

# frontier

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## *Battle for Bakhmut*

**A**T THE G-7 SUMMIT IN HIROSHIMA NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT took back seat to Zelensky's appeals to major powers of the world. Hiroshima, the site of this year's G-7 conclave, is one of just a handful of places in the world that provides a stark reminder of the horrors of war. Though the final communique from the club of the richest did make vague commitment toward a "Hiroshima Vision", only Russia-Ukraine war got the main headlines. As leaders make their journeys home, wars will continue. And Bakhmut—the main area of contention in recent months in eastern Ukraine—comes into focus.

The symbolic importance of the small city in Ukraine's east now far outweighs any strategic value for either side.

Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated his troops and the Wagner Group private army for "liberating" the city on May 20, but Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that although Russian troops are in Bakhmut, the city is "not occupied". But the city has already been raged to the ground. Perhaps they are fighting over a ghost city. One former Russian soldier and intelligence officer who led the original 2014-2015 uprising of separatists in Donbas region painted a bleaker picture despite Ukrainian setbacks. He described the capture of Bakhmut as not a victory in any tactical sense, but part of the Kremlin's policy of "freezing the conflict through a compromise agreement". In March Zelensky also echoed the same idea as he would say Bakhmut's fall could allow Russia to rally international support for a deal that might require Kyiv to make 'unacceptable compromises'.

The fog of war made it impossible to confirm the situation on the ground in the longest battle, and a series of comments from Ukrainian and Russian military officials added confusion to the matter. Both Russia and Ukraine have endured losses believed to be in the thousands, though neither side disclosed casualty numbers. It may be embarrassing for Putin and Zelensky as well. It is not known exactly how many troops on both sides have died in the conflict, but Moscow and Kyiv have both claimed to have killed hundreds in a single day.

But why has Bakhmut, a previously sleepy, nondescript city nestled away in the salt-mining region of eastern Ukraine, become so significant in the Russia-Ukraine war?

In order for Russia to advance further into Ukraine and achieve Putin's aim of "liberating the Donbas", Russia needs to capture Bakhmut.

However, the huge amount of emphasis that both sides have placed on the city goes far beyond any strategic value. If either side were to completely capture Bakhmut, they would then face a series of defensive lines positioned around it.

The city's importance instead lies in the symbolic weight it has garnered over months of bitter, entrenched fighting.

For Ukraine, it has become an example of dogged, determined resistance. The city has seen some of the most intense fighting since Russia's special military operation started in February 2022.

Russia, on the other hand, needs

a victory. After its initial advances in the first months of its full-scale invasion, a successful Ukrainian counter-offensive reclaimed swathes of territory in a series of humiliating defeats for Russian forces.

As the Russian military lost face, the Wagner Group, a mercenary outfit hardened by years of deployments in Syria and various African nations, took on the fight for Bakhmut late last year.

A victory for Russia in Bakhmut could also be seen a victory for Prigozhin, the owner of Wagner and potentially raise his standing with the Kremlin.

The loss of the city could inflict a blow to morale for Ukraine after so many months of bitter fighting. It would come at a time when Ukraine is expected to launch a highly anticipated counteroffensive, which could

raise concerns amongst Ukraine's allies.

The fall of the city could be a huge morale boost for Russia, which is in need of its first major victory in more than 10 months.

Since the latter half of 2022, reports from the front lines of the war have tended to reflect Ukrainian advances in some areas and a grinding stalemate in others. Russia has launched several waves of drone and missile strikes at Ukrainian cities but claimed no significant territorial gains.

Strategically, a victory in Bakhmut could open up a path further west, possibly to Kramatorsk, a city with roughly 150,000 inhabitants before the war. However, Ukraine has heavily fortified the areas around the city of Bakhmut. □□

24-05-2023

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## COMMENT

### Whither the Communist Left?

THE DECLINE IN VOTE SHARE of left parties in the Karnataka assembly election is a disturbing outcome. The political disunity among left parties is a clear example of missed opportunities in working-class politics and the promotion of radical political consciousness. Once again, the left parties have failed to effectively address the challenges posed by the corporate onslaught led by Hindutva fascism in India.

The communist parties have failed to come to an understanding for a united left front based on popular issues of people. It sends a wrong signal to the masses that left parties lack basic understanding of their everyday problems and challenges in life. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) had its tactical alliance with the Janata Dal (Secular) and the Republican Party of India (Prakash Ambedkar faction) (RPI-

K). The JD(S) has provided outside support to the alliance candidates in three seats only while RPI-K contested for ten seats and the CPI (M) contested four seats. The Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist) [SUCI(C)] has fought in fourteen constituencies in ten districts. The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) and Liberation (CPI-ML) have contested in two seats. The CPI and CPI(M) candidates have fought against each other in the KGF seat whereas the CPI-ML and CPI(M) have fought against each other in KR Puram (Bengaluru Urban district). The CPI(M) and SUCI(C) have contested against each other in the Gulbarga rural seat. The left parties have fought against each other and lost in several seats without forming any form of political understanding. Such a political trend in left politics only

empowers reactionary political forces in the long run.

Left politics is the moral compass and political anchor of the working people to uphold the economic interests of the masses for a progressive and democratic society. Left unity is central to the working-class political project in India. The political collaboration and cooperation among left wing political parties, groups and movements based on common objectives and shared values are crucial to achieve collective political progress and deepening of working-class politics. The significance of left unity in fostering social change, addressing common challenges, and promoting a more equitable and just society depends on the collective struggles of the left parties. The mass movements can overcome the ideological fragmentation by acknowledging the inherent strength in diversity.

The left unity challenges existing power structures and promotes dialogue, understanding, and the ex-

change of ideas. It encourages activists, organisations, and political parties to unite their efforts, pooling their resources, skills, and networks to create a more powerful force for change. By building bridges rather than walls, left unity amplifies the collective voice of the left, making it more effective in challenging existing ruling establishments and advocating for progressive policies. The left parties and their unity can only mobilise people against all forms of inequality and exploitation in the society by appealing to the wider society. This broader collaboration

enables the left to create coalitions that span various social, economic, and cultural divides. The united left can achieve greater influence and electoral success, translating its ideals into tangible policy changes for societal transformation.

Ultimately, the future of left-wing politics in India depends on the actions and strategies adopted by the parties involved, the ability to connect with the aspirations and concerns of the people, and the capacity to effectively navigate the changing political landscape. □□□

[Contributed]

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## NOTE

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## Digital Feudalism

*David Arditi writes:*

**T**HE CURRENT HOLLYWOOD writers strike has drawn international attention to the plight of TV and film writers in the streaming era.

Much has been made of television's golden age, during which streaming platforms have offered audiences an abundance of well-written, highly produced television shows, often called "prestige TV".

Whereas older television shows tended to be formulaic sitcoms or crime dramas, newer shows more closely mimic the serialized novels of the 19th century, with cliff-hangers that encourage binge-watching.

But not everyone in the industry has equally reaped the rewards. While there are certainly more writing jobs to go around, these roles often pay less and place writers on short-order contracts.

Furthermore, the unyielding demand for content, as more and more platforms compete for subscriptions, has trapped writers in what one may call "digital feudalism".

In truth today's version of capitalism increasingly mirrors the tran-

sition from feudalism to capitalism in 16th-century England.

Beginning in the 16th century, the English Parliament passed a number of enclosure acts, which abolished common land and defined it as private property that the government reallocated to the elites.

