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On Other Pages

| | |
|--|----|
| Comment | 2 |
| Note | 3 |
| DOUBLING FARMERS' INCOME? Of Agriculture and Reforms I Satya Sundaram | 4 |
| MOCKERY OF 'DRY' STATES 'Everyone Drinks, Only the Poor Die' Parth M N | 8 |
| K P SASI A Campaigner against Religious Nationalism Satya Sagar | 10 |
| 'FLAMING FOREST' Back From Conflict Zones Joydip Ghosal | 11 |
| ECHO OF NUREMBERG When is a War a Crime? Oona A Hathaway | 12 |
| Letters | 14 |

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Business as Usual

DAVOS SYMBOLISES THE RITUALISTIC YEARLY MEET OF the world's super rich. It is the club of billionaires and their ideological followers. As per Oxfam's report entitled "Survival of the Richest", since 2020 billionaire wealth has grown by a staggering \$2.7 billion per day while inflation outpaced the wages of nearly 1.7 billion people across the world. This abnormal rise in accumulation continued despite the Pandemic and amid soaring prices of essential commodities in recent months following the war in Ukraine as America in league with its NATO partners has organised a grand alliance against Russia, destabilising global market to the disadvantage of the poor everywhere while allowing the US military-industrial complex to reap huge bonanza after the Second World War. Oxfam's report may create a flutter at the moment at DAVOS but finally it will be business as usual. With the cost of living of wage-earners throughout the world mounting in leaps and bounds the much publicised pledge of steering the planet earth towards a 1.5 degree Celsius pathway hangs in the balance. Then the recent agreement at the UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP15) in Montreal to conserve 30 percent of all earth and sea sounds bold but fragile in the face of a rising biodiversity crisis.

This year climate was high on the agenda of the World Economic Forum (WEF). And UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres delivered his gloomy message on the second day of the elite gathering as he would see 'the world is in a sorry state because of myriad interlinked challenges including climate change and Russia-Ukraine war' that are "piling up like cars in a chain reaction crash". The meeting kicked off with protests from climate activists accusing big oil firms of hijacking the climate debate. In their parlance it was actually World Economic Failure-WEF. Major energy firms including BP, Chevron and Saudi Aramco were among the 1500 business leaders who faced protest at Davos. The global super rich are mainly responsible for the climatic disasters people are experiencing in every corner of the world. Climate campaigner Greta Thunberg slammed corporate bigwigs meeting in Davos for 'fuelling the destruction of the planet by investing in fossil fuels and prioritising short term profits over people affected by the climate crisis'. Another young climate crusader Vanessa Nakate said "leaders are playing games with people's future". The activists sponsored a "cease and desist" letter calling on the chiefs of oil companies to stop all

new oil and gas projects, signed by nearly 900,000 people. Mr Guterres was candid enough to endorse the allegation that 'fossil fuel producers were fully aware in the 1970s that their core product was baking the planet'. He added further that "Some in Big Oil peddled the Big Lie".

Scientists say it will be next to impossible to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) in line with climate goals set in Paris in 2015. Current levels of warming which have already reached up to 1.2 degrees Celsius (2.2 degrees F), means it is "already a living hell for many communities across the African continent, across the global South" who are living with extreme drought, heat and flooding. Unprecedented flooding of Pakistan is a very recent phenom-

enon. And Thunberg was right in assessing the hard reality: "Without massive pressure from the outside, these people [Davos elites] are going to go as far as they possibly can. As long as they can get away with it, they will continue to invest in fossil fuels; they will continue to throw people under bus for their own gains." Gualinga, an Ecuadorian indigenous campaigner, said the world is 'taking a really dangerous path'. But who is listening? Nobody. And political parties, left and right alike, nearer home and abroad, are too naïve to mobilise masses against the real enemy of the people.

The WEF survey states that current-day challenges, particularly the rising cost of living, persistent energy and food supply crunches and heavy national debts threaten to thwart

the collective will and cooperation needed to address the climate crisis. In truth successive climate summits despite pious wishes found more non-cooperation than cooperation.

The annual event of the rich in Davos was once regarded as a cheerleader for globalisation. Now a reverse swing is very much in the air as the global elite met against the backdrop of protectionism. The euphoria over globalisation or what may be called 'Davos Spirit' is vanishing very fast. The head of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said in a speech at Davos that the European Union will prepare a law to make life easier for its green industry and back it with state aid and a European Sovereignty Fund to keep firms from moving to the United States. □□□ [20.1.2023]

COMMENT

Dalit Vote Matters

IT IS UTTAR PRADESH (UP) where the fate of Indian Parliament is decided. The party that controls UP is in a position to control New Delhi. The 2024 general elections are a year away, and political engineering is at its peak in Uttar Pradesh. The darling of the moment is the Dalit. Every political party wants the Dalit on its side. The Dalit vote is so wanted during election time because it is 20 percent of UP's total population of almost 200 million. The Dalit is also called 'untouchable' and who has been sidelined to the lowest rung of the social ladder in a society that has planted the Brahmin as the superior most caste. All political parties want the Dalit vote but not the Dalit in the home or office. In other words social stigma continues to haunt the society at large.

Despite being the majority population, Dalits and people of other

backward castes have been excluded from the fold of mainstream Hinduism. Very few Dalits hold top positions in public life in the country even today. For several thousand years they have been deprived of opportunities that could add more dignity to their life. For the same reason and at different times in history, many Dalits have gravitated towards other religions like Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity and Islam. The Hindutva brigade is trying its best to stop conversion. But it is difficult unless there is positive approach towards caste annihilation.

Ever since Independence in 1947, the Congress had enjoyed almost uninterrupted power in UP. The Congress remains a pan national party where workers come from different walks of life. However, those in power within the party invariably belong to upper castes. The lack of performance by the Congress eventually

led to its downfall in UP in the 1990s. Thanks to provisions in the Indian Constitution, a growing awareness of Dalit rights was able to challenge the privileges enjoyed by Congressmen. Congress party got totally isolated from Dalit and Muslim communities. Today they depend on some regional parties to make their existential presence in UP.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was founded by Kanshiram in 1984 and later led by Mayawati. The founder of the Samajwadi Party (SP) is Mulayam Singh Yadav. The BSP was born to favour the interest of the Dalits while the backward castes and minority groups formed the base of the SP. Together the Dalits and the other backward castes like the Yadavs are half the population of UP. Add to this the vote of 20 percent Muslims and the coalition is unbeatable in numerical terms at least. However, the reality on the ground is that Dalits, other backward castes and Muslims are not united and they do not vote en bloc.

For the same reason it is unlikely

that the different political parties opposing the ruling party in UP will ever come together. Although elections have been fought in the past in partnership with each other, there is little love lost between the Congress, BSP and the SP. This is because the SP hates the Congress, the BSP hates both the Congress and the SP, and the Congress seems to have no clue as to who it hates or loves in UP any more.

