

# frontier

Vol. 55 : No. 40

ISSN 0016-2094

April 2-8, 2023

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Published weekly for Germinal Publications  
Pvt. Ltd. by Sharmistha Dutta from 44, Balaram  
Dey Street, Kolkata-700006 and Printed by her  
at Laser Aid, 35A/3, Biplabi Barin Ghosh Sarani,  
Kolkata-700 067.

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[Typeset by THE D-COMLASER, 60 Sikdar  
Bagan Street, Kolkata-4, Ph : 98361-58319]

## *China is Coming*

**T**HINGS CAN CHANGE VERY QUICKLY IN THE MIDDLE EAST. Just days before Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to patch things up and restore diplomatic relations, there had been talk that it was actually Israel that was edging closer to Riyadh. In fact, much of the friendlier relations between Israel and several Gulf countries can be tied to their mutually shared animosity towards Iran. And yet, seven years after Iran and Saudi Arabia had severed ties, here they were in the same room, announcing a deal to reopen embassies in their respective capitals within two months. A dramatic shift in Mid East political equation. And it is going to radically affect the geo-political equilibrium in the region much to the disadvantage of America.

The consequences of this arrangement won't just play out in Iran and Saudi Arabia, of course, but across an entire region riven by fault lines previously created by the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh backed by America. Will their diplomatic coming together further ease the way for the rehabilitation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the eyes of other Arab leaders? Will Lebanon, dominated by Hezbollah, now receive more Saudi investment? Will Saudi Arabia feel secure enough to disengage from the war in Yemen, where Iran has supported rebel forces? And will Iran's own regional isolation, if not end entirely, then at least ease substantially? A lot of questions remain unanswered but the Tehran-Riyadh tie-up is surely going to open a new bout of arrangement and rearrangement in the region that is perennially haunted by fratricidal conflicts and internecine warfares and lawlessness.

The other interesting thing to note is where the announcement was made, namely China. Is this a further sign of a "changing global order"? China's role in the Middle East and North Africa has often been seen as one focused on business, but with this agreement it appears as though China is trying to position itself as an alternative arbitrator to the United States. Washington itself has tentatively welcomed the deal, but behind closed doors there will be questions asked about what this means for US influence in a still vitally important region like the Middle East. The US reign of the Middle East is ending, now it's China's turn. China is coming with a lot of noise and America shows its limits, rather limits of power. The decline of the empire is nowhere so vivid as in Washington's retreat in in the Middle East.

With Afghanistan lost, America is now focusing more on the Indo-Pacific

region, in view of the rising military might and economic power of China. Strange it may seem Saudi Arabia is now obliging Russia, not America, in keeping interests of their oil cartel in place much to the dismay of America and its western allies.

A new polarisation is taking place signalling the end of Unipolar world. Space left by America is now filled by China. As Iran is no longer untouchable to Saudi Arabia the Russia-China-Iran axis is all set to get new dimension against the backdrop of Russia-Ukraine war. China is fran-

tically searching for energy sources around the world and its Mid-East venture will strengthen its hold on global oil business. Autocratic rulers of Middle East have no problem in dealing with the Mandarins of Beijing because China itself is a citadel of autocracy and one party dictatorship. They don't bother about human rights. Nor do they show any interest in championing democracy. The Ukraine war is now in its second year and it will continue for years to come. Meanwhile devastation of Ukraine continues while

America and its NATO allies are testing new advanced weapons in Ukraine. The poor Ukrainians suffer. The net result of this war is new geo-political arrangement, a division in Europe and sun-set of American hegemony. China is not yet ready to antagonise America because of its trade relations and it is one reason the shaping of new global order is taking time. But America is losing to China in competition. And so there is sabre-rattling in Indo-Pacific region and a mock-fight over Taiwan. □□□

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## COMMENT

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### 'Surfeit of Democracy'

THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP) seems to be the saviour of Congress that desperately needs a national issue to remain in focus. The saffronites are continually attacking Rahul Gandhi for his caustic remarks about Indian Democracy under the Modi dispensation before a select audience at Cambridge. Congress leaders who have been wandering in wilderness for long are happy. The reason is simple: what they have failed to do in years is being done by BJP in a matter of few weeks—projecting Rahul Gandhi as the opposition face. For one thing BJP too needs a diversion as pressure is mounting on them, domestically and globally, for what may be called 'Adani fraud' and opposition parties in parliament have made it a single point of agitation to grill Modi and his corporate friend—Adani. Congress and its allies think they could downgrade the image of Modi by highlighting Adani's manipulative business tactics and the meteoric rise of Adani house due to Modi's patronage. The net result of opposition's protest in the house is repeated adjournment of parliament. How much people are gaining from

their shouting and counter-shouting is open to question. Unemployment is staggering and no sustained movement demanding gainful employment of the jobless. In truth all have started their election campaign for 2024. Rahul Gandhi's murmur about erosion of democratic rights and emergence of authoritarianism under the Modi regime does hardly elaborate the gravity of the problem and the emergency situation people are being forced to live in.

India is among 22 countries and territories out of 179 in the world where institutions and 'scholars' enjoy significantly less freedom today than 10 years ago as per the new 'Academic Freedom Index' published by the V-Dem Institute. Last year India received a score of 0.38 in a table of 0 to 1, where 1 is the highest academic freedom. Surprisingly, India was behind Nepal (0.86), Pakistan (0.45), Bhutan (0.46) and before Bangladesh (0.25) and junta-ruled Myanmar (0.01). 'India along with China, Afghanistan and Myanmar, are identified as countries where political events have severely reversed promising developments in the academic sector.' The

V-Dem report further specifies how 'around 2013 all aspects of academic freedom began to decline sharply, reinforced with Narendra Modi's election as prime minister in 2014.' There are no laws that particularly protect academic freedom, leading to their increased vulnerability under the Modi dictatorship. Centralisation, bureaucratisation, and politicisation have historically produced weak university autonomy in India and under Modi's steam-roller things have become just alarming and yet they boast of projecting India as the world's largest democracy. A sense of fear-psychosis has gripped the education sphere. Academic freedom is a thing of the past.

For all practical purposes India is an 'electoral autocracy'. If anything India began to drop on the electoral democracy even when Rahul Gandhi's party was in power. Modi has just aggravated it. Not that only academics' freedom of expression is curtailed. No voice of dissent is allowed. The Congress-led opposition is hardly serious about declining democratic space in the country. Their protest remains confined within the four walls of the House. They have no intention to take it to the streets and involve people against Modi tyranny.

The crux of the matter lies elsewhere. A united opposition now looks

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a mirage. It will never be materialised unless something dramatic happens, the possibility of which seems remote. A Congress-led broader opposition against the Modi brigade is a non-starter. Only the other day some regional outfits came out strongly in favour of a Congress-less opposition alliance. Samajwadi Party, TMC and some other regional parties are

against a Congress-led opposition. It means in the end Modi's party will laugh the last laugh.