These laws kicked peasants, known as serfs, off the land where they had lived and worked for generations. Many of them ended up heading to cities in order to find work. The ensuing oversupply of workers drove down wages, and many ex-serfs couldn't find jobs or housing, becoming vagabonds.

In other words, serfs lost stability in their everyday lives as they were thrust into a new economic system.

Precarity, debt and a lack of stability are again the dominant themes in today's digital economy.

So, why are TV writers feeling the pinch of digital feudalism if this is the golden age of television?

Streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu and HBO Max brought about the golden age. But the gold prospecting has slowed, as the number

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of prestige TV shows seems to have hit a saturation point.

Starting in the 2010s, streaming platforms began hiring more and more writers. To lure customers, platforms needed quality content—otherwise, viewers wouldn't continue paying the US\$8 to \$15 monthly cost of a subscription.

Platforms couldn't market their content like network sitcoms, so they had to constantly develop new ideas for shows. Large stables of creative writers ended up forming the core of studio strategy.

Entertainment companies took a page from the gig economy playbook in ways that worked against writers' livelihoods.

The contracts were short and the pay lower. The formats of streaming shows—more one-off miniseries rather than sitcoms that could run for as long as a decade—rarely guaranteed work for any lengthy period of time.

Writers want to fix this by raising their minimum wage; they want writers for streaming platforms to receive the same royalties that theatrical film writers get; and they

want to end the practice of mini rooms, where small groups of writers hash out scripts but often receive less compensation for a series that may not even get ordered.

Another key demand is to limit the use of artificial intelligence in television production.

Writers fear that studios will use AI to hire workers, select which shows to produce and, in the worst-case scenario, replace writers altogether. Interestingly, limits on AI have been the one point of contention that studios have been unwilling to even discuss.

It will be interesting to see whether the writers will be able to claw back some of the financial security that's vanished across many industries, or if the larger economic forces that have powered the gig economy will work in studio executives' favour. □□□

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#### MUSTO'S COLUMN

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## European Colonialism: The Potosí Mines

*Marcello Musto*

**T**HE WEALTH OF POTOSÍ in Bolivia first became known in Europe in 1545, when a group of Spanish conquistadores settled there to exploit the treasure preserved in its subsoil. The city grew enormously, so that eighty years after its foundation it was the largest and richest in the Americas, its population of 160,000 larger than those of Paris, Rome, London or Seville.

Its fame travelled the world. It has been estimated that some 50,000 tons of silver have been extracted from its veins—enough to build a bridge all the way to Spain. It had the largest silver mine in the world, producing huge quantities of the metal that were carried by llama train to the Chilean coast and shipped in the holds of Iberian galleons. For the gentlefolk of Potosí everything was made of silver, and the name became a byword for luxury: 'it's worth a Potosí' (that is, worth its weight in silver), wrote Miguél de Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. The indigenous communities were reduced to slavery, however, and, when the inhumane conditions began to kill them off in their tens of thousands, the colonisers imported new slaves from Africa, more than 30,000 of them. The total number who died in the mines cannot be precisely calculated. But what is sure is that 'European civilisation' spelled pillage and genocide.

After two centuries of exploitation, the silver began to run out; those who could leave Potosí and the whole area fell into oblivion. In 1987 the city was declared a UNESCO heritage site, but—as Eduardo Galeano wrote in his *Open Veins of Latin America*—all that remained were ghosts of the wealth of yore.

In the streets of Potosí you are aware of its frame at every turn, its presence today, at just under 4,800 metres, as disturbing as its history. This is the Cerro Rico, the man-eating mountain. Its imposing bulk, reddish and pock-marked, is strewn with tiny human shapes hurrying to pierce it again and with trucks making their way up and down to carry away its most valuable rocks.

The upper part of the city is where the workers are concentrated. Some 6,000 miners—the total varies with the price of the metal on world markets—are camped out near the top of the mountain and live on the silver, as well as zinc, copper, lead and tin, that it still provides. They work in the artisan mode, with crude instruments and a store of knowledge handed down through the ages. Theirs is perhaps the world's most terrible occupation, not only tiring but deadly. It may kill at any moment, because there is no safety and the men can only trust in Tio, the divinity on whom they shower

gifts in the hope of protection and good luck. But it also kills over time, since in the jaws of the Rich Mountain every breath is a step closer to silicosis.

Women are not welcome in the depths of the mountain. Only palliras can go up there—that is, miners' widows who have the right to scratch a living by gathering the rocks that sometimes fall from carts in between the mine entrance and the trucks. They meet in the market, where they go along with all the other workers to buy their daily necessities, as well as the coca leaves essential for a full day's work at that altitude, the hand-made cigarettes containing eucalyptus that help with breathing, and the pure alcohol (96°) that they drink during work breaks to help them withstand the extreme conditions.

Accompanied by a guide and a group of miners, I visit a few of the holes opened over the centuries in the Cerro Rico. In spite of the great heat outside, the temperature falls below zero after a few hundred metres. Some stalactites make it difficult to pass, while at certain points the water is ankle-deep and gets inside the men's worn boots. As we progress, the relatively easy sections alternate with others where it is necessary to walk almost on our knees, since the shafts, little more than a metre high, become ever smaller and narrower. If you stop here, panic begins to get the upper hand. Apart from the faint glow of the helmet-lamp, everything around is pitch dark and you feel immersed

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in total silence. Now and again this is suddenly broken by a cart weighing a ton or more, piled high with minerals; its wheels have become almost unserviceable over the years, and four workers are needed to drag it along. You have to move carefully then, feeling for side passages or flattening your body against the wall, more than seems possible, to make way for the cart.

We press on, and in a few minutes the temperature suddenly shoots up. It is above forty degrees Celsius—a sudden, excruciating change. The ground beneath us is no longer wet but parched. The air becomes oppressive for lack of oxygen. Dust is everywhere: it gets into your throat and lungs and eyes. You have to keep going, a few dozen metres to the end, where loud sounds now clatter around you. Here are the drillers, the men with the hardest job: they have to bore into the walls and rip them open with home-made dynamite. They are working almost naked, in the most appalling conditions. Some take the lift to the first circle of hell, descending 240 metres into tunnels barely wide enough for their body to head off in search of a vein of zinc, tin or lead, hoping to carry as much as possible to the surface in return for their weekly pay.

It is a long way back. The cold seeps into your bones, and you notice it more than when you were going the other way. When a light finally glows in the distance, you think of the exit as a return to life. It has seemed an eternity, but the clock is there to remind you that only three hours have passed. The strong sun is imparting light and heat, while other miners are arriving to take their turn inside. Looking at their kind but toil-hardened faces, you cannot help wondering how it is possible to spend every day for thirty years in that inferno.

In the last few decades, the number of Bolivian miners has fallen significantly; it now stands at 70,000, just 1.5 percent of the active population. However, they produce 25 percent of the country's exports, and another 300,000 have jobs servicing them in the transport, machine-building and trade sectors. Given that they are also one of the most combative proletarian layers in Latin America, you can see why they are still central to the social-economic life of the poorest country in the sub-continent.

