

# frontier

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## *The Disqualification Drama*

**A**S PER LAW RAHUL GANDHI, CONGRESS SENIOR LEADER IS now out of electoral politics for the next eight years. Maybe, the hope of reviving the Nehru dynasty by way of continually projecting Rahul Gandhi as the prime ministerial face is coming to an end. For quite some time Mr Gandhi has been a liability for Congress. As things stand now the grand old party has no option but to fight the battle legally or politically for its former president. For one thing they cannot do much politically. Mr Gandhi can appeal against his conviction and sentencing at the higher courts challenging the Surat court's verdict. That is one aspect of the game. No doubt the disqualification saw a shift in the dynamics of opposition ranks with some anti-Congress regional outfits like Trinamool Congress, Samajwadi Party and Aam Aadmi Party expressing their strong support for the embattled leader. In truth almost all opposition parties, including the left parties rallied around Gandhi and condemned the disqualification move accusing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of doing 'vindictive politics'. Congress, meanwhile, after its emergency meeting decided to take the job of building opposition unity in a systematic way in parliament and outside parliament, without really specifying their approach towards a broad-based anti-BJP front. The Samajwadi Party, however, made a point that Congress should support the regional parties where they matter in influencing the outcome of polls. Whether the Gandhis are listening is not known.

No doubt the Congress party has now an agenda to agitate across the country raising their voice against the Modi government on various issues, old and new, including demonetisation, GST, foreign policy and the government's pro-corporate bias. The BJP dismissed the Congress charges and termed the disqualification 'lawful'. The sympathy wave generated after Rahul Gandhi's disqualification is unlikely to get translated into vote, not to speak of a grand alliance with a common minimum programme. Congress is not in a position to fight BJP's pro-corporate policies that are ruining small businesses and wage earners in unorganised sector and organised sector as well. What is needed is massive mass mobilisation as the farmers did, against the Modi government's anti-people policies. Mere talking of democracy and constitution day in and day out won't do.

Mr Gandhi has been grilling Modi for quite some for surrendering Indian Territory to China without really substantiating the charges. Not that India-

China border dispute started recently. The bitter legacy left by history dates back to 1962 when Congress was in power. Playing with the gallery without offering any concrete solution makes little sense. Also, it matters very little in vote market. They have been talking about silencing the voice of dissent while refusing to hit the real target—the saffron party's economic base. The Modi government has perfected the art of utilising central agencies against opposition though it was originally started by the Congress.

The Enforcement Directorate (ED), Income tax and the central investigating agencies are routinely doing roundabout tours of the lanes of opposition leaders to terrorise them. The Ed reportedly has carried out 3010 raids or 'searches' between 2014 and 2022, a 27 times

increase from 2004 to 2014. Surprisingly, between March 2011 and January 2020 the ED has somehow managed only 9 convictions out of 1589 cases registered, a rather low profile for any central agency. The real purpose is to harass the adversaries of the government. 95 percent of the total number of politicians summoned, raided, booked, interrogated and arrested after Narendra Modi-led BJP government came to power are from opposition parties. It speaks volumes about the intention of over-activism of central agencies. They are being utilised to further partisan interests. Congress has been principally selected by the powers that be to weaken the organisation—the main challenger to BJP. Rahul Gandhi was questioned for 55 hours by the ED in the National Herald case while Sonia Gandhi had also

been probed about the same.

Regime change is yet another weapon for the BJP to decimate the Opposition. The Congress government in Madhya Pradesh was toppled with 'rebel' Jyotiraditya Scindia leaving Congress and joining BJP a day later along with his loyalists. The process has now become more brazen and it runs across several states where an opposition party is in power.

The agencies never find the leaders of the ruling party worthy of any fault. The substantial probation never results anything beyond political gimmicks. The BJP idea of making India opposition free, rather Congress free, is going on smoothly without being challenged seriously by the Congress-led Opposition or otherwise. □□□

26-03-2023

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## COMMENT

### America is Losing

THE NON-WESTERN RESPONSE to Russian President Vladimir Putin's special military operation against Ukraine in February 2022 came as a surprise to many US and European officials. They could not understand why most African, Arab, and Asian governments did not heed American calls to condemn Russia for violating what they call 'rules-based international order'. In truth the so-called American order is crumbling very quickly. American hypocrisy is being exposed with every passing day. People don't believe in their lies. Their attempt to isolate Putin in Europe is successful but Washington's policy of containing Russia over the Ukraine issue has not many takers in the Middle East and Asia.

On February 17, 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke before the UN Security Council and demanded that other countries take

a stand against Putin's designs on Ukraine, saying American intelligence could confirm an attack was imminent. Many in the chamber and those watching Blinken's address on television in the Middle East could not help but think of the misleading presentation about Iraq's supposed weapons programme that one of his predecessors, Colin Powell, gave to the council in February 2003. Although Powell's request for backing of the invasion of Iraq and Blinken's request for condemnation of Russia are vastly different, the lukewarm response to the second request can be traced back to the first. As Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan's minister of state for foreign affairs, said last month, "There must be a universal application of the rules-based order." No, it is not there. Double standard is the core of American diplomacy! How they created a case

out of nothing to invade Iraq is history. Today even America's age-old trusted allies are questioning the Uncle Sam's credibility in international affairs. The end of Unipolar world is very much in sight. America's inability in 2022 to convince key Arab allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, to follow its lead in Ukraine shocked the Democrats and Republicans alike in the US. Now many have begun to think the 'unthinkable'—the sun set over the empire, rather the evil empire, has started. The Russia-China-Iran axis is emerging.

Then there is the perception that the United States cannot maintain its foreign policy positions from one administration to the next, which also caused US allies to hesitate before supporting Ukraine. Over and over, the United States has decided to re-establish ties with leaders it previously considered hostile, such as Qaddafi in Libya, the Iranian regime during nuclear negotiations, and the Taliban in 2020 ahead of the US withdrawal from Afghani-

stan. These reversals have caused many in the Arab world to question whether the United States might strike a deal with Russia, despite all its public rhetoric against Putin's war, and leave the Middle East to deal with the fallout once again. Yes, America can make overtures to Russia anytime if its strategic interests serve that purpose.

The past 20 years of eroding trust between the United States and the Arab world were on display earlier in March, when China mediated a resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The announcement suggested US influence had waned given that Saudi Arabia, a major US ally, turned to China, the United States' biggest rival, to help it seal a deal. It's a serious blow to American authority in the Middle East. If anything America is paying for the decision it made 20 years ago, to invade Iraq, all in the name of saving democracy and ruled-

based-order. The US went to war in Iraq without the permission of the UN Security Council. But they are now asking Russia to do it what it didn't do in case of Iraq.

Although the United States' standing in the Middle East has declined, the country still wields enormous influence. The United States continues to have the largest military presence in the region. Between 40,000 and 60,000 US troops are deployed there, with approximately 2,500 of them in Iraq. Many countries either peg their currencies to the US dollar or have economies that function on the conversion of that currency. China and Russia are now offering a different currency route to cripple the dominance of dollar. But what has changed radically is that, as Biden has made clear, the era of American-led attempts at nation building is over. Most people in the Middle East welcome this development. □□□

[Contributed]

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#### NOTE

## Andhra Pradesh's Economy

*I Satya Sundaram writes:*

**T**HE ECONOMIC SURVEY, presented by the Andhra Chief Minister, Jagan Mohan Reddy, gave a rosy picture of the Andhra Pradesh's economy. The reality is different. The Survey said the economy registered 16.22 per cent growth in 2022-23. Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) at current prices for 2022-23 is Rs. 13,17,728 crore, up from Rs. 11,83,891 crore for 2021-22. Welfare Schemes (*Navaratnalu*) claimed Rs. 1.97 lakh crore.