Parliamentarians of all hues are too naïve to resort to extra-parliamentary activities. Without massive mass mobilisation the mountain will not move. Finally, it will be more of the same—ever declining academic freedom and civil rights. □□□

## NOTE

## “Betrayal Again”

*Anurag Dwary and Saikat Kumar Bose write:*

**H**OURS AFTER THE SUPREME COURT turned down the Centre's plea for more compensation in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy case, those who lost their own in the disaster termed the verdict a "betrayal".

Over a lakh people were affected by the poisonous gas leak at the Union Carbide plant on December 2, 1984, widely considered the worst industrial disaster ever. Estimates of death range from 5,000 to as high as 25,000. There were injuries to almost 5,68,292 persons besides massive loss of livestock and property.

Rashida Bi lost seven members of her family in the tragedy. Speaking to NDTV at her Bhopal home, she said they continue to face health effects caused due to the gas leak. "The health problems continue. My brother was hospitalised today. The court's verdict is injustice", she said.

The Bhopal victims, she alleged, were denied their day in court because of the "pro-corporate bias" of the bench. "The counsel for Union Carbide was given ample time to speak, but the lawyer for the survivors' organisations was heard for just 45 minutes", she added.

The Centre had sought an additional compensation of Rs 7,844 crore from successor firms of Union Carbide. A compensation of Rs 715

crore was paid back in 1989. The Centre had argued that the scale of damage to human lives and the environment could not be assessed properly at the time of the settlement. 'The contention of the central Government was that the compensation determined in 1989, was arrived on the basis of assumptions of truth unrelated to realities'. The government sought a re-examination of the apex court's 14 February 1989 judgement but the court dismissed the Centre's curative petition.

The court, however, said the Centre had not provided any rationale for raking up the issue now. The successor firms of Union Carbide, represented by senior advocate Harish Salve, had told the court that depreciation of the rupee since 1989 cannot be a ground to seek a "top-up" of compensation now. 'The five-judge constitution bench was unsatisfied with the Union of India for raising the issue after two decades'.

Shehzadi, another survivor of the tragedy, said, "There was a betrayal in 1989. This is again a betrayal".

Balkrishna Namdeo, president of an organisation voicing the demands of the survivors, questioned how the court can "draw the curtain" when those affected in the gas leak disaster continue to die and suffer.

"How can you impose finality

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when the corporation's crimes continue to victimise people? When people continue to die untimely deaths from cancers and other chronic diseases induced by their exposure to the poisonous gas?" he asked.

"When the criminal remains absconding and the suffering of the victims, including that of their children, continues, how can a Supreme Court bench draw the curtain over the injustice in Bhopal?" Mr Namdeo asked.

The then Union Carbide chairman Warren Anderson was prime accused in the case, but did not appear for the trial. A Bhopal court declared him an absconder in 1992. Two non-bailable warrants were issued before his death in 2014.

(Source: India News)

## MORE ON BHOPAL

*I Mallikarjuna Sharma adds:*

**T**HIS WRITER WENT TO BHO-PAL at least two times, once along with late Sri K G Kannabiran,

Senior Advocate (for long years President of PUCL, India), in connection with the Bhopal tragedy. For one thing I have not much sympathy towards the so-called 'victims' who seem to exceed 6 lakhs or so as per the claims made! At that time I have written articles in which I cited the death figure as about or not less than 20,000 but several criticisms I had to face that the figure was on higher side because government and other organisations figure was about 4000-8000 and not more. Of course, all our estimates were approximate.

[Now in the website of International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal it is stated: "The official death toll to-date (local government figures) of people who have died as a result of the disaster stands at more than 20,000 people..."]

However, it is despicable that those who are not even affected by the tragedy in any way filed claim petitions—this is the Indian standards—what we can say?

Of course, if the same accident were to have happened in America, the compensation sanctioned by

courts there would have been many times more than our figures but US and India—quite different situations, no?

I also think our government should have officially filed a compensation suit in American courts and in the International Court of Justice too [if the American government was not cooperative] in this regard, together with necessary diplomatic activity, and that would have delivered better results. At least, the company would have come up for a better compromise and better package. □□□

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#### MUSTO'S COLUMN

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## The Alternative of the Paris Commune

(152 YEARS LATER)

*Marcello Musto*

**T**HE BOURGEOIS OF FRANCE had always come away with everything. Since the revolution of 1789, they had been the only ones to grow rich in periods of prosperity, while the working class had regularly borne the brunt of crises. But the proclamation of the Third Republic would open new horizons and offer an opportunity for a change of course. Napoleon III, having been defeated in battle at Sedan, was taken prisoner by the Prussians on 4 September 1870. In the following January, after a four-month siege of Paris, Otto von Bismarck obtained a French surrender and was able to impose harsh terms in the ensuing armistice. National elections were held and Adolphe Thiers installed at the head of the executive power, with the support of a large Legitimist and Orleanist majority. In the capital, however, where the popular discontent was greater than elsewhere, radical republican and socialist forces swept the board. The prospect of a right-wing government that would leave social injustices intact,

heaping the burden of the war on the least well-off and seeking to disarm the city, triggered a new revolution on 18 March. Thiers and his army had little choice but to decamp to Versailles.

#### ***Struggle and government***

To secure democratic legitimacy, the insurgents decided to hold free elections at once. On 26 March, an overwhelming majority of Parisians (190,000 votes against 40,000) approved the motivation for the revolt, and 70 of the 85 elected representatives declared their support for the revolution. The 15 moderate representatives of the parti des maires, a group comprising the former heads of certain arrondissements, immediately resigned and did not participate in the council of the Commune; they were joined shortly afterwards by four Radicals. The remaining 66 members—not always easy to distinguish because of dual political affiliations—represented a wide range of positions. Among them were twenty or so neo-Jacobin republicans (including the renowned Charles Delescluze and Félix Pyat), a dozen

followers of Auguste Blanqui, 17 members of the International Working Men's Association (both mutualist partisans of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and collectivists linked to Karl Marx, often at odds with each other), and a couple of independents. Most leaders of the Commune were workers or recognised representatives of the working class, 14 originating in the National Guard. In fact, it was the central committee of the latter that invested power in the hands of the Commune—the prelude, as it turned out, to a long series of disagreements and conflicts between the two bodies.

On 28 March a large number of citizens gathered in the vicinity of the Hôtel de Ville for festivities celebrating the new assembly, which now officially took the name of the Paris Commune. Although it would survive for no more than 72 days, it was the most important political event in the history of the nineteenth-century workers' movement, rekindling hope among a population exhausted by months of hardship. Committees and groups sprang up in the popular quarters to lend support to the Commune, and every corner of the metropolis hosted initiatives to express solidarity and to plan the construction of a new world. Montmartre was baptised the "citi-

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del of liberty". One of the most widespread sentiments was a desire to share with others. Militants like Louise Michel exemplified the spirit of self-abnegation—Victor Hugo wrote of her that she “did what the great wild souls do. (...) She glorified the crushed and downtrodden”. But it was not the impetus of a leader or a handful of charismatic figures that gave life to the Commune; its hallmark was its clearly collective dimension. Women and men came together voluntarily to pursue a common project of liberation. Self-government was not seen as a utopia. Self-emancipation was thought of as the essential task.