Although Bolivia is the world's seventh producer of silver and lead, its economy is still marked by a lack of adequate means of subsistence. Some 90 per cent of the miners work in cooperatives, without job protection or social security, yet perform only 20 percent of the extraction work. For the sector is dominated by foreign multinationals: the Japanese San Cristóbal corporation controls not only 85 percent of the lead market but (together with the Swiss Sinchi Wayra) 85 percent of zinc and (again with Sinchi Wayra and the US Panamerican Silver) 75 percent of silver extraction.

This presence has not brought improvements in prospecting—witness the fact that most of the mines in use today are the same as those in the colonial period. Nor has anything changed at the level of infrastructure, since the minerals are still transported on an ancient railway system dating back to 1892. The advances in national autonomy are equally meagre: Bolivia refines only a tiny proportion of its silver and lead, and not a single gram of zinc. It has to confine itself to the export of raw materials, sending them to the same countries where the multinationals that control the market have their headquarters. Only scraps of the multimillion-dollar earnings in the sector remain behind. The for-

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foreign corporations pay only 8 percent in taxes—a figure far lower than the 56 percent that the state-owned Comibol used to pay, but also significantly less than the 13.5 percent that the notorious ‘tin barons’ handed over in the distant 1930s.

In view of this reality, and considering the damage to the environment and the robbery of non-renewable resources, it is to be hoped that Bolivia will proceed, without hesitation, along the road to nationalisation. In order to put an end to a

semi-colonial economy and move on to a phase of ecologically sustainable modernisation that should respect the choices of the indigenous communities living on its territory.

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## MANY LOOSE ENDS

### Is MSP Inclusive?

*I Satya Sundaram*

**T**HE MINIMUM SUPPORT price (MSP) has been conceived as an incentive to farmers to raise productivity and production. Yet, Indian agriculture continues to suffer from low productivity, low procurement, crop imbalances, poor storage facilities, an unhelpful MSP and ever growing role of the middlemen. The tragedy is that the plight of farmers is worsening even when the food-grain output (312 million tonnes in 2021-22) is comfortable. There are suicides amongst farmers, though the rate is coming down. According to NSS data, in 2019, the average income of farm households stood at Rs 10,218. Even those who own one hectare (2.5 acres) earn just Rs 224 per day. Average household debt is equivalent to 60 per cent of its annual income.

The rationale behind MSP operations is to provide guaranteed price and assured market to the farmers and protect them from the price fluctuations and market imperfections. This would encourage investment and also adoption of modern farming practices. The Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) is mandated to recommend MSP to incentivise the cultivators to adopt modern technology and raise productivity and over-all grain production.

CACP recommends MSPs of 23 commodities, which comprise of seven cereals (paddy, wheat, maize,

sorghum, pearl millet, barley and ragi), five pulses (gram, tur, moong, urad, lentil), seven oilseeds (groundnut, rapeseed-mustard, soyabean, sesamum, sunflower, safflower, nigerseed), and four commercial crops (copra, sugarcane, cotton and raw jute).

The officials from CACP also visit States for on-the-spot assessment of the various constraints that farmers face in marketing their produce, or even raising the productivity levels of their crops. Under the MSP operations, the Food Corporation of India (FCI) procures mostly rice and wheat from the farmers for ensuring supplies of grain under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and keeping a buffer stock of grains. The National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation (Nafed) procures mostly oilseeds and pulses, while Cotton Corporation of India procures cotton.

Experts say higher MSP alone cannot ensure higher production and productivity or crop diversification. Indeed, MSP is a deemed or unwritten options contract. The Government has an obligation to buy from farmers, if crop price falls below MSP, and farmer has no obligation to sell to the government, if price stays above MSP; farmers are free to sell in the open market.

Thus, MSP should be backed by a robust procurement system. Otherwise, it is doomed to fail, espe-

cially in the context of production centric approach. Procurement becomes all the more imperative in the event crop prices fall below MSP. In 2019-20, about 2,04,63,590 farmers benefited from MSP, while in 2020-21, about 2,10,07,563 secured the benefits.

Ever since the MSP was introduced in the late 1970s, it became the “floor” price -setter for rice and wheat. The National Commission on Farmers, headed by Prof M S Swaminathan, had recommended, in 2006, that MSPs must be at least 50 percent more than the cost of production.

On 8th June, 2022, the Centre raised MSP for paddy by Rs 100 a quintal for the kharif season of 2022-23. The rates for 14 crops have been increased in the range of 4 percent to 8 percent. This is similar to the increase in MSP in 2021-22 which was in the range of 1 percent to 7 percent.

In October 2022, the Centre hiked MSP of Wheat, other rabi crops by 2 to 9 percent. The Centre has fixed the MSP of wheat at Rs 2,125 /quintal, a 5.5 percent increase over last year. Though the new MSP is higher than the average price received by farmers in the peak season the previous year, it is still lower than the current rates. The MSP will come into force from the rabi marketing season that begins on April 1, 2023. The Centre has admitted that prices remained higher than the MSP throughout the procurement, which led to the target being missed.

Among other rabi crops, the MSP for chana (gram) has seen the lowest

increase (2 percent) to Rs 5,335/quintal whereas the highest rise (9 percent) to Rs 6,000 was seen in masur (lentil). Mustard MSP has also been fixed higher by 8 percent at Rs 5,450 and sunflower by 4 percent at Rs 5,650. Barley MSP has been raised by 6 percent to Rs 1,735.

In the Indian context, the MSP has serious limitations. The rise in MSP favours paddy, wheat and big farmers. A few States like Punjab, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh dominate on the procurement front, leaving other States like West Bengal in the lurch. During 2017-2020, Punjab accounted for 37 percent, Haryana 25 percent, Madhya Pradesh 21 percent and Uttar Pradesh 13 percent of the total wheat procurement. Similarly, Punjab accounted for 26 percent and Haryana 9 percent of the total paddy procurement. West Bengal, which is one of the top States in rice production, accounts for only 4 percent public paddy procurement.

There are 2,239 regulated markets and 4, 276 sub-market yards. All States and UTs are not on the e-NAM portal. Moreover, not all

mandis are engaged in on-line trade. By June, 2021, only 14 percent of APMC (Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee) mandis and farmers joined the e-NAM.

The Shanta Kumar Committee report in 2015 estimated that only 6 percent of the farmers could sell their produce through government agencies. MSP and market price fluctuate constantly. Farmers say most of the time they have to sell their produce below MSP. Also, not all 23 crops get MSP support.

Between 1980 and 2000, the MSP of rice and wheat increased at a much faster rate than those of the "coarse" cereals like jowar, bajra and ragi. This led to the movement of the terms of trade in favour of the water-consuming cereals, thereby fuelling demand for water.

So far, the MSP formula has not taken into account the health and nutritional aspect of the issue. Irrespective of the season, the nutritional aspect needs to be figured into the MSP recommendations, and more nutritional crops should command higher support prices.

There is an urgent need to raise

farmers' income. The sectors allied to agriculture like animal husbandry, fisheries and poultry are doing well. Therefore, the stress should be on agriculture diversification. Of course, the share of non-farm sectors in rural areas is increasing. A diversified cropping pattern will help in mitigating the risks associated with agriculture.

Reducing cost of production is important. The stress should be on integrated farming system as it enhances productivity. Organic farming should be popularised and doubts about it should be dispelled.

The farm reforms Panel, appointed by the Supreme Court, has suggested that wheat, paddy procurement should be in tune with PDS requirements. The Panel has also suggested an Agriculture Marketing Council and "Farmers Courts" at the district level.