The so-called welfare schemes are implemented with conditions. Take the case of Ammavodi scheme. It was announced in January 2020. It is providing incentives to mothers for sending children to schools.

However, a minimum of 75% attendance is required to claim benefits under the scheme.

The Government brought about some changes in the public distribution system (PDS). It has even thought of giving cash instead of ration items, thus threatening nutrition security. Now ration is supplied through mobile vans at the doorsteps of the beneficiaries. But, items like sugar and red-gram are now costlier. Studies show there are leakages at the mandal level itself. The quality of rice is poor. A part of the ration rice is reaching the open market. Newspaper reports say the Civil Supplies Corporation created fake bank guarantees, and handed over grains to millers.

The mid-day meal scheme is named, Jagananna Gorumudda, with newly introduced nutritious menu (effective from November 21, 2022). However, critics say half of the students are not interested in the new scheme. There is no supervision, no supply of gas cylinders. Some students are bringing their own lunch boxes.

School education has been shattered. In the name of rationalisation, as many as 5,200 schools have been merged with other schools. Even when the basic facilities are not available, the students were asked to join these schools. These students have to walk, in some cases, more than 1 km. There is confusion over the medium of instruction. The Government schools are denied Telugu medium. Because of teacher shortage, the students of both mediums were clubbed, further worsening the confusions.

Under the veneer of decentralisation, village volunteer scheme has been introduced. There is confusion over the status of these volunteers. Are they government servants? At present, they are working as party workers. They are even selecting beneficiaries. The High Court reacted harshly. The volunteers are given newspaper allowance, but they have to purchase Sakshi, the newspaper owned by the CM. Some Vice-Chancellors are acting as party agents, and they celebrated even CM's birth day. The High Court did recognise this and strongly warned.

The panchayats have been enfeebled financially. Their funds have been taken away by the Government, stating that they have been adjusted for electricity arrears. Now, the panchayats have no funds even to take up minor works. The sarpanches of the ruling party are also on the agitation mood.

The State is deeply in debt. For repaying loans and interest, it is depending on fresh loans. There are off-budget borrowings. These need not be shown in the budget. Andhra Pradesh tops in debt. For every 1 lakh people, 46,330 people are in debt. The figure is 39,358 for Telangana, 31,510 for Kerala, 31,085 for Tamil Nadu, 24,623 for Karnataka, 14,407 for Odisha and 14,161 for Rajasthan. In the State, there is debt burden of Rs. 2.45 lakh on each farmer. This is three times the national average. Also, the State is not revealing the loans taken with guarantees.

The government spends only 10 percent of its total expenditure on income generating assets. There is no progress in irrigation projects. In the 2021-22 budget, 13.7 percent was shown as capital expenditure, but actual percentage is 8.90. The three-capital slogan has run into rough

weather. The Government now says Visakhapatnam is the only capital because the city is well developed. The State has no funds to develop even one capital.

The State Budget for 2023-24 has an outlay of Rs. 2,79,279 crore. But, capital expenditure is only Rs. 31,061 crore. The fiscal deficit is placed at 3.77 percent of gross state development product (GSDP). Welfare has taken the lion's share of the Budget allocation. YSR pension gets Rs. 21,434.72 crore. Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) gets Rs. 54, 228.36 crore. Economists ask these questions: If the economy is sound, why the state is deeply in debt? Why is it depending too much on liquor revenue? Can sustainable development goals be achieved without stepping up capital expenditure? What about pending bills? Why Government is spending crores of rupees on publicity? □□□

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## ATTACKING THE GRAVE

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### Karl Marx Isn't Buried

*Sam Miller*

**F**ASCISTS KEEP VANDALISING Marx's grave because they're still afraid of his legacy, and the power of his ideas. Karl Marx is far from forgotten, well over a century after his death. This is especially true for those who fear and despise his political legacy. For decades, Marx's grave has endured a series of vicious attacks: its bust pulled off with ropes, a pipe bomb nearly forty years ago that damaged its front face, and consistent painted slurs. But after the most recent damage, his grave "will never be the same again". Even with expert repair, Marx's memorial will bear the scars of this vandalism indefinitely, according to Ian Dungavell, the Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust chief.

The first of the two most recent

incidents took place on February 4th when Marx's name, which is ingrained on the marble plaque from his original 1883 gravestone, was chipped at with a hammer. The second incident took place on February 15th. Bright red paint projected the slogans "Architect of Genocide", "Doctrine of Hate", and "Memorial to Bolshevik Holocaust". The graffiti covered inscriptions of Marx's final words of The Communist Manifesto, "Workers of all lands unite", and the most famous of Karl Marx's Theses on Feuerbach, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to change it". The contrast between Marx's messages of hope and the violent smears that covered them could not be more jarring.

Marx died on March 14, 1883 from bronchitis and was buried alongside his wife Jenny a few days later in the Eastern cemetery of Highgate in north London. As Philip S. Foner details in his book when Marx Died: Comments in 1883, Marx's funeral was attended by a small group of grieving friends and family, including Friedrich Engels, Eleanor Marx, Paul Lafargue, and Wilhelm Liebknecht. Engels gave the eulogy, paying tribute to his friend as a great scientist and revolutionary:

Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history. This was the man of science. But this was not even half the man. Science was for Marx a historically dynamic, revolutionary force... For Marx was before all else a revolutionary.

For many years, Marx's grave rested in a small patch at Highgate. This



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patch included Marx himself, his wife Jenny, their grandson Harry Longuet, and Helene Demuth, the family housekeeper. But the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) wished to find a more suitable memorial for Marx. As soon as Marx died, August Bebel proposed the erection of a new monument to their fallen leader at the SPD Congress. According to Bebel, such a monument would not be too grand, but something that accurately represented the gratitude of the working class.

Engels thought that a monument might be in bad taste. He wrote to Bebel:

'I don't know what should be done about a memorial to Marx. The family is against it. The simple gravestone designed for his wife and now bearing his own and his little grandson's name would be desecrated in their eyes if it were replaced by a monument'.

Liebknrecht echoed Engels in his memoirs, stating that:

'Marx did not want a "memorial." To have desired to put up any other memorial to the creator of The Communist Manifesto and of Capital than that which he had built himself would have been an insult to the great dead. In the heads and hearts of millions of workers, who have "united" at his call, he has not merely a memorial more lasting than bronze, but also the living soil in which what he taught and desired will become—and in part has already become—an act.'

Marx's grave was the site for revolutionary processions that commemorated the Paris Commune. It also served as a gathering location for Lenin and other Russian social democrats at the end of their London congress in 1903. For the next twenty years, the grave suffered neglect. It was increasingly hidden by overgrown

weeds and grass. This inspired the British Communist Party to issue an appeal to "restore the neglected grave of Karl Marx" in 1922. There were pledges made to finance the upkeep of Marx's original grave, but other communists thought a more fitting tribute was needed to commemorate Marx's impact on the socialist movement.

