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The Call for Peace

MORE THAN A DOZEN FORMER US NATIONAL SECURITY officials have released an open letter calling for a diplomatic end to the Russia-Ukraine war. The call for peace was published last month as a full-page advertisement in 'The New York Times' and organised by the Eisenhower Media Network. But the Biden administration is not listening. They will continue the war and supply weapons as long as the Ukrainians are ready to die. And only the other day Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken said 'there would be no cease-fire' without a peace deal that includes Russia's total military withdrawal. Also, he wants Moscow to share a portion of reconstruction cost. It means continuing conflict. Two parallel lines will never meet. Chinese envoy to Ukraine, however, called on governments to "stop sending weapons to the battlefield" and appealed for peace talks.

The Russia-Ukraine War has been an unmitigated disaster. Hundreds of thousands have been killed or wounded. Millions have been displaced. Environmental and economic destruction have been incalculable. Future devastation could be exponentially greater as nuclear powers creep ever closer toward open war. Blaming it solely on Russia cannot hide the objective conditions created by America and NATO for Russian's action.

The immediate cause of this disastrous war in Ukraine is America -led western conspiracy to encircle Russia and destabilise its economy which prompted Russia to launch its special military operation in February 2022. The plans and actions to expand NATO to Russia's borders served to provoke Russian fears. And Russian leaders made this point for 30 years. A failure of diplomacy led to war. Now diplomacy is urgently needed to end the Russia-Ukraine War before it destroys Ukraine completely and endangers humanity. But it is unlikely for the American military-industrial complex to call it a day. They are minting billions at the cost of Ukrainian and Russian lives.

Russia's current geopolitical anxiety is informed by memories of invasion from Charles XII, Napoleon, the Kaiser and Hitler. US troops were among an Allied invasion force that intervened unsuccessfully against the winning side in Russia's post-World War I civil war. Russia sees NATO enlargement and presence on its borders as a direct threat; the US and NATO see only prudent preparedness.

As the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, US and Western European leaders assured Soviet and then Russian leaders that

NATO would not expand toward Russia's borders. "There would be no extension of... NATO one inch to the east", US Secretary of State James Baker told Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on February 9, 1990. Similar assurances from other US leaders as well as from British, German and French leaders throughout the 1990s confirm this. Russia committed a blunder by believing the western double standard game.

Since 2007, Russia has repeatedly warned that NATO's armed forces on Russian borders were intolerable—just as Russian forces in Mexico or Canada would be intolerable to the US now, or as Soviet missiles in Cuba were in 1962. Rus-

sia further singled out NATO expansion into Ukraine as especially provocative. Behind this provocation was a grand design to cripple Russia economically and militarily.

The Russians made their red lines clear. In Georgia and Syria, they proved they would use force to defend those lines. In 2014, their immediate seizure of Crimea and their support of Donbas separatists demonstrated they were serious in their commitment to defending their interests. Why this was not understood by US and NATO leadership is unclear; incompetence, arrogance, cynicism, or a treacherous mixture of all three are likely contributing factors.

So far, the US has sent arms shipments to Ukraine worth \$37.6 billion, a sum nearly equal to the annual defence budgets of Japan or Italy. War, it's been said, is a racket, one that is highly profitable for a select few.

NATO expansion is a key feature of a militarised US foreign policy characterised by unilateralism featuring regime change and preemptive wars. Failed wars, most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, have produced slaughter and further confrontation, a harsh reality of America's own making. The Russia-Ukraine War has opened a new arena of confrontation and slaughter. □□□

[Contributed]

COMMENT

Talking Unity Again

WHO IS AFRAID OF MUCH publicised opposition unity talk? For one thing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the principal target of opposition—doesn't take it seriously despite their defeat in Karnataka assembly polls. Perhaps they know what ultimately matters is parliamentary privilege which depends on seats won or lost. All their tall talk of ideological and political fight against BJP is sham. Mere blind hate of Narendra Modi is not enough to challenge the authoritarian regime run by him. Unless they attack the corporates that back him nothing will change for the better. Adani is not the only issue that deserves attention. Economic ills are deep-rooted and these parties—opposition parties, have no desire to build sustained mass movement against the government's economic policies. They have been talking of anti-BJP front for quite some time without really explaining how heterogeneous elements, having no radical political outlook, not to speak of socialist ideology will come together under a single banner.

Without a common minimum programme talk of any opposition unity is meaningless. They can talk endlessly more of the same—'how to share seats'. Congress wants the leadership of opposition front so that in any future arrangement it can claim the prime ministerial berth. After its electoral success in Karnataka it thinks a swing in Muslim vote is taking place across the country. So it is a matter of time that they would bounce back in Hindi heartland. And not for nothing Rahul Gandhi during his recent US tour found virtues in Muslim League while describing it as a secular party. Perhaps he was defending their alliance with League in Kerala. In electoral gambling nobody is untouchable. In pre-partition India Hindu Mahasabha teamed up with Muslim League to form government in Sind. Surprisingly he got support from an unexpected quarter—Mayawati. Mr Gandhi spoke about the miserable condition of 'Dalits and Muslims' as if they were better

treated during Congress rule. Bhaujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati otherwise discarded by her own community, agreed with Rahul Gandhi's remarks on Dalits and Muslims in India. But previous Congress governments were no less responsible for the present condition of Dalits and Muslims and the insecurity to their lives and religion. The Congress regime is filled with 'black chapters' of innumerable communal riots and casteist incidents for political and electoral self-interest.