The result is that the poor of the state including Dalits remain vulnerable to communal mobilisation by politicians. Communalisation Of UP's Politics The 'lower castes' in UP crave social acceptance and economic improvement in their life.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has stepped in with the promise to provide to the Dalit what its own leaders did not deliver. To win power in UP, the BJP realised that it could not succeed with the support of only the upper caste. It needed the vote, if not the company of the majority population of Dalits and other backward castes. So they are trying to woo Dalits, by making frequent overtures to their icons, particularly Ambedkar. They are lionising Ambedkar every now and then with an eye on monopolising Dalit vote which matters in UP. And what matters in UP also matters in New Delhi. □□□

[Contributed]

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NOTE

A World without Nukes

Patricia Hynes writes:

JANUARY 22 MARKS THE second anniversary of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, a global lifeboat supported by 70% of the world's countries. Meanwhile, the US Department of Energy's 2023 budget request for nuclear weapons' upgrade is more than \$21 billion and close to \$8 billion for radioactive and chemical cleanup at nuclear weapon sites across the country.

Hanford, Washington is the site of the largest plutonium-production reactors in the world from 1944 to 1987 (including for the bomb dropped on Nagasaki). The Hanford land, bordering the Columbia River, was effectively stolen from four Indigenous tribes and peasant farmers by the federal government and is now "arguably the most contaminated place on the planet," according to Joshua Frank, author of *Atomic Days*.

The Hanford plutonium-making site has killed and contaminated fish, waterfowl and other biological

life in the Columbia River and polluted two hundred square miles of the aquifer beneath.

While nuclear weapons governments and their bomb-making industries are criminally sleepwalking into what could mean the end of the planet's life, many others—scientists, high-level military, citizens and whole countries—are countering the weapons holders' political idiocy with principled intelligence.

- At their 40th reunion in Los Alamos, New Mexico, 70 of 110 physicists who worked on the atomic bomb signed a statement supporting nuclear disarmament. When have the brightest scientists of their day ever admitted that their most notable work was a colossal mistake?
- Against immense pressure from nuclear-armed states, most aggressively the United States, 122 countries agreed in July 2017 to ban nuclear weapons. At the heart of the United Nations Treaty

on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is an explicit ethical goal: to protect the world's peoples from the humanitarian catastrophe that would ensue were nuclear weapons employed.

- By the end of 2022, 68 countries ratified the Treaty and 23 more are in the process. At least 30 more countries have promised to join the Treaty.
- Since 2007, ICAN, an international organisation with partners in over one hundred countries, has mobilised people throughout the world to convince their governments to support a ban on nuclear weapons.
- Mayors for Peace from over 8,000 global cities call for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

The new UN Treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons bolsters the hope that the United States and the eight other nuclear giants will grow up into pragmatic, if not ethical adult governments and eliminate forever their genocidal weapons. One nation did so: South Africa developed nuclear weapons capability and then voluntarily dismantled its entire programme in 1989.

In 1963 President John Kennedy

gave at American University's commencement what has been deemed the most important speech by a US president—a speech on peace with the Soviet Union. But “what about the Russians?” everyone asked. Kennedy responded “What about

us...Our attitude [toward peace] is as essential as theirs.” According to historian Jim Douglass, “John Kennedy's strategy of peace penetrated the Soviet government's defences far more effectively than any missile could have done.” Promoted

across the Soviet Union, Kennedy's speech and his behind-the-scenes diplomacy with Khrushchev led toward de-fusing Cold War tension and planted the seed of a world without nuclear weapons and war. This seed awaits germination. □□□

DOUBLING FARMERS' INCOME?

Of Agriculture and Reforms

I Satya Sundaram

INDIAN AGRICULTURE HAS been facing formidable problems. Even when the rate of growth is satisfactory, there is no improvement in the plight of farming community. Whatever incentives are offered by the Government, the rich farmers take advantage of them. This is so in the case of minimum support price (MSP) also. The basic problem facing Indian agriculture is this: the cost, risk, and return structure of farming are unfavourable for most farmers.

Area under irrigation should be stepped up. Of India's 32.9 million hectares (MHs) of geographical area, nearly 140 MHs are net sown area and out of it 70 MHs are rain-fed. Rain-fed areas produce nearly 90 percent of millets, 80 percent of oil seeds and pulses and 60 percent of cotton while supporting nearly 40 percent of livestock. Thus, Indian agriculture is vulnerable to climate change. Government support is needed to bring more land under irrigation. Introducing agro-ecology in rain-fed areas could be a good policy option.

The share of income from crop production in the total income of farmers declined to 37 percent in 2019 from 48 percent in 2014. This means there is diversification in the sources of income. The share of wage/salary in the total income has gone up to 40 percent from 32 percent. According to the Situation

Assessment Survey (SAS) of National Statistical Office (NSO), released in 2021, the average monthly income of an agricultural household has gone up to Rs 10, 218 from Rs 6, 426, up by 59 percent.

Fragmented holdings push agricultural households to tap new sources of income. The latest Agricultural Census shows that the average size of operational holdings fell from 2.28 hectares in 1970-71 to 1.84 hectares in 1980-81, 1.41 hectares in 1995-96, and 1.08 hectares in 2015-16. The latest National Sample Survey (NSS 2018-19) shows that 37 percent of agricultural household income came from crop production and cultivation, compared to 48 percent in 2012-13. There is a substantial rise in income from animal farming. Farmers are also earning comparatively higher income from non-farm business and leasing out land.

Experts say secondary agriculture is important to enhance farmers' income. According to Ashok Dalwai, Chairman of the Committee on Doubling Farmers' income, farm sector is strengthened by technological revolution. Providing food and fodder is not enough. The focus should be on employment and better income. The horticulture production is impressive. But, there is tremendous potential for plantation crops and medicinal plants as well.

According to Food Corporation

of India, wheat stocks on November 1, 2021 stood at 41.98 million tonnes (MTs), compared to 40.29 MTs in the same period a year ago. The stocks more than doubled over the past six years from 18.84 MTs in 2016.

For raising farmers' income, agriculture diversification (AD) holds the key. AD is the shift from the regional dominance of one crop towards the production of a large number of crops to meet the increasing demand for these crops. A diversified cropping pattern will help in mitigating the risks faced by farmers in terms of price shocks and production/harvest losses. India has tremendous potential for crop diversification and to make farming a sustainable and profitable economic activity.

AD is meant to reduce risks associated with traditional agriculture and improve returns to investment. AD is important because it ensures food security, generates employment and income and ensures nutrition security. Of course, diversification is influenced by price and non-price factors. The Government's concentration is on food-grains, especially paddy and wheat. There is no MSP for horticulture crops. The non-grain sector is plagued by market inefficiencies and associated price risks.

The Government is using MSP as a signal to encourage crop diversification which ensures sustainable farming. The Committee on doubling farmers' Income has already suggested shifting some areas for staple cereals to high-value produce in order to enhance farmers' income.

The current stress is on precision agriculture (PA) and smart farming.

PA implies site-specific crop management. Soil-test base nutrient management practices have helped to improve food-grain production. The PA extensively uses the technology driven solutions for managing the entire set. Importance is given to generating the on-site /on-farm data on a continual basis about various practices, using remote sensing, adopting latest technologies like robotics, and aerial imagery, using drones for spraying pesticides.