The Worker, which was the organ of the Workers' (Communist) Party of the United States, argued that the Marxes deserved much better than a simple, nondescript tomb:

'We feel that something more fitting than a small headstone should mark the last resting place of this greatest philosopher of the working class'.

Capitalism takes care of its own. Paris boasts her Tomb of Napoleon. The Tomb of General Grant graces Riverside Drive in New York City. Recently, an elaborate memorial to Abraham Lincoln at Washington, D.C. Similarly, everywhere else.

Why should not the workers honour the last resting places of those who have fought and sacrificed for them. Pilgrims from many lands by the thousands annually visit the grave of Marx. These thousands should leave Marx's grave with a fitting impression upon their minds.

These wishes for a more prominent monument were fulfilled in 1956 by the British Communist Party. They found a new site for the grave, where Marx's family now rests, along with the ashes of Eleanor Marx. A giant bronze bust of Marx sits on top of a granite monolith. Laurence Bradshaw designed the tomb, which he wanted to be "not a monument to a man only but to a great mind and a great philosopher". Bradshaw intended to convey the "dynamic force" of Marx's mind; rather than towering over people, the bust is meant to interact with visitors at eye-level.

For generations, the tomb has

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been sought out by visitors from around the world, attracting thousands of people each year. In 1999, the tomb of Karl Marx was designated a Grade 1 listed structure, which is the highest listing reserved for buildings and structures of "exceptional interest".

Given the rise of global fascism and the increasing interest in socialism worldwide, it is not far-fetched to assume that the vandals of Marx's grave were motivated by far-right ideology. There have been other recent reports of fascist grave desecrations in France, where Jewish graves were vandalized with swastikas. Indeed in 1960, Marx's own grave was vandalized with swastikas. According to the New York Times report on June 5th, 1960:

'Two swastikas daubed in yellow paint were found... on the monument above the grave of Karl Marx, father of communism, in Highgate Cemetery. Slogans written in German said the writer loved Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi leader now in custody in Israel'.

Why is there a pattern between fascist ideology and grave desecration? It is no mere coincidence, as Mark Neocleous points out in his research on the interconnections between fascism and death. According to Neocleous, the fascist fears that their dead enemies are not properly dead, but "undead". This means that the dead can—in some mystical sense—come back to life.

Grave desecration, as Mark Neocleous argues, is integral to fascist terrorism. According to Jewish law, "treating a corpse disrespectfully implies a belief that death is final and irreversible". In other words, treating the dead disrespectfully gives no hope for their resurrection.

Fascists desecrated Jewish graves because it wasn't enough that those interred were biologically dead; grave desecration meant that the fascists did not think they were dead enough. As Neocleous puts it, "Unable to actually engage in this struggle in the world of the undead, the fascist is forced to the next best thing: attack the grave".

These attacks against Marx's grave are meant to prevent Marx from coming back to life—not literally, of course, but in the figurative resurrection of a socialist movement. As Walter Benjamin once put it, not even the dead are safe from fascism; in this case, not even Marx's grave is safe.

For fascists, Marx's grave does not represent the site of someone dead, but of something threatening to reemerge. Marxism represents the eternal enemy of the fascist imagination; Marx is not dead, but undead. They fear that Marx is still influencing world history from beyond the grave. Worse, they fear that the socialist movement is resurrecting Marx from the oblivion of the past.

If capitalism is one day overthrown and humanity moves from its pre-history towards real history, then Marx will be more than a ghost; he will be immortalized. □□□ [Sam Miller is a recent graduate of Columbia University. She is currently a teacher in Manhattan.] ( Source: Jacobin)

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## PLIGHT OF SUNDARBAN RESIDENTS

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### No Water to Drink

*Mahima Kapoor*

PEOPLE RESIDING IN AND around the Sundarbans—the world's largest mangrove forest—are being forced to spend their meagre incomes on buying drinking water as climate change and local policies exhaust their options.

Karuna, 65, ran across the narrow lanes of her village a little before noon, calling out to other women on the streets—"is the water coming?" She adjusted an empty metal pitcher against her hip, as she made her way towards a different water pipeline to ask the same question.

Karuna and the 200-odd families in her village were waiting for water

since 7 a.m. A winding line of plastic cans, buckets and pitchers had formed in front of the government-installed drinking water taps.

"It is supposed to come three times a day", explained Debasis Sarkar, another resident of Village No. 4, also known as Malpara, in the Gosaba Block of Sundarbans. "Two hours early in the morning, two in the afternoon and another two in the evening", he said. That has not happened in weeks.

Sundarbans, partly in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal and partly in Bangladesh, is the world's largest mangrove forest. A delta

between the rivers Ganges, Brahmaputra, Meghna and the Bay of Bengal, 30% of the forest is covered in water bodies. Yet, large parts of the region are going through a severe water crisis worsened by climate change and local policies.

Karuna and the 200-odd families in her village are facing acute water shortages.

The pipelines don't work for months at a time and the groundwater in most islands is either far too deep or far too salty. Thousands of families on the delta are now having to buy drinking water. That is especially a problem considering the population is economically weak, with little opportunity to escape their circumstances. "We can barely afford two meals a day and now we're having to pay for water. This is torture", Sarkar said.

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Sundarbans' mangrove forest has historically protected the inlands from cyclonic storms which originate in the Bay of Bengal. But changing climate patterns have resulted in stronger, more frequent storms while deforestation of the mangroves has weakened its ability to resist them.

In 2009, Cyclone Aila—classified as a category 1 storm; the lowest on the scale of five—devastated the region with around 2.3 million people affected, according to Associated Press. Despite its classification as a lower category storm, it led to widespread floods which washed away mud houses, crops and livestock alike in a matter of hours.

In recent years, the region has been battered by one severe cyclone after the other—Fani (category 5) and Bulbul (category 3) in 2019 and Amphan (category 5) in 2020.

With every storm, the sea's salt-water floods into the land, contaminating the freshwater ponds and wells. In the past, the West Bengal government commissioned programmes to raise the height of tube wells to avoid their submergence, but locals say that has not worked. Yet, several villages continue to consume that contaminated water due to lack of alternates.

Joy Banerjee, a resident of Delhi who works in the Indian armed forces, now conducts independent trips to Sundarbans when he can, with boats full of drinking water. "When I started visiting villages away from tourist hotspots, I realised the general water they drink is saline. There are no government pipelines in the faraway coastal islands. They are used to it now", he told DW. "But they have no idea how bad it is for their health".

Drinking water salinity has been found to be associated with cardiovascular diseases, diarrhea and abdominal pain.

2015 report by the World Bank

on the "poor" situation of drinking water in Sundarbans stated that an estimated 1,925 deaths and over 1.5 million cases of diarrhea were reported in the region in 2008. Things have only worsened since, according to the global financial institution. A follow up report by the World Bank in 2020 warned, "This situation will likely have numerous adverse effects on mother-child health, including dehydration, hypertension, prenatal complications, and increased infant mortality".

Located a 10-minute drive away from the village is a pond-based water filtration plant that supplies pipeline water to Malpara and a few other villages, including Arampur, Chondimon and Borobari. Set up in 2018 by the West Bengal government, the plant takes dirty water from four large ponds and filters out 300 million gallons of water for every 20 minutes of operation.