Some people are pinning too much hope on the latest initiative launched by Machiavellian Nitish Kumar to unite opposition parties including Congress for the coming parliamentary polls. This man has a chequered history of indulging in unscrupulous statecraft. Mere blind hate of Narendra Modi is not going to create a situation where opposition parties will be able to form an alternative. They have no economic agenda of their own. All are competing with each other to offer freebies to the poor and don't forget to appeal to caste sentiments for electoral gains.

The idea of anti-BJP anti-Con-

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gress front has been shelved. It has very few takers. Regional parties seem to have realised their limitation. In this opposition unity culture the left has virtually no role to play. They are on-lookers on the sidelines. These social-democrats are so demoralised that they cannot think of fighting even a regional party on their own. So they need Congress clutch for sheer survival even in West Bengal which was once considered a citadel of leftism. Left parties are eagerly waiting to see a Congress-led government at the Centre so that they

could tactically align with it to save their leftism. They have no programme to fight casteist orthodoxy at its roots. As a result they have very little presence in the casteist belt of north India. Even the minority community people have very little faith in their secular noises which are as vague as anything else. Communalism has its economic base but they seldom attack this base and yet they think they are doing a great service to thwart communal aggression engineered by the BJP.

□□□

NOTE**Tale of a Battle***Farooque Chowdhury writes:*

ARTYOMOVSK, NAMED after a Bolshevik, while the Kiev regime names it Bakhmut, has gone through a part of the ongoing Ukraine War for months. Till now, battle in the town was the longest in this war. Russia has won over the town while Zelensky, the leader of the Kiev regime, now finds the town in his heart. This was his pronouncement in Tokyo as he answered journalists to the question: Is the town in Kiev's grip?

The town was subject of military analysis as it found itself within a frame of changes in terms of military significance. Initially, the NATO camp, the sponsor of the war, and its puppet regime in Kiev told: The town is strategically significant. The Kiev leader boldly assured to have a stand on the town, make it a fortress like Stalingrad, never to give up the town, as it opens roads to strategic gains deep in Ukraine.

The NATO-dictated media was circulating news of heroic fight by the Kiev fighters, and dire losses and failures of a Russian private military company (PMC) engaged with battle

in the town. There were stories of fierce resistance, advances, and successes by the Kiev soldiers, and turning of table by the elite unit the Kiev regime sent to the town.

Then, the NATO-media story gradually began changing colours: The town is not that much important strategically, it is tactically important, it is not even important tactically, it carries no significance, the Russian PMC has taken hold of only a corner of the town, the Russian fighters are fleeing away, the town is being used to erode Russian military force in terms of manpower and armaments, the town is being used to gain time to complete preparations for counteroffensive by the Kiev party.

Then, a different type of news began trickling: The Kiev party's master in Washington DC is suggesting giving up the town as it carries no strategic value, the Kiev leaders insisting with their stand to continue with the fight in the town, Ukraine's military leadership prefers withdrawal from the town, the political leadership likes to continue with the tact of fighting in the town, and both the

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political and military leaderships came into unanimous agreement – continue with the fight – showing unity within Kiev leadership. News was coming out: The Washington masters were not happy with the Kiev's tact centering the town – prolonging the fight in the town.

The Russian PMC was claiming gains by small steps in the town, lack of ammunition, advancing each day, sometimes a few hundred meters a day.

Suddenly, the imperialist media began releasing another type of news –Kiev is deploying untrained soldiers, they are tired, outnumbered and out-ammunitioned, only a few buildings are in Kiev soldiers' control.

The Russian PMC announced, at one stage, within days, the town will be fully won.

It was followed by denials by the Kiev leadership. Then, came, the Kiev leader's that heart-feeling– 'Bakhmut is in our hearts'. It took about a week by the NATO-media to indicate Kiev's defeat and Russia's victory in the town.

About this war, Russia is talking

least, publicising least. Moreover, its tact has been changed. Many experts were telling the Kiev leadership is diminishing the Russian force. The Russians kept quiet at that time. Now, they are telling Kiev has lost a core part of its main force in the battle for the town. A few recent reports by a part of NATO-media now corroborate the Russian claim.

In this war, Russia hit Kiev's infrastructure first. Then, it moved to hit trains carrying ammunitions. It, then, hit armaments workshops and ammunition depots. It is telling about terrorist activities by the Kiev regime. This telling is building up arguments for identifying the Kiev leadership as terrorists, and premise to make further hits. Russia is claiming it is not its war, but a special military opera-

tion against the Nazis and terrorists in Ukraine, which carry legal implication. Russia is using less costly weapons, the Soviet-era weapons. Those are to be depleted, as those are from the 1960s and the '70s. It does not matter whether it is tank or bomb or artillery piece. With minimum cost, it has modified near-obsolete bombs into near-smart bombs that are hard to target, that are almost missed by radars, and that go below radar's frame within a very short time. In the area of tactics, there are opposites of usual tact.

Now, a part of the NATO-media has started telling about these Russian features. They are now reporting about tiredness and frustration of the Kiev soldiers, hard drive by Kiev recruiters—door-to-door—to gather

new soldiers, no exemption of Prisoners of War, freed by Russia, from second term of deployment although deploying a POW for second term is not the practice, high rate of depletion of soldiers in Kiev's army units deployed at frontlines, deploying soldiers without training. There are now many similar reports in a part of NATO-media, which are frustrating for the Kiev supporters.