In January 2022, the Centre announced subsidies for drones with a view to making them more accessible to farmers. It has been decided to provide 40 to 100 percent subsidies till March 2023 by revising guidelines relating to the existing scheme on farm mechanisation. However, the 100 percent grant will be limited to only Farm Machinery Training and Testing Institutes. An institutional agency is necessary to link platform-based agri-business firms with farmer organisations.

The Government promulgated three ordinances on June 5, 2020 in the name of agro-market reforms. The three farm laws (the last one is an amendment to the Essential Commodities Act) have become polemical, leading to agitations by farmers. The PM announced the repeal of these laws on November 19, 2021. The three Laws are: The Farmers' Produce, Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020, The Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act 2020, and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020.

Some did support the farm laws. The fear about MSP is baseless. The Government did not say it will be abolished. The Government wanted to marginalise the intermediaries. Strangely, the farmers did not like this, thus indirectly supporting middlemen. There is nothing wrong

in allowing farmers to sell their produce to those who offer the highest price. Moreover, the MSP has serious limitations as it benefited only some farmers and a few crops.

The Government repealed the Farm Laws. Critics say this will give a free hand to traders. The state governments will be back with cess and market fees, placing burden on poor farmers. It is also true that contract farming (CF) provides safety-net to farmers. The law relating to CF provides protection against land alienation.

The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act would have removed stockholding limits on farm produce, offering better prices to farmers and freeing businesses of the constant fear of the law being invoked. It is said that the law relating to CF will enhance demand for high value commodities for better price realisation to farmers, crop diversification, and induce asset-specific movement. The farm laws would have contributed to diversification of horticulture.

There are criticisms against the farm laws. The laws, having significant implications, were passed without any discussion, particularly with states. The laws effectively nullified the power of states to shape the nature and functioning of agriculture markets.

Most small and marginal farmers are also net buyers of food. The Essential Commodities Act (Amendment) 2020 would also hit their livelihoods hard when there is food inflation due to relaxation of stocking limits. The farm laws will not only create volatility in agriculture markets, affecting small and marginal farmers the most, but even undermine the PDS—the Public Distribution System. The small farmers feared that the new farm laws may lead to fall in demand in the local market. They may not be able to sell their produce outside mandis.

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Also, a few traders have monopolised almost all big mandis.

Experts say without an appropriate regulatory mechanism, deregulation is detrimental to farmers' interests. For instance, the small and marginal farmers are not in a position to take advantage of the new farm laws. They do not have the means for storage and transportation of their produce to distant markets.

Apart from the vertical tensions between the Centre and the states emanating from them, these agrarian reforms are capable of generating new forms of federal tensions in the form of horizontal tensions—inter-state tensions.

It is widely believed that the framework of MSP and procurement is superior to income support scheme. The MSP scheme allows the state to intervene in the procurement in a targeted way. The relief, unlike cash transfers, is specific and can take care of the nutritional needs of the poor.

The new market reforms should address the problems of small farmers—low marketable surplus, high transaction cost and poor connectiv-

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ity to markets. They face production and market risks. Some feel that the decision to repeal farm laws may be a stop-gap arrangement. These laws may reappear in other forms under the veneer of agriculture reforms.

Contract Farming (CF) is an arrangement between farmers and firm/contracting agency where farmers agree to grow crops specified by the firm and supply the produce to the firm for a predetermined price. The produce is supplied at specified quantity and quality levels within the given timeframe. The purchaser/firm commits to procure the produce at a predetermined price. Normally, the firm also agrees to provide certain critical agriculture inputs. CF is expected to strengthen the backward and forward market linkages, vital for market-led contractual agriculture. For farmers, CF can bring benefits of not only assured market and price but also access to new technology, seeds, extension and such other non-price benefits.

In July 2020, the Agriculture Ministry released guidelines. The farmers' liability is limited to the advance they receive. The sponsor cannot get ownership rights, and is responsible for any loss or damage to the farm. The farming agreement should be for a minimum of one cropping season to a maximum of five years.

Some, including the Centre, believe that CF can deliver better outcomes. Giving their produce at the farm gate saves farmers transport cost. CF would help shift market risk to the contract agency, thereby possibly reducing distress selling. It is viewed as a win-win situation.

There are criticisms against CF. It reduces farmers' bargaining power. Farmers become 'Price takers'. The Companies are interested in profit maximisation, and hence, may go in for more capital intensive and often less sustainable patterns of cultivation. Cash crops may be pre-

ferred to food grains, thus endangering food security.

The existing marketing system is dominated by Agricultural Produce Market Committees. This failed to ensure remunerative price for the farmers. Marketing has become a big problem because the crop procurement scheme is lopsided. It benefited only some states and crops. The procurement has not been linked to the production of States. For instance, in 2018-19, Punjab's paddy production was only 11 percent of total production of the country, but its share in total procurement of the country was 25.53 percent.

The National Agricultural Market (e-NAM), an electronic trading portal which connects buyers and sellers, was launched on 14th April, 2016. It aims to create a unified national virtual market for farm goods. It ensures better price for farm produce and provides marketing options. Under e-NAM, the Government provides free software and one time assistance of Rs 75 lakh per mandi for computer hardware and IT infrastructure.

Total transactions over e-NAM was Rs 42, 163 crore during April-January FY22 against Rs 31, 366 crore in FY21. This may reach a level of Rs 46, 000 crore in FY22. Looking at the success of 1,000 mandis, e-NAM is now on a path of expansion. According to e-NAM portal, out of 1,000 mandis integrated under e-NAM, online trading is taking place on 571 market yards. Experts say the Government has to focus on inter-state trading by providing third-party guarantees. If the government is serious about protecting small and marginal farmers, it should set up and encourage public and private wholesale markets.

By February 2022, about 1.72 crore farmers, 2 lakh traders and 1 lakh commission agents have been registered on the e-NAM platform.

February 5-11, 2023

FRONTIER

7

The Centre wants to bring reforms at state level so that inter-mandi and inter-state transactions go up. In March 2022, three states (Rajasthan, Gujarat and Karnataka) allowed free trade of agriculture produce outside mandis, without charging any fee for such deals.

Indian agriculture continues to be a victim of natural calamities. The situation worsened because of climate change. The Government launched Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) in kharif 2016 with the aim to strengthen risk coverage of crops for farmer premium cost over and above the farmer share is equally subsidised by the States and the Centre.

The average sum insured per hectare has increased from Rs15, 100 during the pre-PMFBY schemes to Rs 40, 700 under PMFBY. The scheme covers over 5.5 crore farmer applications year- on- year. Under PMFBY, the premium paid by farmers is fixed at 1.5 percent of the sum insured for Rabi crops, 2 percent for Kharif crops and 5 percent for cash crops. The scheme is implemented on an "area approach basis".

At the end of 2020, PMFBY disbursed Rs 90, 000 crore to farmers in five years. However, the participation of marginal farmers in the scheme declined in the three years ending March 2021. By January 22, 2022, claims worth Rs 2, 822 crore were pending as states drag their feet on subsidy. This is due to State governments not contributing their share to the scheme.

In the Indian context, Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) have to play a vital role in helping small and marginal farmers. The size of the landholding is declining. About 85 percent of the farm land is owned by small and marginal farmers. Also, farmers in the rain-fed areas are left in the lurch in getting benefits of government schemes. With limited marketable surplus, they have lost ac-

cess to value addition and marketing.