However, operating the plant has become difficult. "Today is the last day we're operating the plant this season", said Debashish Adhikari, one of the five caretakers of the plant. "There isn't enough water left in the ponds to operate the machinery. Whatever water is left in the system will be filtered on loop to keep the machinery in good condition for the next few months till monsoon hits".

Adhikari blames the water shortage on the Block Development Office's policies as the BDO leases out the same ponds to a few families with large agriculture fields or fisheries. "They are local affluent families with political connections, that's why they've gotten the lease", he said. "This should not be happening."

Adhikari and local villagers said that the larger ponds are leased out for a period of 1-2 years at a time for hundreds of thousands of rupees even though villagers depend on the same water. He alleged that the

lease had been given to influential names in local village-level politics.

Pressure from villagers has pushed the current village chief, locally known as the "pradhan," to take the matter to the block development officer (BDO), but little has changed.

Gosaba Block's Pradhan Gurupado Mandal confirmed that the ponds had been leased out to 2-5 men with influence, without providing further details. Meanwhile, villagers in the Gosaba block remain without access to clean and free drinking water.

Pakhirala, a village in Gosaba at the edge of the river towards the deep forest, has an additional issue to deal with. The village's proximity to the river and annual floods clogs the soil with salt, making the land unfit for cultivation.

"Once salty water goes into the soil, nothing grows on it. We have to wait for the whole year and more rain to decontaminate the soil", said Shubho Mondol, a resident there. He goes on to describe an endless cycle of rain, which clears the soil, followed by cyclone season, which destroys whatever crops have grown in the past few months.

Communities in several villages like Parikhala, Khapukur and Hasnabad have given up on agriculture and switched to catching prawns and crabs from small estuaries.

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Sundarbans' water crisis is not new. Several investigations, global studies and reports have outlined the dangers of climate change for the region. Despite the warnings, things have only gotten worse.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, in a recent trip to the region, acknowledged the problem and promised action, according to local reports. "I've heard about your water-related problems. We are trying to solve it. We will connect all households in West Ben-

gal with tap water by 2024", she said, according to The Telegraph.

Banerjee further said the state government was working on a master plan for the overall development of Sundarbans, which includes declaring the region as a separate district.

India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in her 2023-24 national budget, announced a new initiative for mangrove plantations along the coastline and on saltpan lands. MISHTI or the 'Mangrove Initiative for Shoreline Habitats & Tangible

Incomes' was announced after India joined the Mangrove Alliance for Climate, launched during the 27th Conference of Parties (COP27) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in late 2022.

Experts have hailed it as a good and necessary step towards long-term conservation of coastlines and the rich biodiversity mangroves sustain. However, the efforts are likely to take time to show results. □□□

[Source: DW]

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## STATE EMPLOYEES' STIR

### Battle for DA

*Atanu Chakravarty*

FOR THE FIRST TIME DURING Trinamool Government's uninterrupted rule since 2011, the state witnessed a new watershed in state government employees' movement. On 10 March, thousands of state government employees, teachers, casual and contract workers resorted to strike demanding immediate disbursement of their long pending Dearness Allowance (DA), filling up of more than 6 lakh posts lying vacant in different government departments, and regularising all contract and casual workers who are in all state departments. They are paid on no work no pay basis employed with paltry sums, having no statutory benefits. They are denied even government approved minimum wages.

For the first time, 55 organisations/platforms of state government employees came together and formed a new struggling platform "Sangrami Joutha Manch" (struggling joint forum) and 4 organisations of State transport employees led by AICCTU also joined this platform, which started indefinite sit-in demonstration and hunger strike in support of their demand at Shaheed Minar. The state government initially de-

nied permission to hold such protest meeting at that place, but after a legal battle, the Manch got permission from the Calcutta HC to continue their protest meeting.

The Hon'ble Calcutta HC declared that DA is a right and not discretion of State Government, and so the State government should initiate the process of disbursing the legitimate DA due to the employees. But the high handed state government rejected the above order, approached the Apex Court, spent crores of rupees from the state exchequer in this legal battle to stall the payment. The hearing of SC is still pending. In truth DA like bonus is actually deferred wage and the government cannot deny it to its employees.

In the meantime, the agitating employees met the Governor, who felt the need of resolving this contentious issue amicably through tripartite discussion.

All the central trade unions organised solidarity campaign in support of their strike.

Mamata Banerjee conspired to drive a wedge between general people and state government employees and lashed the agitators at State Assem-

bly saying it would be better to chop off her head because the state coffer is empty. So DA couldn't be disbursed at all. She even went to the extent that if state government concedes to the demand of paying DA then all the social welfare programmes carried by the state government would be stopped. She questioned the legitimacy of DA of the state government employees as they are the privileged section of the population. The corporate aided newspapers also peddled the logic of State government, but ultimately fighting spirit and united action reigned supreme and the strike was a grand success.

The Trinamool hoodlums, with active support of the administration, attacked the agitators in many places, but united resistance of the agitating employees came out victorious.

It should be noted that the largest and biggest organisation among the state government employees is the left-led Co-ordination Committee. The Joint Platform of Co-ordination Committee also supported this strike call. Both the platforms, viz, Sangrami Joutha Manch and Joint Platform successfully implemented this strike call which proves that newer form of organisation has emerged, reflecting the imagination and aspirations of the state government employees and newer form of movement such as



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digital strike ( withdrawing from all the official govt Whatsapp group) deserves attention. The state government has started issuing show cause notices to the employees for participating in the strike.

But the agitating employees are planning for their next phase of

movement both legal and street demonstration. On 30th March, this platform has planned to organise a massive rally, one from Sealdah, and the other from Howrah and will culminate at Shaheed Minar where a mass meeting will be organised.

On 10 April, mass dharna will

be organised at Jantar Mantar Delhi, from that Dharna deputation will go to the offices of President, Finance Minister and Education Minister to submit memorandums.

They have also planned to go for continuous strike if their demands are not met. □□□ 25-03-2023

## INSIDE A DETENTION CENTRE

### 'I am not a Bangladeshi'

*Rokibuz Zaman*

**O**N THE BLINDINGLY bright afternoon of February 27, a woman arrived at a small shop amid farmlands and sal and rubber plantations in Lower Assam's Goalpara district and gave the person manning it Rs 20. In return, he filled up a photocopied form and thrust it in her hand.

Clutching it, Asiya Khatun proceeded to her destination, a few hundred metres away. She showed the piece of paper to the policemen at the entrance of the facility. It was the first of the three walls protecting the facility—it stood at around six feet, and was mounted with barbed wire fencing, CCTVs, and watchtowers.

The guards examined the form. It contained her husband's name—Abul Kalam—and the address of their home by the Brahmaputra in a picturesque village called Ishwarjari in neighbouring Bongaigaon district.

They let her pass, but seized the treat of paan-tamul (areca nut and betel leaf) she had got for her husband. Only dry items like puffed or beaten rice were allowed, the guard said.

Beyond it was a room where Kalam would shortly arrive. Khatun was not allowed inside. They would have to talk through the grills of a window—as they had on two occasions in the past.

After waiting for a couple of minutes outside the window, she

saw Kalam approach, accompanied by a policeman. He was dressed in a maroon kurta and a lungi. A gamosa—the traditional Assamese hand-woven red-and-white towel—was wrapped around his neck.

When they saw each other, both broke down.