### ***The transformation of political power***

Two of the first emergency decrees to stem the rampant poverty were a freeze on rent payments (it was said that “property should make its fair share of sacrifices”) and on the selling of items valued below 20 francs in pawn shops. Nine collegial commissions were also supposed to replace the ministries for war, finance, general security, education, subsistence, labour and trade, foreign relations and public service. A little later, a delegate was appointed to head each of these departments.

On 19 April, three days after further elections to fill 31 seats that became almost immediately vacant, the Commune adopted a Declaration to the French People that contained an “absolute guarantee of individual liberty, freedom of conscience and freedom of labour” as well as “the permanent intervention of citizens in communal affairs”. The conflict between Paris and Versailles, it affirmed, “cannot be ended through illusory compromises”; the people had a right and “obligation to fight and to win!” Even more significant than this text—a somewhat ambiguous synthesis to avoid tensions among the various political

tendencies—were the concrete actions through which the Communards fought for a total transformation of political power. A set of reforms addressed not only the modalities but the very nature of political administration. The Commune provided for the recall of elected representatives and for control over their actions by means of binding mandates (though this was by no means enough to settle the complex issue of political representation). Magistracies and other public offices, also subject to permanent control and possible recall, were not to be arbitrarily assigned, as in the past, but to be decided following an open contest or elections. The clear aim was to prevent the public sphere from becoming the domain of professional politicians. Policy decisions were not left up to small groups of functionaries and technicians, but had to be taken by the people. Armies and police forces would no longer be institutions set apart from the body of society. The separation between state and church was also a *sine qua non*.

But the vision of political change was not confined to such measures: it went more deeply to the roots. The transfer of power into the hands of the people was needed to drastically reduce bureaucracy. The social sphere should take precedence over the political—as Henri de Saint-Simon had already maintained—so that politics would no longer be a specialized function but become progressively integrated into the activity of civil society. The social body would thus take back functions that had been transferred to the state. To overthrow the existing system of class rule was not sufficient; there had to be an end to class rule as such. All this would have fulfilled the Commune’s vision of the republic as a union of free, truly democratic associations promoting the emanci-

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pation of all its components. It would have added up to self-government of the producers.

### **Prioritising social reforms**

The Commune held that social reforms were even more crucial than political change. They were the reason for its existence, the barometer of its loyalty to its founding principles, and the key element differentiating it from the previous revolutions in 1789 and 1848. The Commune passed more than one measure with clear class connotations. Deadlines for debt repayments were postponed by three years, without additional interest charges. Evictions for non-payment of rent were suspended, and a decree allowed vacant accommodation to be requisitioned for people without a roof over their heads. There were plans to shorten the working day (from the initial 10 hours to the eight hours envisaged for the future), the widespread practice of imposing specious fines on workers simply as a wage-cutting measure was outlawed on pain of sanctions, and minimum wages were set at a respectable level. As much as possible was done to increase food supplies and to lower prices. Nightwork at bakeries was banned, and a number of municipal meat stores were opened. Social assistance of various kinds was extended to weaker sections of the population—for example, food banks for abandoned women and children—and discussions were held on how to end the discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate children.

All the Communards sincerely believed that education was an essential factor for individual emancipation and any serious social and political change. School attendance was to become free and compulsory for girls and boys alike, with religiously inspired instruction giving way to secular teaching along rational, scientific lines. Specially appointed commissions and the pages of the press

featured many compelling arguments for investment in female education. To become a genuine “public service”, education had to offer equal opportunities to “children of both sexes”. Moreover, “distinctions on grounds of race, nationality, religion or social position” should be prohibited. Early practical initiatives accompanied such advances in theory, and in more than one arrondissement thousands of working-class children entered school buildings for the first time and received classroom material free of charge.

The Commune also adopted measures of a socialist character. It decreed that workshops abandoned by employers who had fled the city, with guarantees of compensation on their return, should be handed over to cooperative associations of workers. Theatres and museums—open for all without charge—were collectivized and placed under the management of the Federation of Parisian Artists, which was presided over by the painter and tireless militant Gustave Courbet. Some three hundred sculptors, architects, lithographers and painters (among them Édouard Manet) participated in this body—an example taken up in the founding of an “Artists’ Federation” bringing together actors and people from the operatic world.

All these actions and provisions were introduced in the amazing space of just 54 days, in a Paris still reeling from the effects of the Franco-Prussian War. The Commune was able to do its work only between 29 March and 21 May, in the midst of heroic resistance to attacks by the Versailles that also required a great expenditure of human energy and financial resources. Since the Commune had no means of coercion at its disposal, many of its decrees were not applied uniformly in the vast area of the city. Yet they displayed a remarkable drive to re-

shape society and pointed the way to possible change.

### **Collective and feminist struggle**

The Commune was much more than the actions approved by its legislative assembly. It even aspired to redraw urban space, as demonstrated by the decision to demolish the Vendôme Column, considered a monument to barbarism and a reprehensible symbol of war, and to secularise certain places of worship by handing them over for use by the community. If the Commune managed to keep going, it was thanks to an extraordinary level of mass participation and a solid spirit of mutual assistance. In this spurning of authority, the revolutionary clubs that sprang up in nearly every arrondissement played a noteworthy role. There were at least 28 of them, representing one of the most eloquent examples of spontaneous mobilization. Open every evening, they offered citizens the opportunity to meet after work to discuss freely the social and political situation, to check what their representatives had achieved, and to suggest alternative ways of solving day-to-day problems. They were horizontal associations, which favoured the formation and expression of popular sovereignty as well as the creation of genuine spaces of sisterhood and fraternity, where everyone could breathe the intoxicating air of control over their own destiny.

This emancipatory trajectory had no place for national discrimination. Citizenship of the Commune extended to all who strove for its development, and foreigners enjoyed the same social rights as French people. The principle of equality was evident in the prominent role played by the 3,000 foreigners active in the Commune. Leo Frankel, a Hungarian member of the International Working Men’s Association, was not only elected to the Council of the

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Commune but served as its “minister” of labour—one of its key positions. Similarly, the Poles Jaroslaw Dombrowski and Walery Wroblewski were distinguished generals at the head of the National Guard.

Women, though still without the right to vote or to sit on the council of the Commune, played an essential role in the critique of the social order. In many cases, they transgressed the norms of bourgeois society and asserted a new identity in opposition to the values of the patriarchal family, moving beyond domestic privacy to engage with the public sphere. The Women's Union for the Defence of Paris and Care for the Wounded, whose origin owed a great deal to the tireless activity of the First International member Elisabeth Dmitrieff, was centrally involved in identifying strategic social battles. Women achieved the closure of licensed brothels, won parity for female and male teachers, coined the slogan “equal pay for equal work”, demanded equal rights within marriage and the recognition of free unions, and promoted exclusively female chambers in labour unions. When the military situation worsened in mid-May, with the Versailles at the gates of Paris, women took up arms and formed a battalion of their own. Many would breathe their last on the barricades. Bourgeois propaganda subjected them to the most vicious attacks, dubbing them *les pétroleuses* and accusing them of having set the city ablaze during the street battles.