Instead of unduly depending on MSP, the focus should be shifted to diversification of agriculture to high-value crops, rise in productivity, increase in cropping intensity, higher procurement and scientific use of farm inputs, especially water. □□□

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Renaissance and The 1857 Rebellion in the Hindi Region

**T Vijayendra**

[Dr Vir Bharat Talwar is a scholar of renaissance in the Hindi and North West India region. He retired as head of the department, Hindi, JNU. He has written several books on Hindi literature as related to social movements—in Jharkhand, and Western UP. This \*book discusses some issues of the 19th century renaissance and the 1857 revolt, in Western UP and Punjab around a few personalities of that region.

There are 6 longish articles. The first three deal with renaissance. They are about personalities who are seen in a negative light by mainstream Hindi literature people. Talwar throws some light on the importance of studying them and their contribution to social causes. The remaining 3 articles deal with the meaning and assessment of the 1857 revolt. Here also he deals with controversial personalities like Sir Saiyyad Ahmed.]

## RENAISSANCE

**Shraddharam Phillouri:** The character and importance of counter renaissance. He represents the Anti-Renaissance as opposed to the re-

naissance led by Dayanand Saraswati of Arya Samaj, Brhamo Samaj and Prarthana Samaj. Renaissance in India in the 19th century was chiefly reforming Hinduism in the face of

**\*BAGAAWAT AUR WAFADAARI:  
NAVJAGRAN KE IRD-GIRD**  
(Rebellion and Faithfulness: In The Vicinity of the Renaissance)  
By Vir Bharat Talwar  
2023, New Delhi, Vani Prakashan,  
Pp. 152, Rs. 399

severe criticism by Christianity and resisted the spread of Christianity. The renaissance people were in favour of dropping out some of the religious texts and social practices of Hindu tradition. The anti-renaissance forces were against dropping out the texts and religious practices but supported some social reforms such as widow remarriage and increasing the age of marriage of girls. Socially the renaissance represented the new rising middle class, in Punjab the trad-

ing castes of the Khatri whereas the anti-renaissance represented the Brahmin community whose livelihood depended upon these religious practices.

Shraddharam (1837-1881) lived only 43 years. He was born and died in Phillour town of Jalandhar district. He was a Joshi Saraswat Brahmin. He was an unusually talented and scholarly person. As a child he could write poems in Punjabi, was a very good swimmer, singer and he learnt magic and sleight of hand. He was a formidable scholar of Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and Persian. He read voraciously and wrote thousands of pages. He was a good speaker and gave popular lectures on religion based on Indian scriptures. In Hindi he wrote a novel 'Bhagyawati' the most important book on social consciousness in the

19th century and the Punjab Education department included it in its books for girls' education.

In his battles against renaissance he chased Dayanand Saraswati of Arya Samaj all over and gave parallel lectures. He showed that Dayanand Saraswati misquoted and distorted the Vedas according to his convenience and challenged him for theological debates which the latter refused! Ultimately Shraddhanand's movement died after his death and Arya Samaj flourished. The main reason was that his movement had a social basis of Brahmins whose income was limited to performing rituals and people were spending less on them. On the other hand Arya Samaj represented the new emerging trading castes of Khatri (bourgeoisie) who had regular income and could contribute money.

However renaissance and anti-renaissance are born again and again. Witness recent attempts to remove Darwin's teachings from schools in India!

#### **Raja Shivaprasad 'Sitarehind' and Hindi Renaissance**

He was the most important prose writer in Hindi in the 19th century and yet in Hindi literature he is known as villain. This was mainly because of the rivalry between him and Bharatendu Harishchandra's group. Talwar underlines his contribution to Hindi literature and to the renaissance.

The heart of renaissance in the Hindi region was the Nagari Script, Hindi language and cow protection! Raja Shivaprasad was the first who demanded that the official script of North West Provinces be changed to Nagari and he gave a memorandum to the government. Since then the movement against Urdu script has been going on. After 38 years it first tasted victory when the Nagari script was allowed along with Urdu. However the movement went on till 1947. This movement from its birth was

related to Hindutva and was anti-Muslim. Its communal character was evident from the memorandum mentioned above and scores of memorials given to the Hunter commission. Thus communalism in India was born with this renaissance!

Raja Shivaprasad belonged to a small sect of educated Hindus and they were all loyal servants of the company. The company also gave them jobs and honours like Sitarehind or Raja. Raja Shivaprasad was also a government servant in charge of the education department. He made Hindi a medium of education and took up the historic work of creating textbooks for school in all subjects – science, mathematics, history, geography and literature. His other great contribution was that he considered Hindi and Urdu as one language and even created a common grammar for them!

#### **The Movement for Khadi Boli and Ayodhyaprasad Khatri**

In the 19th century people come across a curious situation in Hindi. The prose was written in Khadi Boli (which is the local language spoken in the region of Meerut district in Western UP) and poetry in Braj (which is the local language spoken in the region of Agra-Mathura in Western UP). The poets believed that Khadi Boli does not have that kind sweetness or lyricism that Braj has. They often quote: the mother-in-law asks the daughter-in-law to move fast who is carrying water on her head. The daughter-in-law replies:

*Mai ree! sar gagri (Mother, there is a pot on my head)  
mag sankri, (the path is narrow)  
pag kankri gadat hai! (small stones are hurting my feet).*

#### **What is modern Hindi?**

Modern Hindi is the literary form of a language known as 'Khadi Boli'. Linguistically it shares a grammatical structure with Urdu and Dakhni. The latter exists in various forms

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throughout Western India, including Gujarat, Maharashtra, Northern Karnataka and Telangana. Hereinafter the word Hindi will be used to mean the literary form of Khadi Boli. This Hindi is called a daughter of Urdu and Urdu itself is called a daughter of Dakhni. This needs some explanation. When Wali Dakhni (also known as Wali Aurangabadi and Wali Gujarati), a famous Dakhni poet, visited Delhi in 1700, he astonished the poets of Delhi with his ghazals. He drew wide applause from the Persian-speaking poets, some of whom, after listening to Wali, also adopted the language of the people, Urdu, as the medium of their poetic expressions. Prominent poets—Shah Hatem, Shah Abro and Mir Taqi Mir—were among his admirers. At that time in Delhi, the court poets were composing in Persian and Arabic. The Hindus were using Braj for their poetry.

So actually poetry was written in Khadi Boli for more than 100 years, only it was known as Urdu! So why did the Hindi author oppose writing poems in Khadi Boli/Hindi? It was a religio-political issue. By then Urdu got established as the language of Muslims and a separate language. The movement to fill up Hindi with Sanskrit words and remove Arabic and Persian words had begun. At the same time filling up Urdu with Arabic and Persian words and removing Sanskrit words also had begun.

However this was mainly in the North West Provinces. Ayodhya-prasad Khatri was in Bihar. Here the situation was different. Khatri himself believed that Urdu and Hindi were one language. In Bihar there was one Keshav Ram Bhatt. He was inspector of schools and brought out a journal called 'Bihar Bandhu' and he appointed Munshi Hasan Ali as its editor. Throughout the Hindi region no magazine came out so regularly and so long-50 years-as

this one did! He brought out another Urdu journal and made Babu Govind Charan as its editor. On the whole the kind of communalism that grew in the wake of 'renaissance' was only in the North West Provinces and Bihar escaped it.