"Kibakoirahoileuamaraenthikabair koro", Kalam said, sobbing. "Get me out of here somehow".

Since February 9, Kalam, a 54-year-old daily-wage farm labourer, had been lodged in a hall that lay beyond two more gigantic walls: one 14 feet and the other 20 feet high.

This hall which he shared with 45 other people was part of the Matia "transit camp"—India's largest detention centre for "illegal migrants".

Spread over a sprawling 25 bighas or 15.475 acres of land, it was sanctioned by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led central government in 2018 at a cost of Rs 46.51 crore. Designed as a cluster of 17 four-storied buildings—15 for detainees and the other two for wardens—it is supposed to house 3,000 inmates at full capacity.

The Matia transit camp was, to a large extent, built anticipating the deluge of people who would be rejected from the National Register of Citizens, a list of Indian citizens in Assam that was compiled in 2019 after several rounds of documentary and physical verification.

The facility became operational

on January 27. It currently holds 69 "foreigners", said a government official overseeing proceedings at the centre.

Most of the detainees are refugees from Myanmar fleeing persecution.

Almost all of them were convicted by the judicial courts for violating visa provisions under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, the Foreigners Act, 1946, and under the Passport (Entry into India) Rules, 1950.

A few like Kalam are, however, "declared foreigners", pronounced so by Assam's foreigners' tribunals, quasi-judicial bodies that adjudicate on matters of nationality in the state.

Before they were moved to the camp in January, many of the prisoners had been housed in "detention centres" inside prisons in the state.

In November 2022, the Gauhati High Court had directed the state government to move them to the Matia camp in response to petitions challenging their detention in jails.

But the camp now currently houses around 300 people arrested as part of Assam's crackdown on child marriage—an arrangement that the Gauhati High Court recently called "unacceptable".

The court reasoned: the facility was no "prison" and was not meant for people who had committed crimes.

For Kalam, though, it was no better than a prison—with or without the new detainees.

He complained bitterly about the monotony of life inside.

"We spend the entire day doing nothing", he said. Scroll had ac-

accompanied Khatun on one of her visits to meet him.

Every day was similar to the previous one, he said. "We are given tea and roti for breakfast, and after that, there is a headcount", he said. "After that, we go outside of the hall, roam and sit idly doing nothing".

He continued, "They lock the hall at 5 pm after an early dinner and only open it in the morning at 7 or 8. This is a jail only...or perhaps worse than the jail".

An official at the camp said "there is no procedure to give or engage them in work" as it was not a regular prison. They added, "There is a school and a hospital inside the camp. And for their entertainment, we have given sports equipment for playing in the open space".

But why should he lead this imprisoned life, Kalam demands.

"Ami toh Bangladeshi na", he insisted. "I am not a Bangladeshi. I voted in 1985".

Kalam was declared to be an "illegal migrant" by a foreigners' tribunal in 2017—the presiding officer had adjudicated that the person he claimed to be his father was likely not actually his father. Kalam, the tribunal concluded, had emigrated to India after March 24, 1971, the deadline for anyone to be considered an Indian citizen in Assam.

However, Kalam's name featured on the NRC.

Regardless, on February 9, the Bongaigaon police's border wing—a special unit of the Assam police tasked with identifying and apprehending undocumented migrants—arrested him from near his home and dispatched him to Matia, located across the river.

Khatun said they did not have the resources to challenge the tribunal's order based on which he was arrested. "The advocate had demanded Rs 20,000 to go to the high court but we could not arrange the money," Khatun said.

What was happening to him, Kalam said, was "injustice towards the poor like us".

The choice to build the country's largest detention centre in Matia, situated around 120 kilometres from Guwahati, may not have been entirely incidental.

Over the years, it has been the site of many refugee camps—now transformed into full-fledged settlements—of Bengali Hindus and Hajongs escaping communal unrest in Bangladesh.

The Matia "transit camp" is located right opposite one such settlement, which, for all practical purposes, is now just another working class neighbourhood.

For the many Bengali-origin Muslim residents in the nearby villages, though, this juxtaposition is a reminder of their precariousness when it comes to citizenship.

For decades, the spectre of "illegal immigration has animated Assam's politics and the NRC. Assamese nationalist groups have long alleged that large-scale migration, of both Hindus and Muslims, from Bangladesh, had altered the state's demography and threatened to reduce the "native" population to a minority.

However, most migrants, particularly the Muslims of Bengali origin who comprise a lion's share of the so-called non-native population of Assam, arrived much before India and Bangladesh (East Pakistan before 1971) were separate countries.

Many believed the NRC update exercise would finally settle the matter.

While the final list left out around 1.9 million people, there has been much contestation around its correctness and finality. To make matters murkier, the Centre in 2019 passed the Citizenship Amendment Act—which, when operational, could naturalise a huge chunk of the non-Muslims left out of the NRC.

As Abbas Ali, who lived in a village close to Matia said, "Many Muslims were engaged to build the detention camp and now the main intention of the centre is to harass them".

However, given the NRC's uncertain status, no one rejected from the NRC is lodged in the Matia camp.

Instead, it has now become home largely to persecuted refugees from neighbouring Myanmar. Lodged in the camp are 26 Kuki-Chin refugees and 18 Rohingya Muslims, including a three-year-old child.

For many of them, the camp is little better than prison. "We fled our country to save our lives but here we are again locked up", said a 23-year-old Rohingya woman, who was first arrested in Manipur's border town of Moreh in 2018 before being given bail ten months later.

The woman, who requested anonymity, was then re-arrested on May 14, 2019 by the railway police while trying to board a train to Delhi in an attempt to reach the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

She was then convicted under the Foreigners' Act and imprisoned for six months following which she was lodged in the Goalpara detention centre carved out of the Goalpara district jail for over a year.

She was in the first lot of inmates to be shifted to Matia.

The woman wants the Indian government to give her refugee status or allow her to go to a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh, where she hopes her parents are. "It is better to die than live like this with no hope", the woman said.

Another 23-year-old Rohingya man expressed similar helplessness. "Nobody comes to see or meet us," he said. "Those who are from Assam get regular visitors but nobody brings food or clothes for us". □□□

[Courtesy: Scroll.in.]

## THE HUNGRY STONE

## Silicosis in Rajasthan's Quarries

*Azera Parveen Rahman*

**S**HRAVAN WAS JUST 11 years old when his father, who worked in a stone quarry near Jodhpur in Rajasthan, died of silicosis in 2007. Left to fend for themselves, Shraavan's mother, Raju Devi, turned to her oldest child for help. Shraavan dropped out of school and began working—ironically, in a quarry. A decade later—when he turned 21—Shraavan found out he had the same disease that once consumed his father.

Silicosis, or Attar ki bimari (disease of the stone) as it was once known among stone quarry workers, is the effect of long term exposure to silica dust on the lungs. An incurable occupational disease, affecting mostly mine and construction workers, silicosis is prevalent in nine Indian states and one Union territory, Puducherry.

Shraavan's is not an isolated case; in his village Gandero ki Dhaani, there are several who started working as children in stone quarries, and were later diagnosed with silicosis. Thirty-year-old Lala Ram started working in a stone quarry when he was 11, after his parents were diagnosed with silicosis. "I am the eldest in the family—we are three brothers and two sisters... I had to start working", Lala said. His mother, who also worked in the quarry, has been sick for the last 15 years. His father passed away from the disease.