### ***To centralise or decentralise?***

The genuine democracy that the Communards sought to establish was an ambitious and difficult project. Popular sovereignty required the participation of the greatest possible number of citizens. From late March on, Paris witnessed the mushrooming of central commissions, local subcommittees, revolutionary clubs

and soldiers' battalions, which flanked the already complex duopoly of the Council of the Commune and the central committee of the National Guard. The latter had retained military control, often acting as a veritable counter-power to the Council. Although direct involvement of the population was a vital guarantee of democracy, the multiple authorities in play made the decision-making process particularly difficult and meant that the implementation of decrees was a tortuous affair.

The problem of the relationship between central authority and local bodies led to quite a few chaotic, at times paralysing, situations. The delicate balance broke down altogether when, faced with the war emergency, indiscipline within the National Guard and the growing inefficacy of government, Jules Miot proposed the creation of a five-person Committee of Public Safety, along the lines of Maximilien Robespierre's dictatorial model in 1793. The measure was approved on the First of May, by a majority of 45 to 23. It proved to be a dramatic error, which marked the beginning of the end for a novel political experiment and split the Commune into two opposing blocs. The first of these, made up of neo-Jacobins and Blanquists, leaned towards the concentration of power and, in the end, to the primacy of the political over the social dimension. The second, including a majority of members of the International Working Men's Association, regarded the social sphere as more significant than the political. They thought that a separation of powers was necessary and insisted that the republic must never call political freedoms into question. Coordinated by the indefatigable Eugène Varlin, this latter bloc sharply rejected the authoritarian drift and did not take part in the elections to the Committee of Public Safety. In

its view, the centralization of powers in the hands of a few individuals would flatly contradict the founding postulates of the Commune, since its elected representatives did not possess sovereignty—that belonged to the people—and had no right to cede it to a particular body. On 21 May, when the minority again took part in a session of the Council of the Commune, a new attempt was made to weave unity in its ranks. But it was already too late.

### ***The Commune as synonym of revolution***

The Paris Commune was brutally crushed by the armies of Versailles. During the *semaine sanglante*, the week of blood-letting between 21 and 28 May, a total of 17,000 to 25,000 citizens were slaughtered. The last hostilities took place along the walls of Père Lachaise cemetery. A young Arthur Rimbaud described the French capital as “a mournful, almost dead city”. It was the bloodiest massacre in the history of France. Only 6,000 managed to escape into exile in England, Belgium and Switzerland. The number of prisoners taken was 43,522. One hundred of these received death sentences, following summary trials before courts martial, and another 13,500 were sent to prison or forced labour, or deported to remote areas such as New Caledonia. Some who went there solidarized with and shared the fate of the Algerian leaders of the anti-colonial Mokrani revolt, which had broken out at the same time as the Commune and also been drowned in blood by French troops.

The spectre of the Commune intensified the anti-socialist repression all over Europe. Passing over the unprecedented violence of the Thiers state, the conservative and liberal press accused the Communards of the worst crimes and expressed great relief at the restoration of the “natural order” and bourgeois

legality, as well as satisfaction with the triumph of “civilization” over anarchy. Those who had dared to violate the authority and attack the privileges of the ruling class were punished in exemplary fashion. Women were once again treated as inferior beings, and workers, with dirty, calloused hands who had brazenly presumed to govern, were driven back into positions for which they were deemed more suitable.

And yet, the insurrection in Paris gave strength to workers’ struggles and pushed them in more radical directions. On the morrow of its

defeat, Eugène Pottier wrote what was destined to become the most celebrated anthem of the workers’ movement: “Let us group together and tomorrow / The Internationale / Will be the human race!” Paris had shown that the aim had to be one of building a society radically different from capitalism. Henceforth, even if “the time of cherries” [Le Temps des cerises] (to quote the title of the communard Jean-Baptiste Clément’s famous verse), never returned for its protagonists, the Commune embodied the idea of social-political change and its practical application. It be-

came synonymous with the very concept of revolution, with an ontological experience of the working class. In The Civil War in France, Karl Marx stated that this “vanguard of the modern proletariat” had succeeded in “attaching the workers of the world to France”. The Paris Commune changed the consciousness of workers and their collective perception. At a distance of 152 years, its red flag continues to flutter and to remind people that an alternative is always possible. Vive la Commune!

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## HISTORY IS CALLING US!

### ‘Save Democracy, Save Indian Constitution, Save India’

**Manoranjan Mohanty**

*[Presentation by The Chair of the Reception Committee, Bharat Bachao  
11-12 March 2023, HK Surjeet Bhavan, New Delhi, Excerpts:]*

PEOPLE OF INDIA TODAY face the onslaught on the basic values of the Constitution from a regime that is determined to impose a socio-political system of Hindutva chauvinism on the multicultural, multi-religious, multilingual society thus violating the constitutional commitment to equality of all citizens. It is advancing the neoliberal agenda of the corporates that is causing enormous hardships to farmers, workers and the poor as a whole. It is unfolding an economic strategy of distributing various kinds of symbolic relief to the different sections of the masses without creating substantive long-term productive assets and without addressing the questions of massive unemployment, distress conditions of farmers and workers, most artisans and small-scale industries, and steadily increasing inequalities of wealth and income. The propaganda machine of the government presents them as ‘pro-poor’ policies whereas in reality funds have been cut from key wel-

fare sectors such as MGNREGS, rural development, education and health. Achieving economic growth with state-supported corporates accumulating profit, accompanied by a pronounced focus on ‘national security’, projected prominently to the world is the driving strategy of the acquiring and maintaining political power by the current regime. In this scheme the VALUES of the Constitution do not seem to figure except in rhetoric.

All criticism is sought to be suppressed, dissidents harassed, jailed or silenced in a variety of means. Using state investigative agencies such as the CBI, ED, Income Tax agencies and NIA, all critics including opposition political parties, academics, journalists, writers, poets, NGOs and research organisations are subjected to much harassment. Surveillance and repression are the order of the day. Much of the media is either co-opted or silenced or coerced to propagate government’s or the ruling party view-point. Independent

institutions of the state are mostly subdued with careful manipulations. The polity and its governance in all spheres is today highly centralised using economic, political, security and technological means. Not only Indian democracy is facing an unprecedented threat, the values of the Constitution are at stake.

In such a critical moment of India’s history, those who are fully immersed in electoral battles, or ideological or political struggles must realise that the water has gone much deeper and the roots of the Republic are under threat. It is a struggle over VALUES. Hence history’s urgent call to us is to unite and point out the full dimensions of this situation at every level from villages, towns and in every part of the country and build conditions for democratic transformation as envisaged under the Constitution.

History tells us that all colonial, fascist, authoritarian and oppressive systems are eventually defeated and people finally win freedom and civilisation continues its march towards greater equality and justice, social solidarity and harmony between humans and nature. Therefore, we must have faith in people. Satyagraha for democracy and people’s rights shall be victorious.