The battle of Artyomovsk indicates Russia's future military victory. A part of the EU/NATO leadership is telling Kiev has already missed its last chance while another part is telling Kiev is going to miss its last chance to snatch victory. There are other sides of the war that also show uncomfortable position of the NATO camp in this war. □ 29.05.2023

TEACHING EVOLUTION TO CHILDREN

NCERT in a Fool's Paradise

Ashok Nag

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is an autonomous organisation set up in 1961 by the Government of India to assist and advise Central and State governments on issues relating to school education. Textbooks issued by NCERT are recommended textbooks in all CBSE schools. In the wake of COVID-19, when schools were closed for a large part of the academic year, NCERT started a rationalisation process of contents of textbooks of class 6 to class 12. This was buttressed by the National Education Policy of 2022 which stated, "The reduction in content and increased flexibility of school curriculum—and the renewed emphasis on constructive rather than rote learning—must be accompanied by parallel changes in school textbooks".¹

For the Class 10 science syllabus,

the chapter 9 was rationalized in the following manner:

- I. Chapter name changed from "Heredity and Evolution" to "Heredity."
- II. Dropped Items:
 - Box item: Charles Robert Darwin
 - Box item: Origin of life on earth
 - Box item: How do fossils form layer by layer
 - Box item: Molecular phylogeny
 - 9.3 Evolution
 - 9.3.1 An Illustration
 - 9.3.2 Acquired and Inherited Traits
 - 9.4 Speciation
 - 9.5 Evolution and Classification
 - 9.5.1 Tracing Evolutionary Relationships
 - 9.5.2 Fossils
 - 9.5.3 Evolution by Stages
 - 9.6 Evolution should not be equated with 'Progress'
 - 9.6.1 Human Evolution

Although NCERT has not expunged the topic "Evolution" from the class 12 syllabus, its elimination from class X syllabus would ensure that majority of children—who do not opt for Biology as a subject of study after class 10—would be deprived of a proper introduction to the concept of Evolution and the science behind it. This is a stratagem that all students of science would easily apprehend. So, no wonder that more than 1800 Indian scientists, science teachers and educators in an open letter expressed their deep concern about this scissoring out of the topic "Biological Evolution" from the science syllabus of class 10. But, as Hamlet would have said, there are "more game plans in a mere syllabus rationalisation" than are dreamt of in the government's pedagogical philosophy.

The debate between scientific community and theologians of all denominations about the propriety of teaching of Evolution in schools has continued till today in many countries, particularly in the USA. As recently as February 2006, the Board of Directors of American Association

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for the Advancement of Science issued a statement on the teaching of Evolution. The statement averred—“Evolution is one of the most robust and widely accepted principles of modern science. It is the foundation for research in a wide array of scientific fields and, accordingly, a core element in science education. The AAAS Board of Directors is deeply concerned, therefore, about legislation and policies recently introduced in a number of states and localities that would undermine the teaching of evolution”.²

Monkey Trial in USA

Although Origin of Species was first published in November, 1859, its impact on the scientific community as well as general public became more pronounced only in the beginning of 20th century. The religious fundamentalists on both sides of the Atlantic started their crusade against Darwinism when they found that this new theory has started influencing their children's education. Enrolment of children in American high schools rose from 0.2 million in 1980 to nearly 2 million in 1920. In Tennessee, the high school population rose from less than 10,000 in 1910 to more than 50,000 in 1925. Most of these new schools included Darwin's theory of Evolution in their curriculum. Ironically, the captains of industry found a resonance of their cut-throat competitive capitalism in the popular interpretation of Evolution by natural selection- that is survival of the fittest. Those who were rallying against excess of capitalism, found in Darwin's theory of natural selection as an apology for such excess. Thus, there were lot of resentments among common people against teaching of evolution in public schools. This got reflected in a spate of anti-evolution legislations in various US states.

One of the earliest legislations in USA on this topic was the Butler

Act, 1925, passed by the Tennessee legislature, which prohibited teaching of any doctrine denying the divine creation of human being as depicted in the book of Genesis- the first book of Hebrew Bible. Defying this law, a high school teacher- John T Scopes started teaching Evolution. He was put on a trial, popularly known as Monkey Trial, for violating the Act. A circus of the trial followed, and Scope was found guilty and a minimum sentence of \$100 fine was awarded. The lawyer defending the state's action against Scopes was William Jennings Bryan, a progressive politician who ran for president three times as the Democratic Party's candidate. Bryan had complete clarity about the danger that Darwin's theory posits to the concept of God. In his New York Times essay of 1922 he wrote, “(if) a man accepts Darwinism, or evolution applied to man, and is consistent, he rejects the miracle and the supernatural as impossible. . . . Evolution naturally leads to agnosticism and, if continued, finally to atheism”.³

Edward L Larson, in his painstakingly researched book “Summer for the Gods”, provides a detailed and balanced account of the Scope trial. He has identified 3 phases of “anti-evolutionism” in USA. The first phase is characterised by the effort for outright banning of teaching of Evolution in high-school biology classroom. The second phase started when a scientific gloss was put on the “biblical account of a six-day creation within the past ten thousand years”.⁴ Two young Earth Creationists, John C Whitcomb and Henry M Morris coined a new phrase “scientific creationism” in their 1961book “The Genesis Flood”.⁵ They posited “Creation science “as an alternative theory to the theory of Evolution and started a new phase. The proponents of “creation