Of course, rural India has credit and non-credit cooperatives. Some of them are however not active. They are also dominated by better-off sections. The FPOs can help farmers in the areas of procurement of inputs, disseminating market information and spreading technology and innovations. They are useful in spheres like primary processing, brand building, packaging, labelling and standardisation. Of course, the success of FPOs depends on professionalisation of management.

The Union Budget 2019-20 announced setting up of 10,000 new FPOs over five years. At present, the intermediaries control prices, credit and marketing. The FPOs are expected to change this situation. They are described as "cluster-based business organisations".

The Centre has earmarked a credit requirement of Rs 18 lakh and an equity grant of Rs 15 lakh for each genuine FPO (with a membership of at least 300 farmers, with at least half comprising small and marginal farmers). The FPOs now enjoy income tax relief, but they seek MAT (minimum alternate tax). There are zero- tax paying companies. MAT aims to collect minimum tax from such companies.

The Union Budget 2021-22 enhanced the allocation for FPOs by 40 percent to Rs 700 crore, up from Rs 500 crore in 2020-21. However, this allocation has been reduced to Rs 250 crore (a 64 percent cut) in the revised estimates for 2021-22. For 2022-23, it stands at Rs 500 crore—the same as two years ago.

The Centre launched the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF) in 2020. Studies show it has given a major boost to the strengthening of Primary Agriculture Cooperative Societies (PACS) which are the bed-rock of village level credit system. According to the data provided to

Rajya Sabha in August 2021, a total of 6,524 projects, at a cost of Rs 4, 503 crore have been sanctioned under AIF—65 percent of the funds have gone to PACS projects.

An important feature of the present agriculture credit policy is interest subvention scheme introduced to provide farmers access to affordable credit. The scheme suffers from limitations in directing credit to a particular crop or a region. The situation may change with the advent of fintech companies assuming important role. For 2021-22, farm credit is around Rs 16.50 lakh crore. This has been raised to Rs.18 lakh crore by Budget 2022-23. The small and marginal farmers can get a loan of Rs.1.6 lakh without any security, up from Rs.1 lakh.

It is possible to adopt a differentiated need-based approach. This would make subvention credit more effective. Of course, the FPOs help is necessary. Also, the present credit system continues to neglect horticulture sector. The credit policy should give priority to enhancing productivity and sustainability.

A recent Study by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has revealed that technology- centric approach is the key to agriculture prosperity. It has observed that doubling of farmers' income is possible, irrespective of land size, provided there is backing from the administration. It also observed that horticulture had the prominent share in total income. In some States, livestock and fisheries matter. The ICAR has evolved site-specific plans to double farmers' income.

Strengthening agriculture is no easy task because the number of farmers is large. Most of them are small and marginal farmers. The Government should concentrate on them. This is possible only when market reforms are taken up seriously. Technology and reforms can ensure economic viability of Indian agriculture. □□□

MOCKERY OF 'DRY' STATES

'Everyone Drinks, Only the Poor Die'

Parth M N

THE BITTERNESS AND SARCASM is dripping in Gauri Parmar's voice when she says, "Where is the ban on alcohol?"

"It is either a fraud or maybe my village is not in Gujarat," adds Gauri. "The men in my village have been getting drunk for years." Her village, Rojid, is in Gujarat's Botad district.

Gujarat is one of three 'dry' states in India where citizens cannot purchase or consume alcohol. Its manufacture and sale could land a person in prison for up to 10 years, under the Gujarat Prohibition (Amendment) Act, 2017.

But Gauri, 50, has seen the rule flouted with impunity ever since she arrived in Rojid as a bride more than 30 years ago. She has seen alcohol being brewed locally and sold in polythene pouches to willing customers.

The dangers of making such alcohol are far-reaching—and fatal. Bootleggers use toxic additives sometimes to speed up the process. "They mix liquid sanitiser, urea and methanol," Gauri says.

In July 2022, such illegally produced hooch killed 42 people in Gujarat; nearly 100 were hospitalised in Ahmedabad, Bhavnagar and Botad districts. And of those who died, 11 from one village, Rojid, in Botad's Barwala taluka.

"My son, Vasram, was one of them," says Gauri. Vasram, 30, was the sole earner of the household, which includes his wife and two children, 4 and 2 years old. The family belongs to the Valmiki community, a Scheduled Caste in Gujarat.

Gauri remembers the morning of July 25, 2022. Vasram was feeling

uneasy and short of breath. The family took him to a private clinic in Barwala, where the doctor told them that he did not have the required treatment facilities. Vasram was then taken to the community health centre in Barwala. "There the doctors gave him an injection and put him on saline drip for a while," says Gauri. "At 12:30 in the afternoon, they asked us to take him to the district hospital in Botad."

The hospital was 45 minutes away, and Vasram complained of chest pain throughout the journey. "He said he had difficulty breathing," says Gauri. "He had been vomiting too."

At the Botad District Hospital, the doctors wouldn't tell her what was wrong. There was no communication, says Gauri. When she asked them, she was told to leave the ward.

Gauri helplessly watched the doctors pump her son's chest. She knew that alcohol had brought him to this state, but she didn't know the extent of the damage it was causing him. "I kept asking them what was wrong, but they didn't tell me anything. When your son is in hospital, you want the doctors to talk to you, even if it is bad news," she says.

The dismissive attitude of doctors towards patients and their relatives—especially people living in poverty and from marginalised communities—is not uncommon. "No one pays attention to the poor anyway," Gauri says.

It is also why the Charter of Patients' Rights and Responsibilities (approved by National Council for Clinical Establishments in August 2021) says that a patient or their

representative has the right to receive "adequate relevant information about the nature, cause of illness." The charter also says there can be no discrimination in treatment on the basis of social origins (such as economic status or caste).

A few hours after Gauri was told to leave the ward, the district hospital doctors referred Vasram to a private hospital in Botad—without telling his family why. Vasram, who was shifted there, died at 6:30 that evening.

"The alcohol ban is a joke," Gauri repeats. "Everyone in Gujarat drinks. But only poor people die from it."

Alcohol poisoning has been a public health problem in Gujarat for more than four decades. Consumption of toxic alcohol has killed hundreds over the years. The worst of the hooch tragedies took place in July 2009, when 150 people died in Ahmedabad district. Two decades before, in March 1989, 135 had died in Vadodara district. Mass deaths first occurred in 1977 in Ahmedabad—101 people were killed in the city's Sarangpur Daulatkhana locality. In every one of these cases, high concentration of methyl alcohol (methanol), was identified as the cause.

There are no standard specifications for making the alcohol. Country liquor is usually manufactured by fermentation and distillation of molasses or plant extracts. But when the demand is high, bootleggers resort to adding industrial ethyl alcohol, which is present in hand sanitisers too, and even the highly toxic methanol.

It is just the tip of the iceberg, say observers.

The circulation of alcohol is a business in which both police and politicians (besides bootleggers) are involved, says Ghanshyam Shah, a

February 5-11, 2023

FRONTIER

9

senior sociologist based in Ahmedabad.