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The representatives of peasant and workers organisations, Dalit and Adivasi movements, political parties, social and political activists, leaders of the civil liberty and democratic rights movements, poets, writers, lawyers, academics and many other democratic forces assembled here, know very well, how the colonial regime had tried to crush India, expropriated Indian people's wealth, destroyed knowledge systems, divided them steadily as a part of its ruling strategy, calling the colonised people uncivilised, stratifying them further as 'primitive' and so on. To fight that challenge Indian people waged struggles on many fronts to assert the right to equality of nations and peoples. They launched many movements for people's rights and engaged in great debates to define the rights of individuals, groups and regions and build a vision of a democratic republic. That vision was enshrined into the Constitution of India. Many progressives including Gandhians, Ambedkarites were not satisfied with what the Constitution gave to people. They considered the document a compromise draft with ruling forces. But even then the new Constitution contained a large consensus about the kind of society that the freedom fighters wished to build in India. Essence of that vision is contained in the statement of the key VALUES in the Preamble of the Constitution. A new India was thus born. Today that India is under threat of destruction. Hence today HISTORY IS CALLING US: BHARAT BACHAO. Save India.

***The Preamble highlights four great values:***

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;  
LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;  
EQUALITY of status and opportunity;  
FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of

the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation.

Each of them has a rich meaning embodying civilisational history of people of India and the world. India as a Sovereign Democratic Republic that was originally mentioned in the Preamble should have been adequate to pursue these goals. But as the trends already unfolding showed slides towards furthering of inequalities and social disunity, 'socialist and secular' were added by the 42nd Amendment in 1976 during the authoritarian regime of the Emergency and were retained by the 44th Amendment during the Janata regime in 1977 even though the many authoritarian distortions were removed from the Constitution. ('integrity' was also added and retained in the expression 'unity of the nation'.)

These values of the Constitution were given concrete shape in the various provisions of the Constitution, especially in the Parts on Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy and the scheme of Federalism and in an independent judiciary and many other institutions of the Democratic Republic. Possibilities of much positive socio-economic transformation appeared and many were accomplished by operation of a vibrant democracy enacting laws to expand people's rights to basic needs. But in course of the past decades it also became clear that often big capital, upper castes, communal and neo-colonial forces found the constitutional provisions unfavourable to their interests and sought to seize state power to subvert them in many new ways. So people's movements were carried out to present demands of oppressed sections. Even though many of them were either crushed or manipulated their impact did achieve many goals.

The intensified attack on the values of the Constitution has been most evident during the past decade

of neo-liberalism and communal authoritarian rule both in the pattern of mobilisation for winning elections and in the method of governance,

1. The scale of its use of the institutions of the republic to serve the rulers' political interests rather than promoting the values of the Constitution is unprecedented.
2. Weaving a formidable strategy of long-term political domination has gone much beyond the familiar notions of Political Parties in a pluralist democratic polity.
3. State power is used to establish structures of domination spanning all spheres of society, economy and culture rather than allowing democratic space to operate autonomously.
4. Combining domestic with global realms, the regime uses global forums to achieve its partisan ends
5. Making full use of the latest smart technology for communication, surveillance, and repression it has organised a large army of technocrats to use all arenas of government and society.

People of India had experienced phases of authoritarian and even fascist rule such as the Internal Emergency before either in the whole country or parts of the country. But the nature and dimensions of the present phase have many new dimensions which pose unprecedented challenges. Therefore, it is necessary to freely debate over this situation and its implications and come to an understanding and formulate an action plan for a united struggle to defend the values of the Constitution.

All this has been done in the name of a government that has come to power by winning majority seats in the elections. This 'majoritarian' view of democracy is a distorted view of democracy. Majority principle is in the ultimate a practical way of taking a decision in a democracy only after all steps

have been ensured to follow the four basic values of democracy :

Equality  
Freedom  
Justice  
Reason

That is why a number of institutions have been designed in the Constitution and all functionaries of the state are required to take oath to 'protect and preserve the Constitution'. Reason is a crucial element in democracy that is often missed in the common notions. Loud rhetoric with captivating oratory by political leaders may sway emotions in a campaign. But it may in fact get far away from the discussions based on reason. Free and reasoned discussions in a fair and even environment must take place so that information and alternative viewpoints are presented before a decision is arrived at. A free press is meant for that purpose. But rulers have made it a point to take over media, print media and electronic media to promote their viewpoint. Elections are to be fought in an even playing field with various small and big parties and independent contestants having equal opportunity to present their case before the electorate. The Election Commission was meant to be an impartial body to make that possible. But rulers try to appoint pliable commissioners to tilt the balance in their patron's favour. Thankfully the Supreme Court has come out with a new appointment committee to ensure appointment of independent commissioners. Courts

are the arenas of debates by prosecution and defendants and witnesses with the objective of reason guiding deliberations leading to a verdict. But the appointment of judges is also now sought to be manipulated to seek verdicts in favour of the rulers.

Today 'reason' is under attack in the name of a government that holds majority in the legislature. First, elections are won by using huge money power, deploying musclemen to cajole voters and appealing to religious and ethnic emotions to mobilise groups. Then party leaders establish 'high commands' or 'supremo' system in leader-led parties using whip or enforcing discipline and making them courtier defenders of their leaders. Then the majority party leadership does not allow debates in the legislatures. Hence 'reasoned' debates have become a rare phenomenon. All the great institutions of 'question hour', adjournment motions etc. and the wit and civility of informed debates in the floor of the house and in committees have been a thing of the past.

Take for example the happenings in the sphere of education. Reason is the essential characteristic of education through which a generation of human civilisation passes on its knowledge, skill, cherished values and inquiring tools to another generation. The state provides adequate funds and infrastructure to facilitate this process allowing full freedom to the teaching and learning community from early education till the

higher levels in the university. Democracy rests on the quality of education as it is meant to promote equality in status and opportunity. What has happened in practice is just the opposite. The New Education Policy (NEP) not only carried forward the growing trend of commercialisation and privatisation of all levels of education in India into new heights accelerating the creation of massive inequalities, but significantly communalised and highly centralised the education system. This is another area where the Constitutional vision of decentralised, autonomous processes of education has been abandoned.

We have a task before us. Let us take up the challenge, discuss with full respect for each other's viewpoint. We must discuss comprehensively the whole range of current challenges, the reasons we reached this point in our history and rebuild the structures and processes to achieve the goals of our freedom struggle : Swadhinata or Swatantrata (freedom), Samata (equality), Sanhati (solidarity or mutuality of humans) and Swaraj ( self-rule or full scale self-realisation of individuals, groups and regions through multidimensional liberation from all forms of domination). I hope this historic initiative will reach each corner of India and with a long term perspective of reaffirming the basic VALUES of our Constitution we shall succeed in protecting and preserving our Constitution and SAVE INDIA. □□□

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#### NATIONAL SEMINAR REPORT

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## Indian Economy and Inclusive Growth

*I Satya Sundaram*

**A** TWO-DAY NATIONAL Seminar on the theme "75 Years of Indian Economy: Economic Growth and Distributive Justice" was held under the auspices

of the Department of Economics, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar-522 510, Andhra Pradesh on 9th & 10th March, 2023. The Vice-Chancellor is Prof. Raja

Sekhar Patteti. The Seminar Director is Prof. K. Madhu Babu.