### **The 1857 Rebellion**

**Pradeep Saxena:**

### **1857 and Renaissance**

Pradeep Saxena has published a voluminous (476 pages) book on 1857 and renaissance. It has a huge compilation of information and sources on 1857 from East and West. Pradeep himself admits that under the pressure of material, the analysis has often been brief. Unfortunately it has also been a futile exercise in establishing a relation between the 19th century renaissance and the 1857 rebellion—a relation that does not exist! In the Hindi literature thanks to Ram Vilas Sharma there is an idea that renaissance was part of a democratic revolution against feudalism and imperialism and that the 1857 rebellion was a culmination of this democratic revolution! Nothing can be further from the truth. The so-called 19th century renaissance in the Hindi region was a movement for religious and social reform to prepare the society for the new situation created by British rule and Christianity. None of the protagonists of this renaissance were against the British. On the other hand the rebellion of 1857 was a culmination of local rebellions going against the East India Company for more than 100 years and it failed like all earlier rebellions did against the British. The events had different class bases. The renaissance people were Hindu and Muslim western educated youths who were trying to define a new cultural identity in the new socio-economic situation. All of them opposed the rebellion of 1857 except that they were horrified by the cruelty of British retaliation.

### **Rebellion and Faithfulness:**

### **1857 and Sir Saiyyad Ahmed**

Sir Saiyyad Ahmed Khan was a very faithful employee of the British Raj—first of the East India Company and later of the British Empire. During the 1857 rebellion he saved the Englishmen and women risking his own life. The British also awarded him with the honour of 'Sir'.

Sir Saiyyad belonged to an aristocracy of Muslims in Delhi and was a good historian. He wrote his first book at the age of 20 about old buildings, forts, palaces and people of Delhi and later he created a list of 203 Kings of Delhi from Yudhishtar to the present. He was made an honorary member of the Royal Asiatic Society of Britain.

Within a year of the 1857 rebellion he wrote a book on it and he sent its copies to the Queen of England and a copy to the Viceroy Lord Canning. It gave a detailed analysis of the rebellion and gave a series of advices to the British. The government took it seriously and got it translated into English. It was a good critic of British rule but he also mentioned the good points of British rule.

The other great achievement of Sir Saiyyad was to serve his community of Muslims. After the rebellion the retaliation by the British was so horrendous that it shook the whole community. It was particularly directed against the Muslims.

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Saiyyad went into a great depression. However after his wife died he resolved to serve his community to face the modern world. He started three societies: 1. Scientific Society (1864), 2. British Indian Association (1866) and 3. The Aligarh Mohammedan Oriental College (1877). It later became the Aligarh Muslim University. Thus the rebellion gave rise to a genuine renaissance among the Muslim community!

### **Changes in Hindi-Urdu Region after 1857**

Several important changes occurred after 1857, mainly to correct some glaring mistakes of the Company Raj and some social changes. The first changes were in the army where

Dalits were given preference instead of upper castes. Then there were changes in land revenue systems and the policy of appeasement of Muslims was also started. The two important social changes that came were: a genuine social reform and renaissance in learning science and modern knowledge. And finally 50 years later 1857 became a symbol of India's struggle for independence with the 20th century national movement. And lastly, Indians have inherited the problem of Hindu-Muslim communalism!

### **Concluding Remarks**

This is a review in English about a book in Hindi about the Hindi region of 19th century. The book is

primarily of interest to people from Hindi literature and those Hindi intellectuals who have some interest in the 19th century history. What use is it for the English reader? To begin with, most Indian intellectuals today are bilingual, including Hindi intellectuals. They often talk and write in English also. Then there are many non-Hindi intellectuals who live in the Hindi region, particularly in Delhi but also in other cities in central government services or institutes or industry. There is often heated discussion about North-South among these two groups. It is hoped that an informed discussion will shed some light on these discussions and lead to better understanding. □□□

## **ENCOUNTER WITH A GHOST**

# **Marx in Old Dhaka**

**Abhinu Kibria Islam**

**I**MET MARX YESTERDAY AT Sadarghat. Marx has turned a little black in this summer's sun. Eye-catching frame glasses. He wore a jeans shirt, jeans pant, a black belt around his waist, a small leather bag on his shoulder. He's probably looking for a location on Google Maps in a low-cost tab. Nobody recognised him. Who would believe that Marx's ghost will be seen in Dhaka on his 205th birthday?

Without taking his face off the screen of his tab, he said, "Is it May 5?"

I said, "Yes. Are you here?"

– Shouldn't I be here?

– No, you're all over the world. But I didn't think it would be seen that way.

Marx looked at the map and started walking. I followed. He said softly,

– I'm not getting used so easily.

– That's fine, but are you here?

– Listen, is it the Fourth Industrial Revolution or, as you say now,

living in that era? Artificial Intelligence can make me talk to Jesus on the last supper if I can. And what does it mean for you to come to Dhaka in this day and age? But in my time, I have tried to learn so much about India and Bengal. There was no internet back then. Knowing what I got from government documents, I note that I intended to do more work. You guys get a chance to abuse me as Eurocentric because I can't finish it because there's so much work to be done.

– The enemies will say that.

– It's a bad habit of yours to dismiss what your enemies are saying. Remember that one's strengths and weaknesses can be known from the criticism of the enemy. I'm not everything; could I see for you what was going on here? So I came on my own to clear my mind.

– Wasn't it difficult to come?

– If so, what? You didn't take my job well anymore. A group of people rejected my euro-centric books, my

thinking fits for Europe; I don't go with the development of your economic conditions here. Another group used to worship what I said 150 years ago like the Vedas. None of you made me like you.

– I admit, we haven't been able to properly validate your thoughts.

– Don't say these folklorisations, lower class Han Tan in front of me. You intellectuals have a lot of fun playing with big terms. How many theories have been given by so many people in the world after me, how many terminologies have come, how many revolutions have happened, there has been a counter-revolution, capitalism has changed itself, it has kept itself alive by creating a society that creates equal opportunities for the development of all people? Who still creates surplus value, who takes it? Does the fruits of your labour go to your store? What's the point of having so many theories if the main thing doesn't change? I always acknowledge the importance of the theory. I don't see the important aspects of other people's thoughts. But if these theories don't really work for people, if they don't actually change human society, what's

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the point? You have to look at the world well, deeply, first.

– You're right.

– My friend Engels writes a book looking at the working class situation in England, Lenin writes very nicely about the development of capitalism in Russia at that time. Where is the basic work on your part that your workers are subjected to double exploitation by the foreign bourgeoisie and their ally the domestic capitalists, your cheap labour is added to the GDP of western countries and the capital is increased by the big companies, and they are looking for new blood-sucking fields again? I don't see any change in the basics of your time with 150 years ago.

"But there is no revolution.

– How about this? Could class in itself be class for itself? Can you

put me in a lungi-towel and go down to the farm? You all can't even take the fact that I used to walk around in jeans shirt pant. Don't make me a revisionist! You don't know me; you don't know the people of your country.

– I'll tell you your point to others who really want to make a change.

– What else can you say? Of course, you will announce on Facebook that you have a conversation with Marx. Lately, intellectuals use themselves to prove themselves to be elite. He is busy proving himself a scholar by listening to a few quotations from the capital. Talking to people like you is a waste of time.

– Don't be angry. Where do you go?