Between 2018 and January 19, 2023, in Jodhpur district alone, 11,462 cases were registered with the Rajasthan Silicosis Grant Disbursement portal, of which 7,475 cases were certified for compensation after being screened at a Community Health Centre. In all, Rajasthan had

registered 48,448 silicosis cases of which 31,869 were certified.

Rajasthan has the highest number of mining leases in the country—189 leases for major minerals, 15,245 leases for minor minerals and 17,688 quarry licences bringing the total to 33,122 licences. A majority of these are sandstone mines and quarries in the unorganised and small scale sector.

Gandero ki Dhaani is among the 20-25 villages in the sandstone mining belt. Villagers call it the 'widows' village', as there are nearly 40-50 women widowed due to silicosis. Children are the silent victims, sometimes medically, sometimes because of the intergenerational burden of the disease that their parents suffer from.

One of the major demands by civil society has been for mines and quarries to stop dry drilling, which does not use water, and exposes workers to fine silica dust that makes them vulnerable to the disease. Wet drilling, also recommended by the Rajasthan State Human Rights Commission in a special report, can reduce risks.

The Rajasthan Policy on Pneumoconiosis (including silicosis detection, prevention, control & rehabilitation), introduced in 2019, says that the state government will take measures to register all mines, industries with dust hazards and potential to cause pneumoconiosis and notify them as hazardous industries.

"The aim of the policy is to streamline the strategy to deal with pneumoconiosis. For the first time, we are looking at a strong preventive mechanism and better assistance to the victims and their families", principal secretary of Rajasthan's Social Justice and Empowerment Depart-

ment, had reportedly said in 2019. The policy aims to detect silicosis, and provide rehabilitation to victims and their families through the pneumoconiosis fund, but more needs to be done, our reporting showed.

The bulk of the implementation of the policy is funded through the District Mineral Foundation Trusts which are formed with levies on mining operations for the welfare of the districts where mines are, the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Fund, the state budget and funds from Corporate Social Responsibility commitments of companies.

Many mines are illegal and not part of official records. The Mine Labour Protection Camp (MLPC) Trust, a nonprofit, like the Rajasthan State Human Rights Commission had said in 2014, that there are at least 12,000 mines operating around Jodhpur alone, even as the entire state records 33,122 mining licences in all.

Mahesh Mathur, Additional District Magistrate, Jodhpur in the Department of Mines and Geology—the regulatory authority—said they conduct regular checks to identify illegal mines. Mathur said that the department has cancelled the lease of more than 100 mines in Jodhpur in the last two-three years for dry drilling. "Mine owners are now aware of the regulations in place about safety measures in the workplace, about safety equipment for workers. Wet drilling is now increasing (in quarries and mines)".

"The machine required for wet drilling is expensive. Now there are other machines, like dust extractors which have a filter bag that needs to be changed periodically. It is also a safer option", said Rana Sengupta, Managing Trustee and CEO of MLPC Trust. During their research in December 2022, MLPC found that while 25 dust extractors were

bought by mine owners in Jodhpur, either because notice was served to them or they were applying for a lease, “none has been used”.

When asked, mine and quarry owners from the area, along with saying that they use wet drilling, also allege that the “silicosis claims” among mine workers are “highly exaggerated”.

Ghanshyam Panwar, a mine owner, said: “People who have never even been to a mine are proving to suffer from silicosis. These numbers are false”. He says the real reason for ill health among workers is a lack of hygiene and addiction to country liquor. “Workers mostly suffer from tuberculosis and they miss their treatment cycle. Then, when they don’t feel better, they assume it’s silicosis”.

Mohanlal Kataria, who has a mine near Kal Beriya village, which employs 30 workers, said that there is now a growing crop of middlemen who “can get you a silicosis certificate from a doctor on payment of Rs 50,000”. “It’s for the government compensation”.

The Rajasthan state government gives a rehabilitation sum of Rs 3 lakh to a certified silicosis (or pneumoconiosis) patient and another Rs 2 lakh to their family in the event of their death. A disability pension of Rs 1,500 per month is given to the widow and the family is eligible to get benefits from the Palanhar scheme for minor children.

Birju, a silicosis widow, has not received compensation because she was unable to access her husband’s death certificate. She works in the quarry to support her four children.

The National Human Rights

**For Frontier Contact**

**DHYANBINDU**

COLLEGE SQUARE

Commission (NHRC) on December 30, 2022, instituted a bench to deal with all silicosis cases in the country, except in the National Capital Region (NCR), to address complaints of non-payment of compensation to silicosis victims.

For others, the compensation amount is not sufficient. “I spent most of the money in repaying the debt taken from the contractor when my husband first contracted the disease, in paying for the vehicle to take him to the hospital, in settling medical bills”, said Gulab Devi, a silicosis widow in Gandero ki Dhaani. Medical bills are higher because families want treatment at private facilities, which have better treatment than at government hospitals.

A lack of other livelihood options means despite knowing the risks, Gulab Devi’s 16-year-old son started working in a quarry. “Mukesh dropped out of school; he was in class 10. He is risking his life for his three younger sisters”, she said softly.

Mine owners, like Kataria, are aware of children being employed by contractors for unskilled work in the quarries—like clearing debris, pushing trolleys. “It doesn’t happen in my mine, but children do go to quarries for work and to earn some extra money”, he said.

Priyank Kanoongo, chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, admitted that there is low reportage on cases of child labour from the mining industry.

Kanoongo added that one of the ways to discourage families from sending their children to work is by increasing workers’ pay. “We have to strengthen the families by increasing their pay. We have had a successful intervention in Jharkhand where we suggested the same to the mica industry”, he said.

A report from December 2005, titled, Budhpura ‘Ground Zero’,

Sandstone Quarrying in India by P Madhavan and Sanjay Raj, said the main reasons for children working in mines was the low wages of parents, alcoholism and bonded labour—when loans taken by parents fall on children’s shoulders to be repaid. The researchers had found that of the 100,000 quarry workers in the Bundi district of Rajasthan—another major mining district—roughly 15,000-20,000 are children. Most of these were in Budhpura’s sandstone quarries.

Enrolling children in schools is not as effective in dissuading child labour in mines.

In Kaali Beri village in Jodhpur’s mining belt, “there are at least 70-80 silicosis patients” in a village of 400 households, estimates Sajjan Kanwar, an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA). “Children going to the quarry for work is common... They go to school and after coming back, go to the quarry”.

In Gandero ki Dhani, 11-year-old Govind, who lost his father to silicosis in 2019, is also enrolled in school but hardly attends classes, and instead goes often to the stone quarry nearby to clear debris for Rs 200. His mother, a silicosis patient, works as an agricultural labourer, to support her family of four.

“It’s difficult to work with the disease”, Mamta said, “I saw my husband go through it but we have to work to feed ourselves”.