The Vice-Chancellor has observed that mere accumulation of knowledge is not enough, we have to strive hard to achieve social justice. He underscored the need for improving quality of life. Of course, growth rate matters. The Principal Prof. Ch. Swaroop Rani said dis-

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tributive justice is as important as higher growth rates.

Prof. Sudhakar Panda, former Vice-Chancellor, Birla Global University, Bhubaneswar, delivered the Key-note Address. He said the economic reforms undertaken in the early 1990s are inevitable as growth rates need to be stepped up.

If anything the world economy is in trouble. The recent (January 2023) annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos, Switzerland, pleaded for a new world order based on justice, equality and peace. India is not well placed on social security front. The poverty ratio, though declined, is still there at 20 percent. India's unemployment rate rose to 7.45 percent in February, 2023. In December 2022, the over-all unemployment rate was 8.3 percent, with urban unemployment at 10.09 percent and rural unemployment at 7.44 percent.

The share of agriculture in GDP came down to 18 percent. Yet, around 50 percent of the labour force works in this sector. Food-grain production increased from 252 million tonnes (MT) in 2014-15 to 323 MT in 2022-23. Agriculture showed resilience even in the period of COVID-19. Yet, India's food security is tenuous. In the Global Food Security Index 2021, India ranks 71st out of 113 countries. Of course, the food-grain stocks were of the order of 51.14 MT as of October 2022.

Agriculture exports are showing encouraging trend. Exports of major agriculture and processed food products promoted by the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), in 2022-23, are likely to touch \$ 26 billion as against \$ 24 billion in 2021-22.

The real problem is that the farmer's income is low for various reasons. The Government is depending on modern technology. Reducing

cost is important. What is necessary is to encourage natural farming. As farmers do not get remunerative prices, marketing reforms are very important.

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) sector is receiving due attention because its contribution to gross value added increased from 29.3 percent in 2018-19 to 30.5 percent in 2019-20. This sector accounts for 90 percent of industrial units, 40 percent of the total manufacturing output and nearly 35 percent of exports. The Government measures to boost MSMEs sector include the modification of the definition of MSMEs, the provision of Rs 20,000 crore subordinate debt for stressed MSMEs, Rs.50,000 crore equity infusion through Self Reliant India Fund, the waiving of the global tender requirement for procurement of up to Rs.200 crore and launching of the Udyan portal for MSMEs registration. The Union Budget 2023-24 revamped the credit guarantee scheme. For the financial year 2022-23, the Government set up Micro Units Development and Refinancing Agency (MUDRA) Bank. MUDRA loans worth Rs 3.56 lakh crore were sanctioned, of which Rs 3.48 lakh crore were disbursed as of March 3, 2023.

The performance of health sector is disappointing. Malnutrition should be considered as a broader issue, involving food and livelihoods. The problem is how to combine agriculture, nutrition and health. At present, among aged five years, 35.5 percent are stunted, and 32.1 percent are underweight. Health expenditure increased from Rs 52,954 crore in 2018-19 to Rs 76, 379 crore in 2022-23 (RE). However, health expenditure as a percentage of GDP is very low. It is just 1.28 in India against 16.9 in the US, 8.1 even in South Korea and 4.2 in Turkey. There are rural-urban disparities. The

stress should be on balanced food. Some voluntary agencies have developed low cost health delivery system. The Government should use their services.

The performance of education sector, at all levels, is not up to the mark. Though quantitative expansion is impressive, quality continues to be poor. There are 51,999 higher education institutions of which 993 are universities, 10,725 are standalone institutions, 39, 931 are colleges. However, not a single university ranked in the top 200 of the world. The National Education Policy 2020 laid stress on accessibility and equity, flexibility in curriculum design, skill development and employability, multidisciplinary degree option. The move to set up foreign universities campuses in India has serious implications.

Women empowerment and gender equality are receiving attention. But, the challenges are many as women continue to work in the unorganised sector. In the political field, there are reservations. But, in the case of panchayats, husbands of women sarpanches (chiefs) enjoy actual power.

In recent years, microfinance has emerged as a tool not only to empower women, but to achieve inclusive growth. As on June 30, 2022, microfinance loan portfolio stood at Rs 2.93 lakh crore. If one takes into account the SHG (self-help group)-bank linkage, the over-all size is at around Rs 4.82 lakh crore.

The centre has been concentrating on capital expenditure (Copex) in recent years. The allocation for copex zoomed from Rs 3.39 lakh crore for 2019-20 to Rs 7.5 lakh crore for 2022-23. The focus is on infrastructure development. Under PM Gati Shakti plan, 196 projects have been notified. The government is also depending on the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme.

The problem of cost and time overruns has assumed ominous dimensions. There is undue delay in the completion of projects. The Government has lost crores of rupees because of cost escalation which is again due to delay in executing projects. This issue is not taken up seriously.

There were four invited talks. The Papers presented touched on the various facets of the Indian economy.

- I. Prof Sudhakar Panda said the year 2023 is not rosy for the global economy. He traced the changing economic thinking in India during the last 75 years. Today, the Government wants to play the role of a facilitator of development. Importance is given to private capital and technology. But, there are pitfalls of the present strategy. The economy has become a high cost economy. The policies placed burden on the poor because even the GST has been used to mobilise revenue.
- II. Dr I Satya Sundaram, economist and writer, underscored the need for developing a low-cost health delivery system. He said the Government should seek the help of private sector and Voluntary agencies to strengthen health

infrastructure at the grass-roots level. Better funds allocation for health sector is needed. Innovative strategies alone can deliver.

- III. Dr Sri Krishna Sudheer Patoju of School of Rural Development, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Tuljapur Campus-413 601 spoke on Crafts and Arts. India is known for its cultural heritage. Crafts and Arts are an important ingredient of Indian culture. But, there is no patronage for them either by the Government or people in general. They remain unorganised, decentralised and labour intensive. Foreigners are giving importance to them. Hence, crafts and arts should become an important ingredient of tourism policy.
- IV. Dr Sasmitha Swain from School of Rural Development, TISS, Tuljapur, spoke on social entrepreneurship. She said when the market fails, state has to intervene. She declared social entrepreneurship is needed to achieve social inclusion.

The conference covered a number of issues relating to poverty and inequality, agriculture reforms, farm credit, farmers' suicides, employment situation, industrialisation, tribal economy, services sector, status of handicrafts, regional disparities in development, special economic zones, power sector reforms, demographic dividend, social sectors like health and education, Indian exports, and women empowerment.

#### **Major Recommendations**

- There is an urgent need to boost both wage employment and self-employment.
- Diversification of agriculture sector is needed to enhance employment opportunities.
- Rapid rural industrialisation is the key to India's prosperity. Chinese policy is successful. India has to

change its approaches by laying stress on technical education and skill promotion. Boosting rural entrepreneurship is important.