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science” started a concerted movement seeking a balanced treatment of two contending views about origin of human beings. In March 1981, the state of Arkansas legislated an act titled “Balanced Treatment for Creation-Science and Evolution-Science Act.” This Act was declared unconstitutional because it failed the test of constitutionality under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. The third phase began with the idea of Intelligent Design (ID). The proponents of ID argue that natural selection mechanism of evolution cannot explain emergence of extraordinarily complex organs and its intricate components with specialised functions. Like a watch needs a watchmaker, existence of such special organs in a living being, say existence of eye of a Homo Sapiens, must have a conscious designer behind its creation. Thus, proponents of ID aimed to position their views as a scientific alternative to Darwin’s theory of Evolution, which according to them is also a theory and not a proven fact. This would help them to avoid the legal hurdle of teaching ID in public schools. Jay D Waxler pointed out the real motivation behind this movement—bringing the idea of God through a backdoor- “Because intelligent design theory does not necessarily rely on any particular concep-

tion of the designer and does not require belief in any particular biblical story ... intelligent design theory is put forth as science, not religion, and thus as a worthy complement to evolution in the classroom”.⁶

After 100 years of Monkey Trial, there is still no resolution of the debate about the origin of human being. Science can never convince the public at large that, irrespective of the existence or non-existence of God, the theory of evolution has stood its ground on the basis of evidence and not faith. A 2013 survey by Pew Research Center found out that, about a quarter of U S adults (24%) agreed that “humans and other life evolved, but that this evolution was guided by a supreme being”. The same survey found that a third of Americans (33%) reject evolution entirely, saying humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time”.⁷

As compared to general public, the scientist community of USA were divided between believers and non-believers in God. According to a Pew research survey conducted in 2009, four-in-ten scientists (41%) declared that they did not believe in God or a higher power, while the poll of the public found that only 4% of Americans shared this view.⁸

In USA, the opposition to the Theory of Evolution has been mostly from people of Christian faith. But the responses of people of Hindu, Buddhist or Islamic denominations in countries where they represent the majority are no different. However, the conflicts of opinions among the protagonists of two sides in these countries have not been so intense as to leading to a plethora of court cases, like in USA. A plausible reason could be that an overwhelming majority of scientific community belonging to these religious denominations are themselves practitioners

of their respective faiths. They are quite comfortable with the theory of evolution as well as existence of a super-being.

God and Evolution— Hindu Philosophy

A number of surveys apparently suggest that educated Hindus generally accept the notion of “Evolution”. Use of the word “apparent” is deliberate and significant. Swami Nikhilananda, a revered spiritual scholar, has explained the Hindu perception about the concept of Evolution:

“It should however be noted at the very outset that any comparison between the Western and the Indian idea of evolution will be both unfair and fruitless; for they have different premises, different methods, different aims and purposes, and different fields of investigation. Darwin and his followers were solely concerned with the evolution of physical forms and structures, whereas the Hindu philosophers discussed evolution from the standpoint of the soul”. This understanding of Hindu view of Evolution is nothing new. According to Swami Vivekananda, “idea of evolution was to be found in the Vedas long before the Christian era; but until Darwin said it was true, it was regarded as a mere Hindu superstition”. Keshub Chunder Sen, another Hindu reformer was more explicit—“Hindu Avatar rises from the lowest scale of life through the fish, the tortoise, and the hog up to the perfection of humanity. Indian Avatarism is, indeed, a crude representation of the ascending scale of Divine creation. Such precisely is the modern theory of evolution”.

God and Evolution-Islam

Muzaafar Iqbal (2007) in his book “Science and Islam” has observed that the Islamic discourse on science

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has been conducted from two perspectives—the first one can be described as a “discourse in which Islam is used as a justifier of science” and the second one as “Islamisation of Science” or more broadly speaking “Islamisation of knowledge”. The “justifier of science approach” explains why verses in Quran is a way of explaining evolutionary process which is being discovered by the western scientists now.⁹ Although Iqbal and the proponents of “Islamisation of Knowledge” talks about three dimensions of knowledge—“ethical, epistemological and ontological/metaphysical views of science” in their effort to distinguish so-called “western science” from their “Islamic science”, they miss the most important dimension of science—that is the dominant paradigm within which scientific discourse is being carried out. The role of paradigm is most effectively brought out by Stephen Hawking through a hilarious anecdote in “A Brief History of Time”.

A famous astronomer, after a lecture, was told by an elderly lady, who was perhaps under the influence of Hinduism, that his cosmology was all wrong. The world, she said, rests on the back of a giant tortoise. When the astronomer asked what the tortoise stands on, she replied: ‘You’re very clever, young man, very clever. But it’s turtles all the way down’.

As no amount of evidence or lack of evidence would persuade the lady to change her view about the cosmos, so is true even for a top geneticist who believes Cosmos has been created by Allah. Up to a certain level of scientific practice, belief or disbelief or agnosticism may not be of any relevance to a scientist, but it may create a mental block when confronted with observations that are clearly at variance with a religious text like Quran. Iqbal’s book traces a

number of such issues-like Stem Cell research, Organ Transplantation, In Vitro Fertilisation etc. which challenged Muftis to issue fatwa on these subjects in accordance with their interpretation of Quran and Sunnah. Such desperate attempts to cut the modern foot to fit into a mediaeval shoe is destined to fail at certain point of time. For example, if fertilisation of human being can be carried out outside a womb, a distinct possibility in near future, what would happen, a sufficiently long period ahead, to the Human Gender. This author strongly believes that marriage will be an antiquated term in the next hundred years. A large number of verses in Quran will become obsolete in that kind of society.