– I'm looking for a way to get to Bangabazar. From there, I'll go to

your public library.

– There is no market.

– You mean no?

"It's burned!

"Is the whole market burned down?"

– Yes, it's all over in a few hours of fire.

Marx was silent for a few moments. With a sigh, he asked me, "Well, tell me, why Bangabazar is burnt to ashes?" Why don't the goods made by the same factory, the same workers, burn the foreign showrooms that go to them?

As he spoke, Marx crossed the street in the crowd. I couldn't find Marx as I pushed the bus rickshaw congested jam and came to the other side of the road. He was lost in the crowd of people. □□□

[Translated from original Bengali by Samudra Dutta and Suchetana Chattopadhyay]

## FROM THE PAGES OF HISTORY

### Stalin on Indonesia

[This letter is a part of the lengthy exchanges between Stalin and D N Aidit in relation to the rewriting of the party programme of the Communist Party of Indonesia. (1) Stalin explained the retention of the colonial status of Indonesia after the departure of the Dutch in 1949 so that the country remained a colony of the Netherlands. In the letter below Stalin expatiated on the features of the feudal survivals in Indonesia. These observations have a value for the contemporary semi-colonial and dependent countries including India. Stalin emphasised the necessity of maintaining a distinction between asserting the existence of feudal survivals/semi-feudalism in a country and maintaining that feudalism still existed as a whole. This has an importance for the discussions in India. But it is also of importance to note that in India each modification of the survivals of feudalism (the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the defeat of Mughal landlordism in 1857, the land reforms of the 1950s) have been projected by the reformist left as the termination of the feudal survivals and the victory of capitalism in the rural sector. Stalin's references to the monopoly of land possession under semi-feudalism is also of particular value to India where the 'land reforms' of the 1950s preserved a situation where the top 15% of the landowners hold the same percentage of land as prior to the 'reforms' even though the composition of this 15% has changed: thereby preserving the remnants of feudalism in the countryside. Similarly in the rural relations India experiences the widespread payment of rent in kind to the landlord through sharecropping; the payment to the landlord of labour rent in the form of begar; the peasant, moreover, is subjected to extensive debt slavery as outlined by Stalin. India additionally suffers from the extensive survivals of the pre-feudal caste system as well as the remnants of tribalism. The letter of Stalin confirms the actuality of the extensive survivals of feudalism in contemporary India.

—Vijay Singh, Editor Revolutionary Democracy]

**To  
D N Aidit**

I have received your letter of January 13, 1953. I did not intend to reply to you, as I thought that it was possible to put this off until our next

meeting. But later I learnt that your comrades were expecting an answer. Therefore I have decided to reply without waiting until we meet.

#### 1. The Peasant Question

It is a welcome fact that there are

no longer any disagreements between us on the peasant question. But I think that there should not only be no disagreements between us, but no misunderstandings at all on this question. I have in mind one passage in your letter, which says; "we will make the work among the peasants, that is, the abolishment of feudalism as our main work." This sentence may give rise to misunderstanding, since people may think that in Indonesia there exists full, 100 per cent, feudalism; which, of course, is incorrect. During our talk, I already said that there is not, and cannot be, 100 per cent feudalism in Indonesia, just as there was not in Russia before the October Revolution in 1917, just as there was not in China or other People's Democracies before the beginning of the anti-feudal revolution.

It may be asked, to what extent did feudalism actually exist then in those countries and what exists now in Indonesia? There was, of course, not 100 percent feudalism there, but

there were important and onerous survivals of feudalism. The Russian Communists spoke of the survivals of feudalism when they roused the peasants against the landlords in 1917. The survivals of feudalism were also mentioned during the carrying out of the "agrarian reform". I think that the same thing is taking place in Indonesia; therefore, in drafting the programme, the formula about the abolition of feudalism should be replaced by the formula about the abolition of the survivals of feudalism, as being more exact.

Of course, in some articles and letters the formula of the abolition of feudalism is sometimes used and this does not always arouse objection. When, however, it is a question of drafting a programme, it is necessary to be quite exact and precisely for this reason preference should be given to the formula about the abolition of the survivals of feudalism.

The question arises: what are these survivals of feudalism, what is their essence?

They are, in the first place, the actually existing right of the big landowners to monopoly possession of the land cultivated by the peasants, the majority of the peasants being unable in view of their poverty—to own land and therefore being compelled to rent land from the landowners on any terms ("monopoly right" of the landowners to the land under feudalism).

They are, in the second place, payment to the landlords of rent in kind, which constitutes a considerable proportion of the peasant harvest and which leads to the impoverishment of the majority of the peasants ("obligation of payment in kind" under feudalism).

They are, in the third place, the system of rent in the form of labour on the landlords' estates, carried out with the aid of primitive peasant equipment, which puts the majority

of the peasants in the position of serfs ("Corvée" under feudalism).

They are, finally, a dense network of debts, enmeshing the majority of the peasants, making them insolvent debtors and putting them in the position of slaves in relation to the land-owners ("debt slavery" under feudalism).

The consequences of all these survivals of feudalism are well-known: technical backwardness of agriculture, impoverishment of the majority of the peasants, contraction of the internal market, impossibility of industrialising the country.

Hence, the immediate task of the Communists is to eliminate the survivals of feudalism, to develop the anti-feudal agrarian revolution, to transfer without compensation the landowners' land to the peasants as their private property.

The question arises: does not temporarily renouncing the nationalisation of the land and the division of the landowners' lands among the peasants as their private property mean renouncing socialist prospects in the development of agriculture? No, it does not.

In Russia it was possible and necessary to proceed to the nationalisation of the land by a direct route and not through the division of the landowners' lands, since favourable conditions for this existed there, viz: a) the principle of private property in land did not obtain due popularity and was even undermined among the majority of the peasants owing to the presence in Russia of the peasant commune with its periodical re-divisions of land; b) the peasants themselves, the majority of them, considered that "the land belongs to no one, the land belongs to God, but the fruits of the earth should belong to those who labour on the land"; c) the strongest workers' party in the country, the Bolshevik Leninist Party, which enjoyed confidence among the peasants, stood for nationalisation,

conducted propaganda for nationalisation of the land; d) the strongest peasants' party in the country, the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, in spite of its petty-bourgeois and kulak nature, also stood for nationalisation, and conducted propaganda for nationalisation of the land. All this created a favourable situation for carrying out nationalisation of the land in Russia.

The situation was different in the People's Democracies. These favourable conditions not only did not exist there, but, on the contrary, the principle of private property in land became so rooted in the life of the peasants that they did not conceive of the agrarian revolution in any other form than that of the division of the landowners' estates into private property. As regards the slogan of nationalisation of the land, the peasants' attitude to it was one either of indifference or of great distrust, because they believed that nationalisation of the land means an attempt to take away from the peasant owners the land that they owned. Consequently, it was necessary in those countries to proceed to the nationalisation of the land and to socialist prospects in the development of agriculture, not directly but in a round-about way—through the division of the landowners' lands.