Despite a majority of people saying that they do not possess any other skill to earn a living, those like Shraavan and Birju, the silicosis widow, are determined to keep their families out of the quarry. “My two sons and two daughters go to school. I will not send them to the quarry”, Birju said, while getting ready for her job at the quarry. “I know the risks (of silicosis) but I cannot sit at home in fear. With this work, I earn a daily sum of Rs 300”. □□□

[Courtesy: India Spend]



## BIG PAYOFF

## US Military Aid to Ukraine

*Polina Bellikova*

*Rachel Tecott Metz*

UKRAINE'S MILITARY HAS defied expectations in its war with Russia, and many analysts attribute its success to US help. But the mere fact of receiving aid is no guarantee of a positive outcome. After all, the United States provides security assistance to many countries with mixed results. Billions of dollars in aid and decades of training, advising, and institution building did not stop the armies of Afghanistan and Iraq from collapsing. Smaller scale efforts around the world have produced so-called Fabergé egg armies, militaries that are expensive to build but easy to crack.

One of the main reasons security assistance has succeeded in buttressing the Ukrainian war effort but failed elsewhere has to do with the motivation of Ukraine's leadership. If leaders are not prepared to prioritise institutional reforms that will strengthen their militaries, then foreign support will be of little consequence. Ukraine's experience is telling. Between 2014 and early 2022, Ukrainian officials were glad to receive US help, and they followed US advice in making changes that improved the effectiveness of Ukrainian forces. But they did not embrace institutional reforms that threatened the political or personal interests of powerful constituencies.

That changed in February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion. The attack galvanised Ukraine's leadership to discard parochial concerns and implement a series of reforms and battlefield innovations that help account for the country's tremendous performance in the war. At the same time, the redoubled motivation of Ukrainian leaders has simplified the challenge of delivering the country security

assistance. Ukrainian leaders no longer need to be persuaded by US advisers. They are motivated enough to implement reforms on their own. What Ukraine needs now from the United States to beat back the Russian invasion is weapons and ammunition. This, the United States has delivered—to extraordinary battlefield effect.

In March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and launched an incursion into eastern Ukraine. In response, Western governments increased security assistance to Kyiv. The United States committed approximately \$2 billion to military training and security sector reform between 2014 and 2022. Ukrainian leaders were motivated enough by Russia's aggression to implement some US recommendations, particularly in training, exercise, and arming units—areas where Kyiv had considerable room for improvement. But US efforts to encourage reforms in Ukrainian defence institutions fell short because they rubbed up against the interests of the defence establishment.

For instance, US military instructors trained the new Ukrainian Special Operation Forces in clandestine operations behind enemy lines, sabotage, and informational-psychological warfare. At the training centre in Yavoriv, US and other Western military instructors trained Ukrainian troops in combat tactics, battlefield medicine, and dismantling improvised explosive devices. With US encouragement, Ukraine reformed its noncommissioned officers corps, improving methods of personnel management. Ukrainian leaders were receptive to these efforts because they boosted battlefield effectiveness without threatening existing institutional interests.

But when US advisers recommended more costly security sector reforms, Ukrainian leaders made only cosmetic changes. Kyiv saw reforming the political institutions and processes in the security sector as burdensome and less pressing than progress at the tactical level. Ukrainian officials dawdled on implementing US-proposed reforms to increase civilian control of the military, expand professional military education, and clean up the corrupt defence procurement system. For instance, despite the early successes in strengthening civilian oversight in the Ministry of Defence, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appointed a career military officer, General Andrii Taran, as defence minister, and Taran promptly squashed such initiatives.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Defence, led by Taran, and the Ministry of Strategic Industries dragged their feet in reforming procurement practices and failed to place orders for crucial weapons. For example, Ukrainian manufacturers make an excellent antitank weapon, the Stuhna-P, but the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence did not order enough of them in 2021. When Russia invaded in February 2022, Ukraine had to repurpose Stuhnas it had manufactured for Middle Eastern clients. Ukrainians fought Russians with Ukrainian weapons operating on Arabic interfaces. More proactive reforms in civilian control and defence procurement would have ensured Kyiv's readiness for a larger war.

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine. Confronted with this immediate, existential threat, Kyiv focused on a single priority: maximising the effectiveness of its forces fighting against Russia. Doing so required both reforming the defence institutions and increasing security cooperation with the West. Kyiv was desperate for Western ammunition and weapons, which the United States has delivered.

Weapons and training provided by the United States and other Western countries have been vital for translating Ukraine's willingness to fight into battlefield success. The United States has provided much-needed antitank weapons, howitzers, High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), antiship missiles, air-defence capabilities, and infantry fighting vehicles and tanks. Ukraine's armed forces have quickly learned to use new weapon systems and have liberated thousands of Ukrainian civilians from Russian occupation in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson oblasts.

An existential threat from Russia did what US encouragement alone could not—incentivised Kyiv to tackle corruption in defence procurement. In January 2023, Ukrainian media alleged that the Ministry of Defence was about to overpay suppliers for food for Ukrainian troops. The scandal resulted in hearings at the Ukrainian parliament, investigations, and the partial declassification of the defence procurement budget—a bold step toward transparency that is all the more striking in the midst of an ongoing war. In addition, the Ministry of Defence fired the head of the

procurement department while the deputy minister of defence resigned voluntarily. In a separate case, the Security Service of Ukraine detained the president of a leading defence manufacturer for alleged corruption. Facing an existential threat, Ukrainian authorities and the public became increasingly intolerant of the endemic corruption that has plagued the country since its independence in 1991.

Ukraine has also implemented reforms that had nothing to do with US security assistance. Since 2014, the Ukrainian government has developed a new legal basis and institutional capacity for mobilising, training, and deploying its reserve corps—the result of hard work by Ukrainian civil society, government, and the military. Similarly, Ukrainian civil society has played a tremendous role in delivering the necessary equipment and services to the frontline. For instance, the Come Back Alive foundation, a nonprofit that aims to equip Ukrainian forces, improved Ukraine's procurement process—and bypassed the Ministry of Defence's bureaucracy—by crowd funding the purchase of communication devices,

laptops, generators, telescopic sights, and advanced drones for combat and reconnaissance. Hospitallers, a volunteer paramedic organisation, has trained hundreds of paramedics to work on the frontlines and evacuated thousands of wounded combatants and civilians since 2014. Supporting Ukraine's armed forces with donations has become a daily routine for thousands of Ukrainian citizens and businesses. Since February 2022, Come Back Alive has received almost \$163.5 million, 80 percent of which has come from individual donations under \$27. Although these achievements align with the goals of US security assistance, they cannot be attributed to Western influence.

But weapons and ammunition from Western countries were essential to Ukraine's ability to sustain the fight against Russia. Ukraine's success does not demonstrate that US security assistance works writ large but, rather, that US security assistance is most useful in the cases when those receiving the aid are driven to do whatever it takes to strengthen their forces. □□□

[Source; *Foreign Affairs*]

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## MANUSMRITI IN BHU

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# The “Gospel of Counter-Revolution”

**Subhash Gatade**

**C**LASSICAL LITERATURE may contain pearls of wisdom, but time has also turned some of it into a minefield of inaccuracies. The great dramatist Shakespeare can inspire but is also hauled up for alleged anti-Semitism. Even Gautam Buddha has been scrutinised for his controversial observations about women.

In recent weeks, a debate has raged about 17th-century poet-saint Tulsidas's epic poem *Ramcharitmanas* and its' allegedly unfair and humiliating treatment of women and so-called lower castes. Voices to edit such books and scriptures or scrap

them have grown louder. Yet, the Banaras Hindu University, a premier central university in Uttar Pradesh, has proposed something that, instead of settling the controversy, muddies the waters more.