Successive government inquiry commissions set up to investigate and prevent hooch tragedies, including the Laththa (Hooch) Commission of Inquiry chaired by Justice K M Mehta after the 2009 incident, have highlighted the ineffective implementation of prohibition policy.

Liquor consumption is permitted only on health grounds in Gujarat, and that too if a doctor prescribes it. Alcohol is however available to out-of-state visitors, who can get a temporary permit to purchase it at authorised shops.

“For the middle class and upper middle class, alcohol is available at marked-up rates,” Shah says. “The poor can’t afford it so they go for the cheap liquor made in villages.”

Doctors say that even if spurious alcohol does not kill the consumer immediately, it could impair vision, cause seizures and permanent damage to the brain and liver.

Unfortunately, public medical infrastructure in Gujarat is not equipped to deal with this health concern.

To begin with, the district hospitals—emergency care centres for people in rural areas—are not equipped with enough beds. A 2021 report by NITI Aayog on the performance of district hospitals in the country says that Gujarat has an average of 19 beds for every 1 lakh population. It is less than the national average of 24.

And there is a lack of doctors at the district and sub-district hospitals, of which there are a total 74 in rural Gujarat. According to Rural Health Statistics (2020-21), only 588 doctors are in position in them, when there should be 799.

At the 333 community health centres (CHCs) in rural areas of the state, there is a shortfall of 1,197 specialist doctors: surgeons, obstetri-

cians-gynecologists, physicians and pediatricians.

It was overworked staff that met Karan Veergama, a 24-year-old daily wage labourer and farm worker, when he took his father to Sir T Hospital, the civil hospital in Bhavnagar on July 26, 2022. “The hospital was so crowded that we couldn’t figure out where to go,” he says. “The staff was busy and nobody knew what to do.”

The report of the Laththa Commission of Inquiry had noted that there had been no emergency preparedness, especially during the initial hours of the tragedy, to deal with the alcohol-related deaths in 2009. The commission also highlighted the lack of a treatment protocol for methanol poisoning.

Karan’s 45-year-old father, Bhupadbbhai, who was a farm worker too, had consumed the same batch of alcohol that had sent many others in Rojid to hospital. At 6 am that morning, he had started to feel uneasy and had trouble breathing.

When Karan took him to CHC Barwala, the staff didn’t even look at Bhupadbbhai and referred him to the Bhavnagar hospital straight away. They knew that a batch of alcohol was making people sick. “They knew what was wrong,” says Karan. “Instead of wasting time, the CHC asked us to go to Bhavnagar. It is the best option for us from here in terms of facilities.”

But the hospital, about 80 km away, is a two-hour drive. “The road from Rojid to Bhavnagar is not great. That is why it takes two hours,” says Paresh Dulera, who drives the ambulance in the area.

Dulera recalls that when he picked up Bhupadbbhai, the patient didn’t need a stretcher. “He stepped inside the ambulance without much help.”

The ambulance service, which operates under the public-private-partnership model, gives pre-hospital

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

—Fr.

care during an emergency. Dulera says an auxiliary nurse midwife and a general nurse midwife are attached to it, and the vehicle is stocked with an oxygen cylinder, saline bottles and injections.

Amidst the chaos in the hospital, Bhupadbbhai was admitted to the intensive care unit. “The staff took him in, but we couldn’t even ask any questions because of the overcrowding,” says Karan. “An hour later, we were told he had passed away. We couldn’t believe it,” he says, repeating over and over again that his father was all right when he entered the ambulance.

“I know he is gone,” Karan says. “But I need to know how or why his health deteriorated so rapidly. We [the family] need some explanation, some closure.” The reason for the deadly outcome was not explained to him.

The family hadn’t received the post mortem report even two months after Bhupadbbhai died.

By July 27, 2002, the police had held 15 persons on charges ranging from acquiring methanol to making and selling the spurious liquor. A massive police crackdown against bootleggers across the state, reported on July 29, led to over 2,400 arrests and seizure of illicit liquor worth Rs 1.5 crore.

The fallout of police action has been swift in Botad: the pouch of homemade alcohol that sold at Rs 20 is now going for Rs 100. □□□

[Source: People’s Archive of Rural India]

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K P SASI

A Campaigner against Religious Nationalism

Satya Sagar

KP SASI, THE FILMMAKER, cartoonist and activist is no more. A few months before he passed away Sasi sent a passionate note to his wide network of friends appealing for a joint effort to ensure the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) does not win a third, consecutive term in power, when the next general elections are held in 2024. As a lifelong campaigner against the politics of religious hatred and division promoted by the BJP and its affiliates, Sasi foresaw disaster for India if communal forces remained entrenched in power.

There is more than enough evidence accumulated by now of how religious nationalism—with its dystopian goal of a 'Hindu Rashtra'—has wreaked havoc on the country's social fabric. The last several decades of the rise of Hindutva have seen repeated pogroms against religious minorities, sectarian riots, mob lynching of Muslims, apart from systematic assaults on Constitutional principles and rights.

The note identified a wide range of natural allies who could come together to challenge the Hindutva communalists and help restore social peace, uphold secular principles in public affairs and strengthen democratic norms. According to Sasi these include human rights groups and forums, cultural networks, students' groups, youth groups, women's groups, Adivasi and Dalit organisations, queer groups, fish workers' forums, forums of religious minorities, farmers' organisations, media networks, legal forums and film makers' forums along with individuals, who believe that BJP should not come to power in 2024.

Though all these diverse groups would naturally have their own vision as well as their own agenda Sasi's note emphasised the platform he sought would be as much inclusive as possible and seek cooperation to work for the main goal of defeating the BJP in 2024.

In the first phase, Sasi proposed the platform would act as a clearing house for bringing together all existing intellectual, cultural and social materials which could be useful for the campaign against the BJP in the run up to the 2024 elections. Phase Two of the project would involve widespread dissemination of these materials, after careful selection and creative packaging if needed.

The third phase would concentrate on communication through regional languages, formation of state level and regional level teams to continue dissemination of important communication materials at a wider level. If resources were available, the forum would directly involve in production of materials also for such a purpose.

In the final stage of work team members would visit all potential candidates with necessary materials that they can use during their election campaigns for a united action to defeat the BJP.

Sasi had intended the work to start in January 2023 itself but unfortunately he is no longer with his friends today. However, Sasi was never alone in his dream of a future for India that would be free of the poisonous ideas and actions of the forces of Hindutva. There are numerous friends of Sasi and many others who wish to recover the best traditions of India's experiment with

mass democracy since independence from colonial rule—especially its values of religious tolerance.

In Sasi's perspective culture was a key arena where Hindutva needed to be challenged. In his own prolific output as a filmmaker and cartoonist he focused on these aspects extensively and in quite some depth. He had very well-thought out and nuanced positions on themes such as freedom of religious expression, preserving traditional way of life of Adivasi or fisherfolk communities and the demands of sexuality groups or women.

For example, while strongly opposing the use of Hindu icons, symbols and mythology for political mobilisation, he was not opposed to any religion per se. He distinguished clearly between big, institutionalised religion that was closely aligned to state or money power and the belief systems and faith of ordinary people. Though he was himself atheist he worked passionately to defend the rights of religious minorities under attack from Hindutva fascism, to practise their faith.