Seven or eight years have passed since the agrarian revolution in the People's Democracies of Europe. What did the division of the landowners' lands lead to there in this period, what results did it produce? It should be noted first of all that the agrarian revolution did not put a stop to the differentiation of the peasantry there, but, on the contrary, has intensified it recently, by dividing the peasantry into three groups the poor peasants (the majority), middle peasants (25-30 per cent), kulaks (5-10 per cent). Further, the poor peasants became convinced that the land alone,

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which they received as a result of the agrarian revolution, was insufficient for any considerable improvement of their material position, that for this they needed also livestock and equipment, sufficient quantities of seeds and agricultural machinery. The peasants, however, experienced a great lack of all these things. Hence the working peasants came to the conclusion that it was necessary to combine the small land holdings of the peasants and their equipment in a single large-scale co-operative farm on a large area of land and to require the assistance of the state in the form of tractors, combines and other agricultural machinery. In other words, the working peasants in those countries took the path of collective farms, the path of socialist development.

As regards nationalisation of the land it is being prepared and beginning to be carried out in those countries in a rather peculiar way, namely, by promulgating a series of separate laws restricting the right to private ownership of land and making diffi-

cult or even altogether prohibiting the sale and purchase of land. This is the path towards nationalisation of the land.

Such are the results of the agrarian revolution and the division of the landowners' lands in the People's Democracies of Europe.

It is this path that China is taking too.

I think that the same thing will happen in Indonesia after the victory of the agrarian revolution there.

### **2. The National Front.**

Of course, if the Communist Party is so weak that it is incapable of simultaneously taking up both the organisation of an alliance of the workers and peasants and of the creation of a national front then it will have to choose between these two social undertakings and concentrate its forces on the organisation of an alliance of the workers and peasants as the more important task. But such a contingency cannot be considered in any way desirable. It would be desirable, on the contrary,

for the Party to gain the possibility of building simultaneously both the alliance of the workers and peasants and the National Front. In this connection it should be borne in mind that the National Front is certainly essential and important for a successful struggle not only against the internal reaction but also against the foreign menace.

Hence my advice is: in organising the alliance of the workers and peasants on the basis of a revolutionary agrarian programme you should take up at the same time the improvement and strengthening of the united National Front so that the Communist Party will acquire in time a leading position within this front.

3. For the rest, your letter does not call for any comment.

With Communist greetings,

J Stalin

February 16, 1953

revolutionarydemocracy.org

*[Letter to D N Aidit on the Question of the Survivals of Feudalism and the National Front in Indonesia]*

## PAKISTAN ARMY'S BRUTALITY

# Bangladesh's Rape Camp Survivors Speak Out

*Thaslima Begum*

**I**T WAS THE SUMMER OF 1971, and the distant murmurs of a war that began months earlier had made their way to Rajshahi in Bangladesh, across the north bank of the Padma River, to Noor Jahan's door. The 14-year-old was playing in the courtyard with her little sister when a loud military truck came to a halt outside the family's farmhouse.

Armed soldiers threw the two girls into the back of the truck, where they discovered several women sitting back to back with their hands tied. "They told us to look down and to remain silent", recalls Jahan, now 65. The truck continued through the small

town, making several stops; each time loading more women and girls into the back as if they were cattle. All the women were sobbing silently, Jahan describes, too afraid to make a sound.

"We had no idea where they were taking us. I watched from the corner of my eye as the marigold fields surrounding our home disappeared from sight", says Jahan. "I remember clutching my sister's hand tightly and being terrified the entire time. We had all heard about the Butcher of Bengal and his men".

The Butcher of Bengal was the nickname given to Pakistan's military commander, Gen Tikka Khan, noto-

rious for overseeing Operation Searchlight, a murderous crackdown on Bengali separatists in what was then East Pakistan, which led to a genocidal crusade during the liberation war that followed.

But Jahan was about to become a victim of another brutal tactic of the Pakistani army. Alongside the killings, soldiers carried out a violent campaign of mass rape against Bengali women and girls, in what many historians believe amounted to a direct policy under Khan's command to impregnate as many women as possible with "blood from the west".

When the truck finally came to a stop, the girls found themselves in military barracks. The next few months were a blur for Jahan, who regularly passed out during her confinement. "We lay there like corpses, side by side. There were 20, maybe 30, of us confined to one room," she

recalls tearfully. "The only time we saw daylight was when the door creaked open and the soldiers marched in. Then the raping would begin."

During the conflict that led to the birth of Bangladesh, military-style rape camps such as the one in which Jahan was held were set up across the country. Official estimates put the number of Bengali women raped at between 200,000 and 400,000, though even those numbers are considered conservative by some.

Though ethnic rape was feature of Partition years earlier, what Bengali women experienced was one of the first recorded examples of rape being used as a "consciously applied weapon of war" in the 20th century. But despite its shocking scale, little remains known about it outside the region.

Within Bangladesh, widespread stigma led to the women being ostracised by their communities, and their horrifying accounts were often suppressed by shame. Today, a plaque on the wall of the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka says it all: "There are not many records of this hidden suffering." Yet in every corner of Bangladesh, there are survivors with terrifying testimonies.

In August 1971, Razia Begum had gone looking for her husband, Abu Sarkar, who had been missing for several days. She wandered anxiously through the abandoned streets of Tejturi Bazar in Dhaka, where Sarkar was a fruit seller, but he was nowhere to be found. Begum turned a corner, when she found herself face to face with a group of soldiers. She tried to run but was struck on the head with a rifle; a scar she still bears.

Begum was dragged to a nearby forest where she was raped repeatedly over a period of weeks. The soldiers were stationed close by and returned at different times of the day. "They tied me to a tree and took turns raping me during their breaks," says Begum, now 78. After they were done with her, the soldiers

threw Begum into a shallow ditch.

A passerby eventually found her and took her to a shelter, which Begum describes as a lost-and-found for women who were abducted during the war. Such makeshift shelters had been set up in districts across the region for the many women who had been abducted and abandoned miles from their home.

"Women didn't often leave the house during that time, so many of us didn't even know our proper addresses," says Begum. Begum's husband tried four different shelters before he found her and took her home. "I don't like to think about what happened," says Begum. "But after all these years, it has been difficult for me to forget. I still have nightmares."

On 16 December 1971, the war came to an abrupt end. Although independence had been won, thousands of Bengali women, such as Jahan and Begum, would be rescued from shelters and rape camps across the country.

Maleka Khan, then secretary of the Bangladesh Girl Guides Association, was tasked with mobilising female volunteers to help with war recovery efforts. But after learning about the discovery of women who had been raped and held captive in underground bunkers near Jahangir Gate in Dhaka, Khan decided to lead the rescue mission herself.

When Khan arrived, she was shocked by what she saw. "There were women who were completely naked," Khan, now 80, says. "They were abandoned in bunkers, where they had been kept and tortured during the war." Khan bought the women clothes and, after helping them out, she describes carefully wrapping them in saris and blankets.

"They were in a state of shock and couldn't speak," says Khan. "Some had their hair chopped off, while others were heavily pregnant. There was an air of disbelief about the whole thing. It was all so horrific."

The women were taken to safe

houses provided by the government of the newly independent Bangladesh. In an effort to integrate rape survivors back into society, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of the nation, granted them the honorific of Birangona (war heroine) and established a rehabilitation programme for the women, of which Khan became executive director.

"The rehabilitation programme provided shelter, counselling and training for survivors, while entrusting medical practitioners with the task of dealing with unwanted pregnancies," Khan says. Two things then happened: temporary legislation to allow later abortions and an international adoption campaign for babies that had been abandoned.