- Any employment strategy should give importance to agriculture. The employment potential of this sector should be properly utilised. The focus should be on organic farming.
- Agriculture's performance is satisfactory. But, farmer's income is low. Price support alone is not enough. Marketing support holds the key.
- Crafts and Arts have special significance. Yet, they remain neglected. A special package for traditional artisans and craftsmen under the PM Vishwa Karma Kaushal Samman was announced to integrate them with the MSMEs value chain and enable them to improve quality, scale and reach of the products.
- The current stress on digitalisation, make in India and financial empowerment of women are no doubt welcome.
- The allocations for social sectors like health and education need to be stepped up. Better management of funds is important.
- Neo-liberalism has not benefited the common man because of wrong priorities. For instance, the stress is on high-speed trains, but, the senior citizens are denied concessions. Can the poor afford to use gas cylinders? Inflation is a problem because even the GST is used to raise revenue.

At the Valedictory Session, university Rector, Prof. Varaprasad Murthy underscored the need for interaction between the university and the affiliated colleges in respect of academic activities. Officer on Special Duty, Prof Suneetha, observed that those who recovered from COVID 19, are suffering from side-effects. These should be minimised. □□□

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## Oppression, Wounds and Freedom

*Joydip Ghosal*

A FOUR-MEMBER TEAM from WSS visited the restive Kashmir—the valley of death—after the abrogation of Article 370. They wanted to interact with common people and listen to their unheard voices. They showed solidarity and tried to understand the volatile situation after the scrapping of article 370 and 35 A and bifurcation of state into two union territories. They travelled across the districts of Srinagar, Shopian, Baramulla and Kupwara. Their experience was published in a book titled ZULM ZAKHM AZADI, women's voice of resistance in Kashmir which literally translated as Oppression, Wounds and Freedom. Their journey into the districts of Kashmir chronicled the stories of fear, loss and pain which were beyond measure. After the abolition of special status of J&K the whole country rejoiced. But in Kashmir common people felt a deep sense of betrayal, loss and simmering rage. According to them it was the ultimate blow to their identity and it wrecked heavily upon the common psyche. WSS team interacted with various people cutting across different strata of society but they did not find a single person who was happy with the scrapping. The summary execution of the decision angered everyone. The women who spoke to the team members in Soura expressed their feelings clearly: "With 9 lakh forces in Kashmir, do we have freedom of speech?"

A student from Pulwama was trying to appear for civil services after his Masters in Psychology from Jammu University. But he felt that his life was done for. Article 370 was the connection between India

and Kashmir. Now clause 3 of 370 ceased to operate. According to his version "They are using gun to suppress us".

Ordinary Kashmiris felt that scrapping of article 370 had a clear purpose which was to acquire land and property in the state. In 2018 the then J&K Chief Minister, Mehbooba Mufti stated that Army and government offices continued to illegally occupy over 21, 400 hectares of land in the state. In Drogmula, Kupwara army settled their transient camp upon a land which belonged to a lady. It was her only source of income. State already had control over many civilian establishments like Palladium cinema in Srinagar. Tosa Maidan meadow in Budgam was leased to Indian army for an artillery firing range but it remained a death trap for children and visitors. In Baramulla, the army had taken over huge stretches of land near the district hospital since 1960 and local people conveyed to WSS team that they had to take long route in order to avoid multiple checkpoints.

Right wingers in India claimed that abrogation of article 35A would protect the rights of women. But local people whom WSS team spoke to vehemently protested. They asserted that abrogation of Article 35A was not for that purpose. J&K High Court's judgment in 2000 stated that a woman did not lose her right to own land when she married a non-state subject.

Since July 17, 2019 the J&K Forest Advisory Committee had diverted more than 663 hectares of forest land for 198 projects in the course of only five meetings. This book ZULM ZAKHM AZADI brings to the fore an interesting fact that an Environmen-

tal Impact Assessment Authority was set up on August 4 to facilitate the clearance to the projects. Government refused to divulge the details of the projects. Since 2017 CRPF had taken over the lower section of Dachigram National Park. As a result the habitats of critically endangered deer species were displaced. In September 2019, the Indian National Board for Wildlife gave sanction for destruction of 13.53 hectares of forest land including portion of Gulmarg Wildlife Sanctuary for air-defence project. People ridiculed the concept of development when prime minister talked about the construction of toilets in his speech in UN Assembly on September 27, 2019. Common people found it hilarious that he had to bring up the topic in an international forum and on the other hand he claimed that abrogation of article 370 would hasten development in Kashmir.

After the abrogation the livelihoods of people also suffered severely. WSS team spoke to Haenz community who solely depended upon the water. They had to shift their bases to Bemina because their income from houseboats declined drastically. They now earned their livelihoods as scrap dealers. Some of them lived near Habba Kadal. They told the WSS team members that they missed their Pandit brothers who now migrated to Jammu. From this book one comes to know that Sikh minority groups which remained in Kashmir did not face religious persecution.

This book carefully documented instances of torture and sexual violence and their consequences for men and women. Perpetual anxiety, torture, arrests left deep psychological scars. In Baramulla a woman spoke to the team members how difficult it was to go outside because of constant presence of security forces. They came across a woman whose friend's

father disappeared when she was still in the mother's womb. She was now 26 years old and they still did not have any information about him. The team also documented specific instances of violence in Anchar and Saura area.

In Srinagar the team documented the horrible death of Fahmeeda Shagoo, a 34-year-old woman. She

breathed her last due to the tear gas suffocation in her own house. In case of Osaib Altaf, who was just 17-year-old even a death certificate was not issued. He was probably the first victim after the abrogation.

In Kashmir through the process of militarisation men were removed from their houses. So the burden and panic women lived with multi-

plied manifold. Amidst violence and insecurity they had to rear their children up. Despite that they fought for their near and dear ones in courts and police stations.

By documenting the instances of repression and its aftereffects ZULM ZAKHM AZADI presents an honest and truthful picture of Kashmir to the nation. □□□

## LETTERS

### **AADHAAR: A Tool of Deprivation**

Technological wonders are an organic part of capitalist modernity. This is more pronounced in the age neoliberal capitalism, which makes workers footloose while pursuing its agenda of primitive accumulation.

Very recently, Aadhaar has emerged as a tool of making workers jobless in neoliberal India. Very recently, the central government introduced the Aadhaar-based payment system (ABPS) for MGNREGS workers. From February 1, 2023, payments to MGNREGS beneficiaries were to be made only through ABPS, when only 44 per cent of the total workers in India were eligible for ABPS. It is estimated that in 14 states in India more than 50 per cent of workers were not eligible for the new system of payment. In Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra, where more than 2 crore workers each are enrolled under the MGNREGS, over 60 per cent were found to be not eligible. Reportedly, the ABPS will adversely impact close to 80 per cent of workers in Maharashtra, who are yet to complete the relevant formalities. (See The Hindu, February 27, 2023)

The motive of the central government is quite clear in the amount allocated for the Scheme in the last budget. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj noted with concern in its report that "Budget Esti-

mates for MGNREGS has been reduced by Rs 29,400 crore for 2023-24 when compared to Revised Estimates of 2022-23" (Quoted in The Indian Express, March 16, 2023). In fact, the Budget allocation for the Scheme was slashed by 33 per cent from the revised estimates of Rs 89400 crore in the current fiscal year to Rs 60,000 crore for FY 2023-24. (Hindustan Times, February 2, 2023)

The mainstream media projects Aadhaar as the ideal tool of delivering welfare benefits to the people in a transparent mode. In actual reality, the BJP government in power at the Centre is using Aadhaar as a tool for depriving the footloose people in India of their meagre livelihoods.