What Next

In this age of internet and social media, NCERT’s effort at rationalisation of syllabus by way of keeping out one of the most important scientific achievement of 19th Century from the reading list of young children is like “tilting against the windmill”. It needs to be understood by the framers of syllabus for NCERT that today when AI is coming of age, manicured textbooks of NCERT types are the least important source of knowledge to the children.

Science is always a work in progress. Internalisation of scientific research outputs of a given time is an ongoing activity of any science research programme. Today, apart from historians of science, nobody reads the original writings of Newton or Galileo. But their findings have been completely internalised and current researchers take off from the knowledge base left to them. Every scientist knows that truth is always elusive, a beacon to be reached—that is neither too far nor too close. Thus, certainty is the death of science.

Theology is just opposite of the science. People still have to read Vedas/Gita/Genesis/Bible/Quran to

understand what God or Allah has revealed. There has been no more addition to knowledge after these texts became available to the mankind. That is why God is always a static and frozen entity, even if it had created the Universe.

Notes

1. Expert committees set up for finalizing new syllabus adopted the following 5 criteria for rationalization of existing syllabus.
 - a. Avoidance of overlapping of content amongst different subjects in the same class.
 - b. Avoidance of similar content in the lower or higher class in the same subject.
 - c. Reduction in difficulty levels.
 - d. Weeding out contents that are easily accessible to children from other sources and self-learning is recommended.
 - e. Weed out contents that are not relevant in the present context.
2. American Association for the Advancement of Science, Board of Directors. (February, 2006), Statement on the Teaching of Evolution
3. quoted in God vs. Darwin The War between Evolution and Creationism in the Classroom by Mano Singham , page 154)
4. See Larson page 270 Chapter Afterword
5. Lorence G Collin’s (2018) article on this topic gives “eight different bits of evidence, using good science that demonstrates that a global flood never happened during the Paleozoic and Mesozoic Eras, and shows that Moses did not use the knowledge of modern science to write his story about Noah and the flood.
See God vs. Darwin The War between Evolution and Creationism in the Classroom by Mano Singham for details of various court cases on this issue.
6. Jay D. Wexler, Darwin, Design, and Disestablishment: Teaching the Evolution Controversy in Public Schools, in 56 Vanderbilt Law Review 751 (2003). Available at: https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty_scholarship/1627
7. Darwin versus Religion 5 facts about evolution and religion BY David Masci available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/10/30/5-facts-to>

about-evolution-and-religion/
#:~:text=The%20rejection%20of
%20evolution%20by,they%20see
%20as%20biblical%20truth.

8. See Pew Survey titled Science and Religion(2020) <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/08/26/on-the-intersection-of-science-and-religion/>
9. According to Islamic scholars, Evolution is a reality but it was not through

natural selection per Darwin but under the guidance of a divine power. For example, consider the following two lines: with water did We create every living thing (Holy Quran, Chapter 21, Verse 31)

And surely, we created man from dry ringing clay made from stagnant blackish mud (Holy Quran, Chapter 15, Verse 27)

These two verses have been interpreted as: This picture of water and clay, presented by the Holy Quran, seem to be consistent with the mixture of inorganic materials becoming organic, which was followed by a dry stage to allow the organic material to develop irreversible strength.

[*Quranic Concept of Evolution*
Author: Atif Munawar Mir]

REWRITING HISTORY

NCERT and Mughals

S Irfan Habib

PEOPLE ARE AGAIN IN THE midst of a perpetual and intractable debate that revolves around the past. A section of Indians had always been ragged with the way Indian history, particularly Mughal history, had been written and taught in schools. The RSS and its cohorts are known for their pseudo-nationalistic perspective of the past, in which a section of fellow citizens have always been foreigners. They are conveniently dubbed as the progeny of the medieval Muslim rulers, while the heterogeneity and diversity of Indian Muslims are expediently ignored by these semi-literate propagandists. There is hardly a minuscule minority that can claim any linkage with the Turko-Afghan or Persian and Arab nobility of those times. The majority of Muslims are Indians who crossed over to Islam for diverse reasons—including some forced conversions, of course.

However, the discomfort of the present political dispensation with this history, both medieval and modern, is more of a toolkit to brighten their present political fortunes. Just keep the country polarised in the name of religion, spread lies about the past and reap the windfall of electoral dividends. This delusion about the perpetual religious conflict over “700 years of Muslim rule” works like an opiate for some people, where daily miseries of life are forgotten and the relentless demonising

of a section becomes a national pastime. During the past few years, a big chunk of the population has internalised the hate that is spewed by spreading falsehoods about history, mainly through WhatsApp networks. Now the medieval past has been reduced merely to a Hindu-Muslim conflict zone, where the majority Hindus were brutalised by the barbaric Muslim rulers.

Sadly, even India’s history of the past 200 years, including the freedom struggle phase, is being fabricated afresh, subverting the inherited legacy of composite nationalism. The “new history” stresses more on the disagreements among national leaders, like Jawaharlal Nehru vs Sardar Patel, Subhas Bose vs Gandhi and less about their combined struggle against the British. Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Bose and others were together to challenge the communal forces led by Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League. The NCERT had the temerity to remove Maulana Azad from the list of senior leaders mentioned in a political science book of class XI. There is no other way to explain this mischief except for the communal hatred that couldn’t spare even Maulana Azad. Sadly, he fell victim to divisive mentality, a malaise he fought all his life.

