking to the locals."

Meanwhile, the West Bengal Vigyan Manch has raised questions about the survey work on the proposed coal mining project on Deucha-Pachami land. The organisation said, "There was supposed to be an eight-stage survey. The third phase survey has just been completed. In this way, based on some preliminary surveys, administrative work has started, and various government announcements are being made. It is not only creating confusion, but it is a very anti-scientific movement. Government should immediately stop this extremely unscientific action."

A statement by the West Bengal Science Forum states, "Geological survey said that the Brahmani-Birbhum region has many apparent faults. The use of explosives for excavation may activate the faults and make the area earthquake prone."

The Deucha-Pachami-Dewanganj-Harinsinga coal block is the second largest coal block in the world and the largest in India. Estimates show that around 20,000 people will be displaced due to the project.

Newsclick

## Lal Singh Dil

Lal Singh Dil (11 April 1943–14 August 2007) was a Punjabi Dalit poet of the wretched of the earth. His verses on caste oppression and call for revolution made him the bard of the Naxalite movement in Punjab. He died on 14 August 2007 at the age of 64.

Dil wrote extensively on the farmers' plight in rural Punjab of the 1960s. And Punjab remembers him to this day—when the Narendra Modi government enacted the farm bills in September 2020, Sikh farmers across the borders of Delhi evoked Lal Singh Dil as one of their icons.

Pramod Gupta, Kolkata

## 'Slaves' Who Came To Jamaica

The first black slaves brought to Jamaica did not come directly from Africa but were either Africans, or the descendants of Africans, who had been enslaved for a time in Spain. In 1518 King Charles I

of Spain (Ferdinand's successor) signed a four-year contract, allowing an annual supply of 4,000 African slaves to enter Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. After that, slaves were taken directly from Africa.

More than 1 million slaves are estimated to have been transported directly from Africa to Jamaica during the period of slavery; of these, 200,000 were re-exported to other places in the Americas.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Akan, Ga, and Adangbe from the northwestern coastal region known as the Gold Coast (Ghana) dominated the slave trade to the island. They frequently rebelled and joined the Maroons who had escaped the plantations and lived in mountains. As a result of this, the plantation owners decided to enforce other groups from West Africa in an attempt to diffuse the Akans.

After 1776, slaves were "imported" from other parts of Africa—Ga and Adangbe people from Toga, Yorubas and Igbos from the Bight of Biafra (Nigeria) and Kongos from Central Africa and they outnumbered the slaves from the Gold Coast. The demand for slaves required about 10,000 to be imported annually.

In the British mind, slaves were no more than property and merchandise to be bought and sold. On this premise, the British enacted a whole system of slave laws aimed primarily at policing slaves. In general, the premise that slaves were no more than property allowed slave owners to treat them brutally. The severity of this brutality varied. Slaves on large sugar estates generally suffered the harshest punishments, while those on smaller estates and in towns received somewhat better treatment.

Since their arrival on the island, blacks had resisted their enslavement. They engaged in what is referred to as atomised forms of resistance, such as foot dragging (work slowdowns, or 'go-slows'), destruction of property, theft, absenteeism from work, and the covert murder of the slave masters. But resistance also took the forms of large-scale rebellions and establishment of maroon communities.

By December 1833 there was a Bill for the abolition of slavery, and it be-

came effective on August 1, 1834. At that time all slaves became apprentices. They remained working for the same slave masters. The system was a failure, and that too was abolished. Slaves received their unrestricted freedom on August 1, 1838.

When Britain abolished the institution of slavery in 1834, Jamaica had a population of more than 311,000 slaves and only about 16,700 whites. Unlike other groups of people who came to Jamaica, including the Jews, Indians, Lebanese / Syrians and Chinese, they had no assets, no property or businesses and most of all, no land.

Bharat Patankar, Maharashtra

## Forced Labour in China

UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Tomoya Obokata reported to the Human Rights Council recently that sufficient evidence points to forced labour in the Uyghur Region of China.

In particular, he highlighted that, "While these programmes may create employment opportunities for minorities and enhance their incomes, as claimed by the Government, the Special Rapporteur considers that indicators of forced labour pointing to the involuntary nature of work rendered by affected communities have been present in many cases."

Uyghur rights activists are still awaiting the report from UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, who visited the Uyghur Region earlier this year.

Bloomberg shares that Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin, has placed Obokata among the ranks of the "anti-China forces." But the repetitive condemnation may not be enough to fix the damage done.

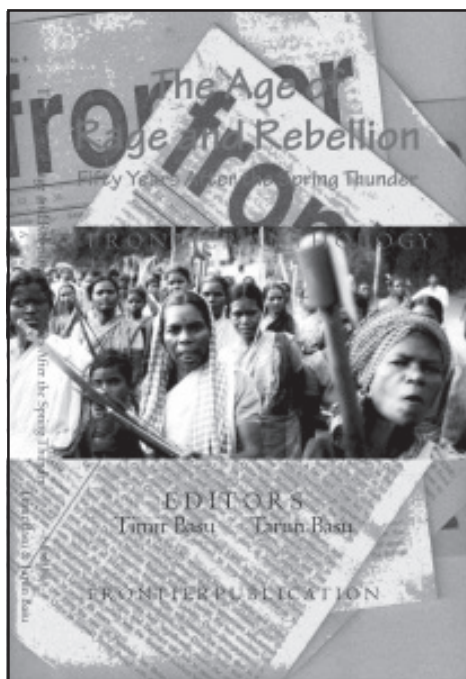
According to Obokata's report,

"Given the nature and extent of powers exercised over affected workers during forced labour, including excessive surveillance, abusive living and working conditions, restriction of movement through internment, threats, physical and/or sexual violence and other inhuman or degrading treatment, some instances may amount to enslavement as a crime against humanity, meriting a further independent analysis."

Miriam Kirmali, Freedom United

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