He was also very tuned into debates around Indian history and caste discrimination—being very critical of Brahmanical notions of 'superiority' and 'inferiority'. On the language issue Sasi opposed the imposition of Hindi on southern Indian states and took a strong stand in support of the movement for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, especially following the large-scale massacres against Tamils by the largely Sinhala-dominated army in 2009.

Issues of anti-people development, impoverishment of ordinary citizens and growing corporate power were also important concerns Sasi dwelt upon in his work. Though he came from a strong Left background, he courageously opposed the conservative positions or decisions of

Communist parties on many of these themes. In short, Sasi was very independent-minded and in every situation sought to champion the cause of the underprivileged and marginalised sections against more powerful forces.

Involving a wide section of his own friends and others will surely bring forth different viewpoints and approaches on specific questions. That is not by itself not a problem as diversity of ideas is always welcome. Also, such differences can be sorted out through discussion and agreement on a process that allows quick decision-making that will be needed to carry out the activities of the platform.

The greater challenge will be practical and logistical as the work of such a platform will require the setting up of teams of people—at the national, state and local levels—willing to shoulder the responsibilities involved. They will need to dedicate the time and energy to make the platform a success. The platform will also require both human and other resources to ensure wide reach and genuine impact. It will require a transparent and accountable structure to ensure maximum participation and public credibility.

Above all it will require the willingness of diverse groups and individuals to come together and put

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their souls into the difficult but very achievable goal of defeating the BJP in 2024. □□□

[Satya Sagar is a public health worker who can be reached at sagamama@gmail.com]
[Source: countercurrents.org]

'FLAMING FOREST'

Back From Conflict Zones

Joydip Ghosal

IN 2010 FRENY MANECKSHA began a series of journeys across the strife-torn areas of the country to get an in-depth view of people's uprisings. As an independent journalist her visits to Bastar and Kashmir brought about a tectonic shift in her ways of seeing. The horrific experiences of documenting state oppression in the name of national interest, death, dispossession and routine violation of human rights set her on a learning course. Tragedies resulting from brutal repression propelled her to unearth the realities behind these atrocities. Her book *Flaming Forest*, wounded valley-stories from Bastar and Kashmir published by Speaking Tiger was the outcome of her passionate engagement with the regions where she documented the gruesome accounts of killings, beatings and razing of homes. In order to chronicle how the conflict and authoritarian rule permeated every aspect of civic life she visited Chattisgarh and Kashmir again and again. In these theatre of

conflicts readers would find overlapping contents. Close encounters with the inhabitants of the regions gave her an idea of how places and spaces were impacted by politics of overlordism and how people fought resolutely to reclaim their lost places and identity. In this book she repeatedly stressed that the concept of home as a safe space did not exist in those violence-ridden villages and towns especially in Kashmir where draconian laws empowered the security personnel to act with absolute impunity. Instances were galore where they exhibited scant regards for human rights. Troops can force their way into home at any hour and deploy a male member as a human shield or decoy. Aged and infirm were not spared from the atrocities. Even mere failing to stop at a check-post barrier can get one shot in Kashmir. This is how they maintain law and order and sell India as the biggest showcase of democracy.

In case of Adivasis their culture was shaped by forest for centuries.

It had hugely contributed towards their ecosystems. Indigenous people lived in harmony with the trees, water bodies and earth which Arunopol Seal described as ethics of reciprocity. But this orientation got disrupted when they were forced to live in make-shift camps. Despite vague claims by the government it became apparent that it was the concerns of the corporates that became paramount. Anyone who defied government dictate was described as a terrorist. Then a maoist tag is enough to keep anyone behind bars for years without any trial.

Over several field trips she came upon the stories of resilience of common people. This book celebrates the idea that heroic deeds are performed by ordinary people.

This book traverses different aspects. The author points out that in Chhattisgarh how the commercial perspective and the logic of economy determine the classification of forest produces. It is needless to say that displacement drive was undertaken to insidiously advance the interest of corporate honchos. While the repressive measures like Salwa Judum intensified the shadow of death dangled precariously over the heads of

Adivasis. The author here raised the pertinent question why there were so many demonstrative acts of dissent against the ‘development’ agenda. Through her field trips she learnt that Adivasis suffered great feelings of insecurity and alienation because they associated camps as centres of illegal incarceration, torture and humiliation. In this regard the protest at Silger camp and the resultant repression found mention in her account. She chronicled several incidents of sexual brutalisation, rape and intimidation. Her graphic narrative documents how serious crimes against humanity were brushed aside. The recent understanding of sexual violence as a weapon of war had reshaped the understanding of the feminists and rights activists. It was deployed in conflict zones as a means to crush the resistance movements.

Malik Sajad, an artist in Kashmir once wrote that “We prepared our ears for both screams and silence.” Decade long armed conflict and state repression proved beyond doubt that Kashmir was gripped with an eerie

air of uncertainty. Medical anthropologist Saiba Verma described how the concertina wire had been used to divide the city of Srinagar. It prevented the movements of people, goods and information. Verma described the siege as an ‘infrastructural war’, a term coined by Stephen Graham, the geographer. Graham in his book *Disrupted Cities* graphically detailed the havoc that Hurricane Catarina wrecked upon the livelihoods of New Orleans. He described how the intersectionality of technology, urban city life and security was devastated beyond any comprehension. People generally take urban centric infrastructure for granted but when it gets dismantled panic sets in. Complete clampdown leading to disruption of Kashmiri lives was just like that. State did not allow them to share even the most basic level of information. Manecksha collated the poignant accounts of how disruption of infrastructural flows caused immense suffering to the common people in Kashmir. Application of digital tech-

nology facilitated the webs of ‘invisible infrastructure’. It got visible when its functioning got halted. After the abrogation of article 370 Kashmir was literally plunged into digital darkness. State argued that it had genuine concerns for the security of the state. But Access now, a digital rights group said in addition to limiting the rights to freedom of expression, disruption of communication became the cover for state violence. Freny Manecksha unequivocally stated that denial of access to internet and other facilities had become a new form of warfare. In 2016 UN adopted a resolution when it categorically stated that ‘the same right people have offline must also be protected online’.

So gathering stories from the highly militarised zones of Bastar and Kashmir this book deftly examines how radically spaces can be altered. This moving book shows as Nandini Sundar says, ‘an India that is stitched together in pain and resilience’ where ‘stories of torture coexist with hope.’ □□□

ECHO OF NUREMBERG

When is a War a Crime?

Oona A Hathaway

FOR MONTHS, UKRAINIAN representatives have been quietly working to generate support for a special tribunal. The proposal picked up steam in mid-December, when the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, endorsed the creation of a tribunal and pledged to “start working with the international community to get the broadest international support possible for this specialised court.” In mid-December, while accepting the European Union’s top human rights award, Zelensky called on states to form a special tribunal to prosecute “the crime of Russian ag-

gression.” At the same time, a Ukrainian delegation, hoping to capitalise on the momentum, arrived in Washington, D C seeking U S support for a special tribunal.