Coming back to the Mughals first, the NCERT deletions are merely the symptoms of a larger and deeply rooted disease that had crept into

the society. There always had a fringe that believed in a past, particularly medieval past, as a period when the Hindus were traumatised by the Mughal state. There were people like P N Oak who fabricated a past by creatively imagining it purely on the basis of a religious divide. He used the same hateful vision to look at the built heritage as well, where historical facts had no place, and almost all monuments of the medieval Muslim period became suspect. But now, some of the new-generation right-wingers are savvy and crafty and can smartly put together a history that conforms to the BJP’s political needs. Quite a few of them are not even trained historians but that hardly matters, even an economist can write an astute history that aligns with the ruling party’s political ideology. Here truth, facts and skill go for a toss. Thus, the interventions of the institutions like NCERT or the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) must be seen within this skewed and ideology-driven perspective.

When you decide to look at the past from the above-mentioned perspective then you end up with a disconnected history, with huge and vital gaps in the historical narrative. For example, if your ideological compulsions push you to chip away at Mughal court accounts substantially, then you deprive the coming generation of not only Mughal history but also of the profound legacy of Todarmal, Tansen, Man Singh, Birbal and so many others. Maharana Pratap’s valour cannot be narrated without Akbar and the battle of

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Haldighati will have no place in history either.

Moving ahead to Aurangzeb and his war of succession against his brothers, which included Dara Shukoh, who, as people know, was a scholar, who got Upanishads translated into Persian, he also had a liberal image, as liberal as one can imagine in the 17th century. However, Aurangzeb was supported by most of the Rajput princes who did not perceive this as a religious battle. But it did not matter, the Rajput princes and also a large number of Muslim nobility saw Aurangzeb as a more competent military leader. All of them were concerned about protecting their interests. It is the communal polarisation today which perceives them as Hindu and Muslim. This blatant communal divide is clearly aimed to instil hate amongst fellow citizens for political advantage. Like Maharana Pratap, it will be difficult to celebrate Shivaji's courage and tenacity to fight against Aurangzeb, they are all part of the connected history, so pick and choose will destroy the narrative of the past.

Even when one goes back to ancient history, one finds that Ashoka is also not spared by the proponents of the Hindutva narrative, who are blatantly attacking him for weakening India by enunciating non-violence as a follower of Buddha. Nehru is dragged into the controversy as well; it is proposed that after independence historians were encouraged to further build up the legend of Ashoka the Great to provide a lineage to Nehru's socialist project. It is difficult to explain how scholars in European, Australian and American universities were roped into this project by Nehru. This is the history of New India based on fakery and some imagined facts.

The institutional interventions by NCERT and ICHR are all motivated by this prejudice and propaganda-driven agenda.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak defined the identity of an Indian inclusively in one of his early speeches. While delivering a lecture in Ahmadnagar on May 31, 1916, Tilak dealt with the question 'Who is an Alien', or to put it in today's context one can say who is the 'other' whom people can't consider a nationalist. Tilak explained it so clearly when he said that "The Muhammedan kings who ruled here at Ahmednager (I don't call Muhammedans aliens) came to and lived in this country and at least desired that local industries should thrive. The religion may be different." All those who are bent upon spewing hatred in the name of religious otherness, Tilak continued and said "Alienness' has to do with interests. Alienness is certainly not concerned with white or black skin. Alienness is not concerned with religion".

For him, religious differences were a minor issue when it came to defining national identity. He said about a fellow Indian, "He may not perhaps go with me to the same temple to pray to God, perhaps there may be no intermarriage and inter-dining between him and me. All these are minor questions". He did not merely say that "Swaraj is my birth right" but also categorically explained who constituted this Swaraj of his dreams.

This inclusivist vision of history was also espoused by several other prominent nationalists like Subhas Chandra Bose, who is venerated so fervently by the present regime. Of course, he deserves that veneration, but one also needs to know his understanding of Indian history. It will be insightful to look at the views of Bose about the past, expressed so categorically in his book *The Indian Struggle*.

While commenting on the coming of the Muslims, he writes that "with the advent of the Mohammedans, a new synthesis was gradually worked out. Though they did

not accept the religion of the Hindus, they made India their home and shared the common social life of the people-their joys and their sorrows." He stresses the syncretism of the culture that developed during this phase, a culture which is being erased in the ongoing revision of history. He continued to write:

"Through mutual cooperation, a new art and a new culture was evolved which was different from the old but which nevertheless was distinctly Indian. In architecture, painting, music-new creations were made which represented the happy blending of the two streams of culture."

Bose had something special to say about Akbar and the Mughals, who are under severest attack these days. He wrote:

"The great merit of Akbar was not only the political unification of the country, but what was perhaps more important, the working out of a new cultural synthesis-in order to reconcile the new stream of culture with the old-and evolve a new culture. The state machinery which he built up was also based on the whole-hearted co-operation of the Hindu and Mohammedan communities."

This goes on to establish the point that the Mughal rule was a collaborative project of the Hindu and Muslim nobility, despite the occasional communal discord that cropped up in their relationships, affecting governance.

This is the idea of a composite India which was passed on to people as an inheritance by India's iconic nationalists, something people need to respect while they go through the exercise of rewriting history textbooks. There can be no disagreement with the need for revision of history textbooks but that should not be at the cost of erasure, where huge sections of the past disappear merely because of religious/sectarian prejudice. □□

[Courtesy: *thewire.in*]

OBAMA AND KISSINGER

Nobel Peace Awards and Western Hypocrisy

Bharat Dogra

AN IMPORTANT FEATURE of the western political establishment has been that while all the time speaking about world peace it has been extremely destructive in terms of its violence towards the Global South in particular, and entire nations (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Vietnam, to mention only a few) were destroyed and democratically elected governments of many countries have been toppled, replacing them with dictatorships including those notorious for torture, while speaking of the commitment of USA-led western establishment to peace and democracy. Western political leaders generally avoid speaking against this although this has claimed several million human lives. On the contrary those who played leading roles in this alarming injustice were rewarded in many ways and continued, many even now continue, to lead highly comfortable and increasingly prosperous life after committing very serious crimes.