*Arup Sen, Kolkata*

### **National Conference**

The first successful attempt by Indians in the pre-independence days to build an all-India platform was the National Conference. The Indian Association, led by Surendranath Banerjea and Ananda Mohan Bose, convened the first National Conference in Calcutta from December 28 to 30, 1883. The famous educationist Ramtanu Lahiri presided over the conference. Around one hundred delegates, mostly from Bengal but also from Bombay, Madras, and Northern India, attended the conference. Issues discussed included subjects of national interest like representative council, education, the separation of judicial and executive func-

tion, and the increased employment of Indians in the public service. The organisers were satisfied with the response received by the conference. In 1884, Surendranath Banerjea attended numerous public meetings across Northern India, exhorting his countrymen to fight for reforms in the civil service. The second National Conference was held in Calcutta on December 25, 26, and 27, 1885. It was convened jointly by the Indian Association, the British Indian Association, the Central Mohamedan Association, and the Indian Union. Delegates from the Bengal Presidency, Bombay, and Northern India were present. The conference reiterated its commitment to the issues raised in its first session. Finally, the conference concluded with the decision to convene every year in different parts of the country. It is interesting to note that when the National Conference met in Calcutta around the same time, the Indian National Congress held its first session at Bombay from December 28 to 30, 1885. The issues raised in the Congress platform were similar to those discussed in the National Conference. Hence, the National Conference merged with the Indian National Congress when the latter held its second session in Calcutta on December 27-30, 1886. Commenting on this, Surendranath Banerjea writes in his autobiography, *A Nation in Making*, "Henceforth those who worked with us joined the Congress and heartily cooperated with it." (92) Thus, for the

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sake of national unity, the National Conference willingly subsumed itself in the Indian National Congress.

**Visakh S M, Kerala**

### **Bottled Water**

Surging global bottled water consumption reflects the failure by governments to improve public water supplies which is putting the UN sustainable development goal of safe drinking water by 2030 under threat, said a UN academic think tank recently.

The bottled water market saw 73% growth from 2010 to 2020, and consumption is on track to increase from around 350 billion litres in 2021 to 460 billion litres by 2030, according to the UN University's Institute for Water, Environment and Health.

"The rise in bottled water consumption reflects decades of limited progress in and many failures of public water supply systems", the institute's director Kaveh Madani said in statement.

The UN estimates that some 2.2 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water, with the number of people who had access growing by only 4% between 2016 and 2020.

Developing nations depend on bottled water to make up this shortfall. Egypt, facing water scarcity, was the fastest growing market for treated bottled water from 2018 to 2021, the UNU report said.

Singapore and Australia were the biggest per capita consumers of bottled water at 1,129 litres and 504 litres a year respectively, according to the report. Malaysia led developing countries in per capita consumption, at just under 150 litres.

More than a third of Americans said they use bottled water as their main water source.

In addition to concerns over poor access to clean drinking water, rising bottled water consumption also threatens the environment, ranging from concerns that corporations are depleting groundwater to plastic pollution.

**Gloria Dickie, London**

### **Police Notice**

PUCL, Delhi, strongly deplores the notice of Delhi Police directing Gandhi Peace Foundation (GPF), New Delhi to cancel the meeting on "Media Blackout and State Repression in Kashmir" organised under the banner of "Campaign Against State Repression" (CASR) comprising various organisations [to be held on 15th March, 2023 at the GPF]. The reason given by the police in its letter is that the police had received input about a disturbance to law and order in the area. Another reason given by the police is that no permission was sought from the police for holding the meeting.

It is obvious that the reasons advanced by the police do not hold any ground. The meeting was to be held inside the auditorium of the GPF and no permission is required to hold an indoor public meeting. There is no such law. If the police suspected any disturbance, it could have taken adequate measures to control the law and order situation. Large number of indoor public meetings are held in Delhi on various burning issues and there is no requirement to take permission.

Another reason given by the police is that an anonymous group was organising the meeting and it could not verify the details of its members in spite of its efforts. This reason is also baseless. 'Campaign against State Repression' (CASR) is a well-known body of civil rights activists and organisations which has been organising public meetings, demonstrations from time to time in Delhi and its activities are covered by the media. On 5th December 2022 it held a Press Conference at Surjit Bhawan, New Delhi demanding unconditional acquittal of Prof G N Saibaba & others who have been in jail for years in cooked up charges in Bhima Koregaon case. This press conference was also addressed by D Raja, well known leader

of CPI. CASR also held a public hearing on 12th January 2023 at Surjit Bhawan demanding release of political prisoners framed under the yoke of laws like Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act i.e. UAPA which was addressed by well-known professors and activists and was very well covered in the media.

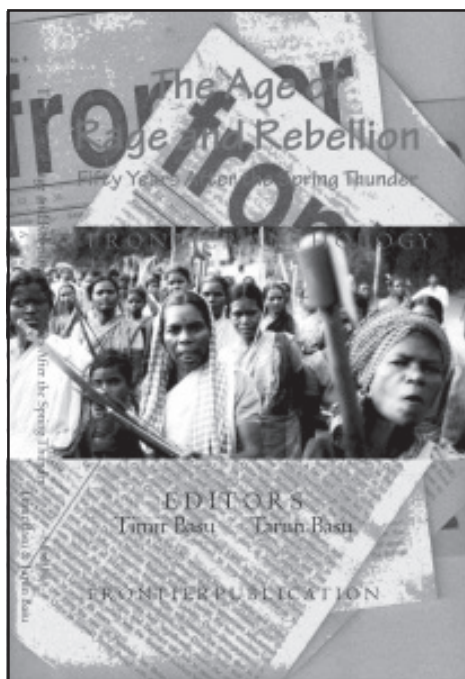
This meeting on Kashmir was to be addressed by eminent personalities in public life like Justice Hussain Masoodi, a Rajya Sabha MP and retd. High court judge, Prof Nandita Narain, well known activist and former Chairperson of DUTA, CPI(M) leader M Y Tarigami, film maker Sanjay Kak and Mr Shahid Saleem, the Chairman of the United Peace Alliance. All are well known figures in public life. It is quite clear that the law and order problem is not the issue; real motive was to gag the freedom of speech on an important public issue involving rights of the people of Kashmir. Banning an indoor public meeting is totally arbitrary, malicious and unconstitutional. Even during the infamous 'emergency' (June 1975 to March 1977) indoor meeting opposing 'the emergency' were not banned. The present government and the police must remember what Gandhiji said as far back as 1921, in a message he wrote in Young India, "In a democracy people are not like sheep. In democracy we must jealously guard freedom of expression and thought and action"

PUCL Delhi therefore urges upon the government and the Police to desist from following such unconstitutional and unlawful methods which are in violation of the constitutional rights of the citizens and are harmful to the democratic system.

**ND Pancholi, President  
TS Ahuja, General Secretary  
Ashok Bharti, Secretary  
People's Union for Civil  
Liberties, (PUCL), Delhi  
17th March, 2023**

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