The effort to establish a special tribunal may seem quixotic. After all, plenty of criminal investigations into crimes committed by Russians during the war are already underway in both domestic and international courts. Why add another court to the mix? But without a special tribunal for the crime of aggression, the fundamental crime of launching and waging this illegal war—a crime without which the other crimes would not have

taken place—would go entirely unpunished. Creating a court that has jurisdiction to try this crime is an essential step in the global effort to reject Russia’s blatantly illegal war.

When legal scholars speak of the crime of aggression, they mean the crime of waging an illegal war. Since the end of World War II, that has meant a war that violates the UN Charter, which prohibits states from using force against any other state unless they are acting in self-defence or have been authorised to use force by the UN Security Council. For much of history, however, there was no such thing as a crime of aggression, because aggressive wars were perfectly legal. Indeed, military conflict was an accepted method of settling international disputes. States could go to war for any number of reasons,

including to collect debts, to enforce treaties, and to protect trade routes. That changed only in 1928, when nearly every country in the world joined the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which for the first time outlawed war, prohibiting states from using war “as an instrument of national policy.”

The first court with jurisdiction to try this new crime was the International Military Tribunal established at Nuremberg, Germany, after World War II. There, 24 Nazi leaders faced trial for crimes committed during the war, including the “crime against peace,” as it was then called. Prosecutors—including Robert Jackson, who took a leave of absence from his position as a U.S. Supreme Court justice to serve as a prosecutor in Nuremberg—filed an indictment, the first count of which charged defendants with participating in a conspiracy to commit acts of aggression, noting that the “invasions had been specifically planned in advance, in violation of the terms of the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928.” The second count charged defendants who “participated in the planning, preparation, initiation, and waging of wars of aggression.” (Similar charges were made in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in Tokyo, which tried Japanese leaders for starting and waging war.)

The Nuremberg court found eight defendants guilty of the first count and 12 guilty of the second. In its judgment, it explained the foundational importance of the crime: “To initiate a war of aggression . . . is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

The only other international court with jurisdiction over the crime of aggression is the International Criminal Court (ICC), created in 2002. The treaty that established the court,

the Rome Statute, granted the court jurisdiction over the crime of aggression. But the crime could not be prosecuted until a conference of the states that had ratified the treaty could agree on the definition of the crime. That task was only completed in 2010, when the conference of states parties met in Kampala, Uganda, to amend the statute to fill in the missing pieces. The draft writers limited criminal liability to “manifest” violations of the UN Charter by any person engaged in “planning, preparation, initiation or execution” that was “in a position effectively to exercise control over or to direct the political or military action of a State.” This meant that only those most responsible for the war, and not ordinary soldiers, could be prosecuted (though only after the amendments became effective, in 2018). In a concession to the United States, which participated as an observer, the conference also agreed to limit the exercise of the court’s jurisdiction over the crime to wars of aggression committed by states that had ratified the Rome Statute as well as the new amendments. The United States signed but never ratified the treaty; thus, no citizen of the United States can be charged for the crime of aggression in the ICC.

No citizen of Russia can be charged for the crime of aggression, either. Like the United States, Russia signed but never ratified the Rome Statute. Belarus, too, never ratified the treaty, and it therefore cannot be held to account by the court for its complicity in the illegal war, including by allowing Belarusian territory to be used in service of Russia’s war.

Although the ICC does not have the power to prosecute the crime of aggression committed by Russian or Belarusian citizens, the ICC does have the power to prosecute war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Ukraine. That’s because coun-

tries gave the court broader jurisdiction over these crimes, allowing it to prosecute the nationals of nonmember states if the crime is alleged to have been committed on the territory of a state that has agreed to the jurisdiction of the court. This is why the United States could be investigated by the court for alleged crimes, including torture, committed by its forces in Afghanistan. While the United States is not a party to the Rome Statute, Afghanistan is, meaning that crimes committed on its soil can be investigated by the court. In Ukraine, the court has had this same authority since 2014, when Ukraine first submitted to the jurisdiction of the court.

Although the Ukraine war has renewed interest in amending the Rome Statute so that the crime of aggression can also be prosecuted against states that commit the crimes on the territory of a state that has accepted the court’s jurisdiction (as is true for the other crimes), such an amendment would likely take years to enact. The best way forward is therefore a two-track approach: a special tribunal for the crimes of aggression in Ukraine and an amendment to the Rome Statute to expand the court’s jurisdiction so that a special court will not be necessary in the future. But how it should be done remains an open debate.

The first widely circulated proposal, put forward by former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and several other heads of state and legal experts, called for a special tribunal modelled on Nuremberg. But that approach has drawn criticism; some argue that a tribunal created by a few Western states would not have the legitimacy of one created under the auspices of an international organisation. And what would stop, say, Russia, Belarus, and Syria from creating a competing “international court” of their own?

Alternative plans have emerged

one after another. There was a proposal to establish a hybrid tribunal under the auspices of the Council of Europe that would be called the Extraordinary Ukrainian Chamber for Aggression. But the proposal would have required unanimity among members of the Council of Europe, and it never picked up steam. What about simply leaving it to the Ukrainian courts? Ukrainian domestic law, after all, criminalises "planning, preparation and waging of an aggressive war." But domestic courts are obligated to recognise the immunity of foreign heads of state, heads of government, and the foreign minister, which would

mean that Putin and his foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, would be out of the Ukrainian courts' reach. (The same would likely be true of the proposed hybrid tribunal.) Russian generals could not take advantage of personal immunity, which applies only to those at the very highest level of government, but they would likely seek to claim functional immunity if prosecuted in Ukrainian courts, arguing that they cannot be held criminally responsible in a foreign domestic court for performing official acts. Those same immunities would not apply in an international court acting on behalf of the international community.

The proposal with the most widespread support at present) is a court created through the UN. This would require agreement between Ukraine and the UN, after a vote of the General Assembly recommending its creation. This would be fitting: after all, the court would be created precisely to enforce and reaffirm the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force. And creating the court through a vote in the General Assembly would give every country in the world a chance to reject Putin's illegal war and endow the special tribunal with powerful international legitimacy. □□□

[Source: *Foreign Affairs*]

LETTERS

Labour Strikes

It's only the second week into the new year and there's already been a series of strikes around the world across numerous sectors prompted by the rising cost of living and high inflation eating into workers' stagnant wages. Strikes are having an increasing impact, with implications for sustainable business..

Britain's Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union said 100,000 of its members across 124 government departments would take strike action on February 1 in a dispute over pay, pensions and job security.

Britain is experiencing a wave of strikes across sectors ranging from healthcare to railways, as pay rises fail to keep pace with double-digit inflation. Thousands of ambulance workers held a second day of strikes on January 11, while many schools in Scotland were closed by a teacher walk out.

Talks between government ministers and trade unions failed to produce a breakthrough to avert further planned strikes. The British government's response to the increasing strikes was to introduce legislation to parliament which would require key public services to maintain minimum safety levels during strike action

by workers. The new law could make effective strike illegal and workers may be sacked for exercising their right to withdraw their labour.