In this context it is instructive to examine the case of two Nobel peace prizes being awarded to such top leaders whose actions had the main responsibility for the entirely avoidable deaths of a very large number of innocent people, including children. As these are supposed to be top awards in the decisions regarding which a lot of thinking and consultation are involved, the selection of those responsible for many, many innocent deaths for these awards can be an appropriate case-study for understanding the schizophrenic trends in western thinking regarding peace, and such understanding is important as a first step

for resisting and avoiding such tendencies.

The first such case is that of Barack Obama, the USA President during 2009-2017, which is particularly interesting as he appears to be so extremely sincere when speaking about his commitments to peace and democracy. Yet the undeniable fact is that in Libya, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen and several other countries he shared a very important part of the responsibility for thousands of innocent people killed. His years in office saw the relentless pursuit of the same highly distorted and questionable so-called 'war on terror' that has already taken around a million lives in direct conflict since it was initiated in 2001 (and around 4.5 million lives if indirectly caused deaths are included), a significant number of these during the tenure of Obama. During his presidency 26,171 bombs are estimated to have been dropped by the USA in 2016 alone, or 72 per day.

Obama has contributed more than anyone else to killing of people in distant areas by drone attacks. It appears from published accounts that during a period on almost every Tuesday he used to take a personal interest in selecting the victims of the next drone attacks. While some terrorists were hit, the number of innocent or unintended people dying or getting very painfully injured and disabled in such attacks in many countries was much higher. In the case of Operation Haymaker in northeast Afghanistan, official reviews indicated that 90% of those killed in US drone attacks appeared to be unintended victims. Even people in countries, like Somalia

and Yemen, not officially in conflict with the USA, were targeted. of people across the globe".

Obama spoke publicly for a world free of nuclear weapons, then went on to speed up additions to nuclear arsenal during the years of his presidency, with bigger budgets for nuclear warheads. With allies France and Britain he destroyed Libya, turning a country with high human development indicators into a land of endless internal strife, with adverse impacts on several neighbouring countries as well. There was carpet bombing, mass graves, children dying in large numbers and Obama openly told big lies to justify it all. In Egypt a democratically elected government was toppled, to be replaced by a military dictatorship, justified by Obama officials as restoration of democracy. Under the watch of the first African-American President, as Nick Turse reported in the Nation, in 2014 the US carried out 674 military activities across Africa, nearly two missions per day, an almost 300% increase in the number of annual operations, exercises and military to military training activities since the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) was established.

It was during the Obama presidency that the roots of the present Ukraine crisis were established with the notorious coup and removal of a democratic government in Ukraine in 2014 (as well as other provocative actions nearer to Russian borders), and pivot-to-Asia policy leading to increasing aggression against China was initiated.

Secondly, let us consider the case of the Nobel Peace Prize for Henry Kissinger who dominated USA foreign policy during 1969 to 1977 in the Presidential administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. He was appointed National Security Advisor in 1969 and Secretary of

State in 1973. It has been widely documented since then that he played a very important role, likely to be a crucial and decisive role, in initiating and supporting in a big way anti-democratic, illegal, violent, catastrophic actions and activities in several nations which resulted in deaths of a very large number of people, including democratically elected, highly popular national leaders like Allende in Chile and Mujibur Rehman in Bangladesh.

Although documentation for this is spread over hundreds of articles and declassified pieces of information, perhaps the most detailed and most discussed documentation for this is available in a book ' Trial of Henry Kissinger' written by Christopher Hitchens which is written almost as a document which can be used for trial in a court of law.

Of course there is in addition a lot of other documentation, all the more so in the specific context of the tragic events in Chile, Cambodia and Laos, Bangladesh and several other countries of the Global South which suffered from coups, killings and carpet bombings unleashed by the arbitrary, ill-reasoned decisions taken by US foreign policy under the watch of Kissinger during 1969-77. Recently new evidence has become valuable of the extreme destructiveness of

Kissinger's policies in Cambodia.

Documentation is also available on opposition to his policies by principled USA officials who were close to local realities and opposed the whimsical decisions of Kissinger taken in cruel violation of the advice of on-the-ground US officials. As Prof. Greg Grandin of New York University wrote, "A back of the envelope count would attribute three, may be four million deaths to Kissinger's actions, but that number probably undercounts his victims".

Again in Cambodia and Laos over 3500 carpet bombings caused up to half a million deaths but in addition in Cambodia this indirectly helped the brutal communist regime of Pol Pot to come to power and unleash its own mass deaths. In Bangladesh the immediate results of Kissinger dominated policies led first to the killing of nearly 2.5 million persons in genocide by Pakistani forces and its collaborators in 1971 (plus emergence of 10 million displaced refugees), and later to the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the popular President, his family members and close colleagues in a coup in 1975. In addition authoritarian military regimes installed by this coup kept their atrocities and repressions going for nearly their 21 years after this.