The university's Department of Dharmashastra and Mimansa, whose curriculum already includes studying the Manusmriti among ancient Indian scriptures, has proposed researching the “applicability” of Manusmriti in Indian society. It plans to use the funds received under the Centre's Institutes of Eminence scheme, which provides research and development grants of up to Rs 1,000 crore each

to ten select public-funded institutions.

The BHU's proposal seems anachronous—and not just because it involves spending money on an esoteric subject, while public universities face a severe fund crunch forcing them to cut down even on essential expenses.

Nearly a century ago, during the first Dalit revolt of its kind in modern times, Dr BR Ambedkar, the legendary leader of the oppressed, symbolically burnt the Manusmriti in a public programme held at Mahad. On 25 December 1927, at the Mahad Satyagraha, he said in the presence of thousands of people from different parts of the Bombay province, as it was then known, that the text was a “gospel of counter-revolution”.

The resolution read out during the

symbolic public “cremation” of the Manusmriti, proposed by Ambedkar’s associate Gangadhar Neelkanth Sahasrabuddhe, emphasised the intent of the organisers of the conference. After considering the verses of the Manusmriti, it said, the conference had formed the “firm opinion” that it “undermined the Shudra caste, thwarted their progress, and made their social, political and economic slavery permanent”. The resolution said the context of the text is unworthy of a religious or sacred book. That is why participants performed the “cremation” rites of the book at the conference. The resolution even described the book as “divisive” and a “destroyer of humanity”. All these facts are recorded in public intellectual Anand Teltumbde’s book, *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt*, published by Navayana in 2017.

Nearly a quarter-century later,

while dedicating the Constitution to the nation, Ambedkar, who headed its drafting committee, famously declared that the Constitution had “ended the rule by Manu”.

However, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) never saw eye-to-eye with a modern Constitution for India. Their leaders made their objections to modernising Indian tradition clear as their fascination for the Manusmriti. In the late sixties, Maharashtra witnessed a massive movement of Dalits and other democratic sections to protest the RSS supremo’s comments praising the Manusmriti in an interview with the Marathi newspaper, *Nava Kaal*.

Yet last year, Justice Pratibha Singh of the Delhi High Court spoke of the Manusmriti in glowing terms at a programme held under the auspices of the Federation of Indian

Chambers of Commerce and Industry or FICCI. She said scriptures like Manusmriti give women “a very respectable position”, a remark that created a furore, earning her much criticism for promoting regressive ideas filled with “casteism and classism”.

To think that academics at the Banaras Hindu University are unaware of the stormy history of this book and its disparaging comments about women and non-elite castes would be the height of incredulity. Undoubtedly, the department seems deliberately bent on de-legitimising all the struggles and yearnings for change in Indian society. That desire for change has refused to die, but the university and like-minded institutions and public figures are keen to provide new legitimacy to the right-wing and regressive forces who want to package this “gospel of counter-revolution”, whether people like it or not. □□□

## LETTERS

### Indian Citizens

For those who have been declared foreigners or excluded from the list National Register of Citizens without just cause, it has meant a civil death with repercussions that often engulf entire families.

Since 2017, our team at CJP’s Team Assam has been working tirelessly in faraway villages and districts to provide real paralegal and legal aid, as well as psychological assistance to those affected by this issue. Our district-level legal team works on 25 Foreigner Tribunal cases every month, ensuring that those who are wrongly accused are provided with the necessary legal support.

While assisting Indian citizens in Assam, CJP has encountered many cases of people from disadvantaged backgrounds struggling to defend their citizenship. We recently came across the case of Sukur Ali, a man who begs for his living and was expected to defend his citizenship, despite being on the National Regis-

ter of Citizens (NRC). But CJP was able to fight his case and he has been declared an Indian, finally!

One more Assamese who had been “suspected of being a foreigner” by the Foreigners’ Tribunal (FT) in Goalpara District, Assam, has been declared an Indian citizen. A 68-year-old elderly woman, Ajibun Nessa, belonging to the “Goriya Muslim” community was put under the scanner by the state. The Goriya Muslim community has already been identified as the “khilonjia,” or Assam’s original inhabitants.

**CJP**

### Peace Plan

China under Xi has promoted itself as a neutral peacemaker, proposing a peace plan for Ukraine last month which the West largely dismissed as vague at best, and at worst a ploy to buy time for Putin to regroup his forces.

“A ceasefire right now, freezing the lines where they are, basically gives him the time and space he needs to try to re-equip, to re-man,

to make up for that resource expenditure,” White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said.

Putin praised Xi for the plan, and blamed Kyiv and the West for rejecting it. Kyiv, for its part, has cautiously welcomed the Chinese proposal while urging Beijing to consider Ukraine’s own peace plan. Zelensky has called on Xi to speak to him.

Ukraine says there can be no peace unless Russia withdraws from occupied land. Moscow says Kyiv must recognise territorial “realities”, referring to Russia’s claim to have annexed a fifth of Ukraine.

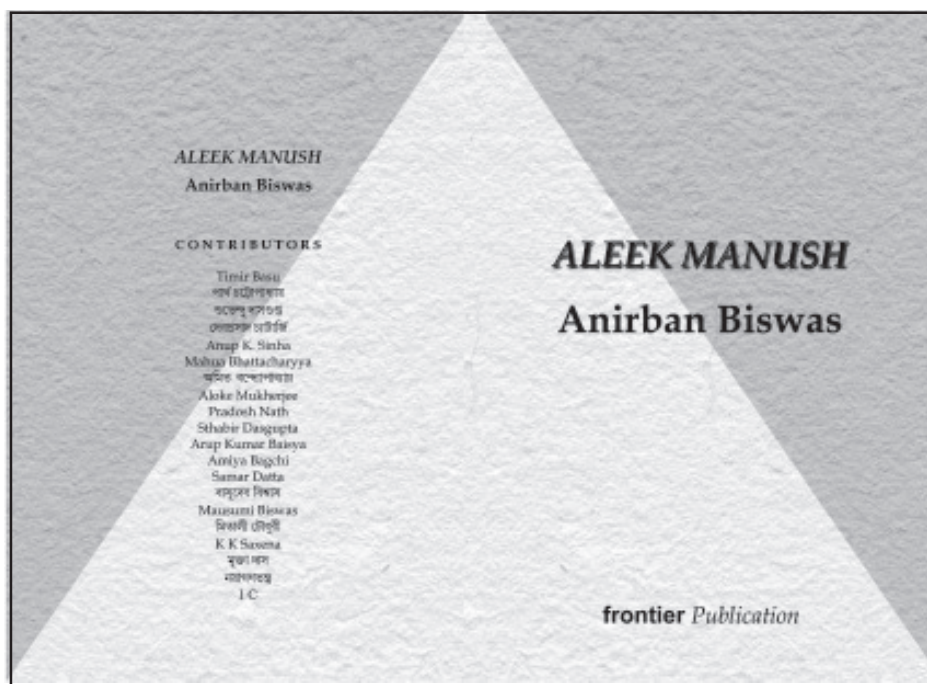
After Ukraine recaptured territory throughout the second half of 2022, Moscow launched a massive winter offensive using hundreds of thousands of freshly called-up reservists and convicts recruited as mercenaries from jail.

Despite the bloodiest fighting of the war, which both sides describe as a meat grinder, the front line has barely moved for four months.

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