On the subject of new laws targeting strike action, Zimbabwe's government has signed a bill into law outlawing organised protests by healthcare workers, who could now face a fine or an imprisonment of up to six months. This comes after thousands of nurses and doctors at state-run hospitals in the southern African country went on strike last year demanding a hefty raise and wages in US dollars due to a slide in the local currency and steep inflation.

Meanwhile, French unions and opposition parties said they would fight hard to try to derail a highly unpopular plan to make people work longer before receiving a pension. President Emmanuel Macron's government, in turn, said it wasn't afraid of a nationwide call for strikes and protests on January 19 and would carry on with its plan.

The French will have to work two years longer to age 64 before retiring, if the reform, announced recently, is adopted by parliament. They will also need to work longer to get a full pension.

"I started work when I was 18 and

I'm tired," said 57-year old accounts department worker Francesca Lemolt. "I don't understand the principle of making people work longer when there are lots of young people looking for work."

In the United States, as a strike involving more than 7,000 nurses at two New York City hospitals ended after three days, as they reached tentative deals over staffing levels, according to the New York State Nurses Association..

Sharon Kimathi, New York War and Left

The division of Left political positions and ideological formulations over Russian invasion of Ukraine are disturbing. It sends a wrong message to the working-class politics across the globe. It is imperative for the Left to reflect on how its political confusions provide ideological justifications for different forms of wars and conflicts. Bourgeois wars and conflicts don't serve working class interests. There is no nobility and national glory in deaths and destitutions.

Wars and conflicts are different from class struggles. Class struggles are ideologically driven by working class to uphold their interests while changing society for better whereas wars and conflicts uphold ruling and non-ruling class interests represented by states and governments. Class

struggles enable progressive and democratic transformations in the society whereas wars and conflicts maim, kill, control, create and domesticate large army of unemployed, marginalised, homeless and displaced people. Wars and conflicts destroy civilisations and societies to uphold the interests of the powerful and marginalises the masses. It creates the republic of refugees. Deaths and displacements are twin outcomes of wars.

The theatres of war and conflicts are slaughterhouses for the most committed, dedicated, idealist, skilled and healthy youth. The war propaganda cripples the abilities of people to think rationally in the name of nationalism, territory and motherland. Science and technologically driven modern wars kill scientific thoughts. Working class people die and surrender their interests whereas elites prosper in all wars and conflicts. The imperialist military industrial complex makes super profits at the cost of human lives and livelihoods.

Therefore, the unconditional opposition to Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO and the neo-Nazi Azov battalion in Ukraine is central to left politics for peace, solidarity and internationalism. It is ideological bankruptcy and reactionary politics to choose one over the other in the name of fighting the enemy and protecting the territorial sovereignty. Whose enemy? Whose territory? Whose sovereignty? Defending people irrespective of their national origin is central to left politics and internationalism. Territorial nationalism is a ruling class ideology, which is shaped by colonialism, and promoted by states, protected by governments and consolidated by the military power and wars. The wars for homeland create homelessness.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine serves war mongering American and European imperialists, and oligarchs of Russia and Ukraine. There are no culturally relativist and ideologically expedient arguments available in favour of Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The struggle of peace, citizenship rights, equality, liberty, democracy and socialism are core values of left politics. These ideals can never be separated from each other. The opposition to Russian invasion is the first step towards peace and working-class politics of internationalism.

Bhabani Shankar Nayak,
University of Glasgow, UK
Kerala Film Institute Row

Philosopher and associate professor of IIT Delhi, Divya Dwivedi, has expressed her concerns over the ongoing protest against alleged caste discrimination at KR Narayanan National Institute of Visual Science and Arts (KRNNIVSA) in Kottayam.

"I feel a deep sense of sorrow, concern, trepidation and rage after learning about the casteist officials of KR Narayanan National Institute of Visual Science and Arts and their lower caste victims who are students and staff members. The nature of these casteist acts is dehumanising and paralysing; it includes episodes of forcing scavenging upon the lower caste employees by the upper caste director's family while telling the victims that Savarna excretions are quite special," she said.

She pointed out that "an atmosphere of impunity has been created" instead of taking action against the Savarna supremacists in the institute.

It may be noted that students of KRNNIVSA have accused institute director Shankar Mohan and his wife of caste discrimination. The institute's chairman Adoor is accused of protecting them. The protest has been going on for months. Dwivedi's remarks come in this context.

Dwivedi condemned the remarks of institute chairman Adoor Gopalakrishnan against the ongoing protest. She also criticised the support given by a high-ranking member of the ruling party to Adoor.

"But all this should not surprise anyone since Kerala is still governed by the 'vanguard' of the upper caste ancestral rule, which continues to

arrive, as we found with the implementation of EWS quota for the upper castes," she said.

She further said that an institution named after the first Dalit president of India, KR Narayanan, could only find members from the minority upper-caste communities to govern it.

Mathru Bhumi, Kerala
Bhima-Koregaon

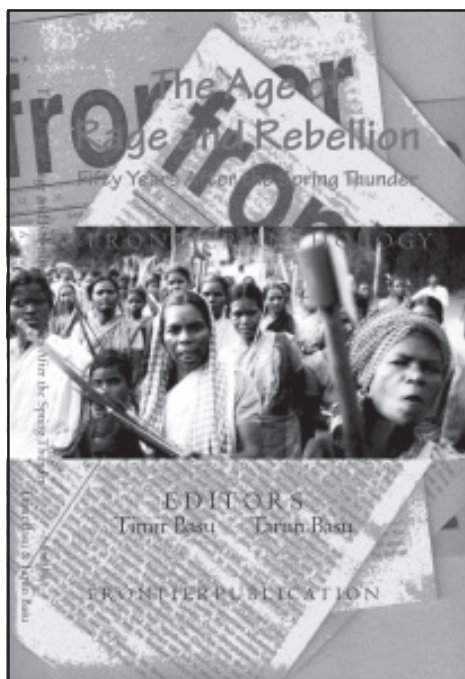
This is in response to a letter regarding Bhima Koregaon by a reader, Pune, published in Frontier (Vol 55 No 29, January 15-21, 2023), {and with no connection to or comments on the current right/left tussle on the incidents}:

1. In my opinion, it is unbecoming for any party/organisation calling itself as 'leftist' to celebrate this occasion.
2. Because, basically it celebrates the 'claimed' victory of the British East India Company forces against Peshwa's Maratha forces and there is nothing to be celebrated by Indians in it.
3. Apart from Mahars (Dalits), [more no. of] Rajputs, Marathas, Muslims, Jews etc. also fought on the British side.
4. Wikipedia informs "the Dalit scholar Anand Teltumbde has argued that portraying the Battle of Bhima Koregaon as the battle of Mahars against their caste oppression in Peshwa rule is misleading. Teltumbde mentions that most of those died in the battle (27 out of 49) were not Mahars, and the Peshwa army actually retreated fearing the arrival of a larger British force. Thus he considers painting of the battle as "Mahars' against the Peshwas' Brahmanic rule" to be misleading."
5. It is also to be noted that the Mahars first volunteered to serve under the Peshwa (but on condition of some anti-discrimination remedies to them) but on his refusal, joined the British side.

I M Sharma, Advocate, Editor,
Law Animated World, Hyderabad

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