Geoffrey Davis, an Australian doctor who specialised in late-term abortions, was brought in by the World Health Organisation to oversee the high-risk procedures. He described how the Pakistani army would conduct their attacks on towns and villages during the war.

"They'd keep the infantry back and put artillery ahead and they would shell the hospitals and schools. And that caused absolute chaos in the town. And then the infantry would go in and begin to segregate the women," Davis told Bina D'Costa, a professor at the Australian National University, in his last interview before he died in 2008.

"Apart from little children, all those who were sexually matured would be segregated," he said. "And then the women would be put in the compound under guard and made available to the troops."

"Some of the stories they told were appalling – the women had it really rough. They didn't get enough to eat. When they got sick, they received no treatment. Lots of them died in those camps."

"They all had nightmares. You never get over it. A lot of them had tremendous anxiety because we were foreign and they didn't trust anybody who was foreign," he said. "They didn't know what we were going to

do to them ... It was very difficult.”

The doctor also reflected on his conversations with soldiers who had taken part in the rapes but could not seem to understand what all the fuss was about.

“They were in a prison in Comilla and in pretty miserable circumstances and they were saying: ‘What are they going on about? What were we supposed to have done? It was a war!’” said Davis. “The really disgraceful thing is that all these officers were trained in Sandhurst [Royal Military Academy] in England – and that was just not acceptable.”

Today, women in Bangladesh are finding ways to write Birangona women back into a history from which they had been largely erased. *Rising Silence*, an award-winning documentary by the British-Bangladeshi playwright Leesa Gazi, preserves the testimony of some of those still alive.

Uncovering the women’s stories left Gazi asking herself: “How can a woman’s body instigate so much hatred and violence? If we need to shame a family, we go after their daughters. If we need to shame a country, we go after their daughters. It’s the same mindset.”

Rape continues to be deployed in

war as a tool of fear, a military strategy to terrorise communities and destroy their dignity. A recent report by the UN special representative on sexual violence in conflict listed 18 countries where women were being raped in war, and named 12 armies and police forces and 39 non-state actors.

“The repeated failure of the international community to bring perpetrators to account means these horrendous acts continue with impunity,” says Shireen Huq, co-founder of Naripokkho, an activist group leading the fight for women’s rights in Bangladesh. Naripokkho was instrumental in supporting Rohingya rape victims in 2017, when Bangladesh once again found itself on the frontline of a rape epidemic, as more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims crossed its borders to escape genocide in neighbouring Myanmar.

Among them were thousands of women and children who had suffered horrifying sexual violence at the hands of Burmese soldiers. Harrowing details emerged of women being tied to trees and subjected to rape for days, tortured by bamboo sticks and set on fire. Once again, in an echo of past events, many of the women

would also find themselves battling with the stigma of unwanted pregnancies.

“It has been 52 years and we still haven’t received an apology from Pakistan for the horrendous war crimes it committed against the Bengali people,” says Saida Muna Tasneem, Bangladesh’s high commissioner to the UK.

Bangladesh has already succeeded in getting genocide recognition from the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Genocide Watch, and US Congress recently introduced a historic resolution recognising that a genocide occurred in 1971. The government is now lobbying for the UN and international community to recognise that a genocide was committed during the Bangladesh liberation war.

“Lack of recognition remains an open wound for the millions who were directly impacted by the atrocities that took place, many of whom are still alive today,” says Tasneem. “This dark chapter of history has been kept in the shadows for too long.” □□□

[Thaslima Begum is an award-winning journalist with a focus on women, conflict and human rights. Courtesy: The Guardian]

## LETTER

### **Joshimath and Beyond**

Joshimath, a picturesque town nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, is facing a concerning issue—it is sinking under its own weight. The town’s foundation is weak as it sits atop a glacial moraine, leaving it vulnerable to earthquakes. Moreover, the rapid increase in construction activities has made the situation worse, resulting in significant land deformation. Experts attribute this construction boom to the widening of the Char Dham Yatra road and National Highway 7, which are frequented by tourists and used to transport cargo to reach the holy shrine of Badrinath every year. Additionally, the Tapovan Vishnugad hydel project by NTPC Limited has

also contributed to the situation.

The current crisis in Joshimath is a result of prioritising economics over a fragile ecology or the Himalayan ecosystem. The development model that has been followed for years has led to the open plundering of natural resources, ultimately leading to the present situation.

Atul Sati, the convenor-president of Joshimath Bachao Sangharsh Samiti, is spearheading the movement against maldevelopment and advocating for proper rehabilitation of affected people and preservation of the ecology.

‘Moti Bagh’ is an award-winning film by Nirmal Chander that highlights the complex and multilayered overall crisis in Uttarakhand—fraught

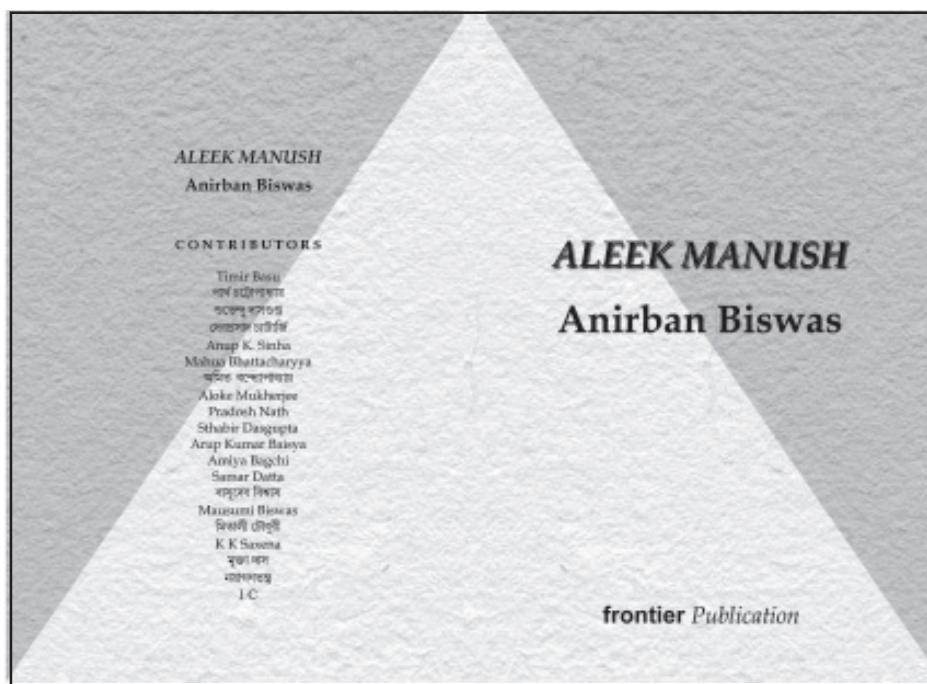
with thousands of ‘ghost villages’ caused by mass migration to cities, the struggle to save farming, the socio-economic rift with Nepali agricultural labourers, all amidst increasing incidents of forest fires and earthquakes in a very fragile Himalayan ecology.

For over five decades, 83-year-old Vidyadutt Sharma has nurtured Moti Bagh, his 5 acre farm in a small Himalayan village. Around him are 7000 ghost villages - a chilling testimony to large scale migration by locals in search of employment. Chronicling the changing landscape in verses of resistance, Vidyadutt Sharma and Ram Singh, his Nepali farmland, plough the fields and keep them alive, hoping to return Moti Bagh to its old glory.

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