What makes the conduct of Kissinger even more terrible is that he ignored repeatedly the sane and sage advice of important regional US diplomats. During the ongoing genocide in Bangladesh in 1971 for example, the Dacca based US Consul General and the US Ambassador to India are known to have pleaded repeatedly for stopping the US support for the genocide, but Kissinger and Nixon disregarded them and their advice and went ahead with their total support for 'good friend' Yahya Khan, who was overseeing the genocide from his base in Pakistan. He made fun of those who expressed anguish at the massacre of 'Bengali Hindus'.

In the case of the Nobel peace prize for Obama, the prize committee can try to take refuge in the fact that the prize was given at a time when the violent deeds of the President were not yet revealed for the greater part (although the question still remains regarding why the prize was given at such an early stage), but in the case of Kissinger even such a fig leaf is not available.

A highly worrying aspect is that when such crimes against humanity go unpunished and in fact are rewarded with the top most prizes, then this is likely to pave the way for even worse crimes in future. □□□

CORONATION CEREMONY

Sengol—the Symbol of Hindu Nationalism?

Ram Puniyani

ON MAY 23, 2023, PRIME Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the new Parliament building. This building is far more chic than the old building. Most of the opposition parties boycotted the inaugural event. Their argument was that this building was to be inaugurated by President Draupadi Murmu. According to Ar-

ticle 79 of the Constitution, Parliament consists of the President, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. Thus, the President is a part of the Parliament. Keeping him out of the event is indicative of Modi's tendency to put himself at the centre of everything on him.

Two aspects of this grand event are important. First, a large number

of sadhus, pandits and heads of many monasteries participated in it. Lord Shiva and Ganesha were challenged and Hindu rituals were performed. It was definitely going to damage the secular character of the country and the Constitution. Modi accepted the sceptre called Sengol from representatives of Thiruvaduthurai Adhinam, a Shaiva monastery near Mayiladuthurai in Tamil Nadu. Accompanied by representatives of various subordinates of Tamil Nadu and the Lok Sabha Speaker, the Prime Minister installed Sengol in the new building.

It is said that this Sengol is a symbol of transfer of power. This is part of the tradition of the Chola kings, in which the new king was presented with Sengol as a symbol of his powers. According to tradition, the king used to get his powers from Almighty God through priests. The Prime Minister wants to revive this 'glorious tradition'.

People are also told that at the time of the country's independence, Lord Mountbatten handed over this sengol to Jawaharlal Nehru as a symbol of transfer of power. This is a fabricated story. In a tweet, Jairam Ramesh of the Congress said, "A royal sceptre, conceived by a religious institution in the then Madras province and created in Madras, was handed over to Jawaharlal Nehru in August 1947... But there is no documentary evidence that Mountbatten, Nehru or Rajaji described this sceptre as a symbol of transfer of power from Britain to India. All claims to this effect are pure bogus. These claims are the brainchild of only a few, first spread through WhatsApp and now propagated through the government's bhat media outlets. Two learned scholars with deep knowledge of Rajaji's life and his works, whose credentials have never been questioned, have expressed surprise at this claim."

Certainly, Nehru would have accepted this visit of the Shaiva Math pandit, respecting him and his feelings. But instead of keeping it in his Prime Minister's Office, he kept it in the museum of Allahabad. All the big leaders of the freedom struggle, including Nehru, had no faith in monarchy and kings. He believed in democracy in which the people hand over power to their leaders through general elections. In a democracy, the people rule and the source of power is neither God nor the pundits and priests who claim to be his representatives. India's system of

governance is based on democracy. A fundamental element of democracy is that the ruler (prime minister or president) is not a king accountable to the religious guru (rajpurohit). They are elected representatives accountable to the people and the Constitution.

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam founder C K Annadurai had written a scathing article against projecting Sengol as a symbol of power. "You (Nehru) know that he had to get rid of it (Sengol) to pave the way for the dawn of democracy. The heads of the monasteries are scared. They fear that you will do what you have learned. Therefore, they can also gift you gold or even a sceptre studded with Navratnas to protect themselves."

Giving primacy to Hindu rituals is part of the BJP-RSS agenda. They want to impose Hindu nationalism on the country by weakening the pluralistic character of the country. This Hindu nationalism is, in fact, based on the rules and traditions established by Hindu kings. This is what his thinkers have called Hindu nationalism. It is no coincidence that the new Parliament building was inaugurated on the 140th birth anniversary of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Savarkar is the pioneer of Hindu nationalism, who presented it in his book "Hindu Nationalism or Who Is a Hindu". The book describes religion as the basis of nationalism and is the first to openly advocate the "two-nation theory".

It is clear from the spectacle that Modiji has done that he wants to keep faith above the Constitution. "Today, India is once again turning to the glorious stream of ancient times," he declared. There used to be a dictatorial king who ruled a society steeped in caste and gender hierarchy. The rules and beliefs of that "glorious period" are defined in Manusmriti. The book was burnt

publicly by Ambedkar. According to Ambedkar, in ancient times, due to such books, Dalits and women had a secondary status in society.

Sangh ideologues are describing this event as glorious. According to him, it revives the glorious tradition of Hindus in which religion was above politics and it was the duty of the king to follow the path shown by religion and also that Sengol represents this tradition. The government says that it symbolizes the continuity of the sniper tradition and embodies the sacred sovereignty and rule of religion. According to Ram Madhav of the RSS (Indian Express, May 29, 2023), "The historicity of Sengol at the time of its installation in the new Parliament building cannot be a matter of debate, but the issue is that it is 'apocalypse' and symbolises the supremacy of moral and spiritual supremacy over political power in India's civilisational tradition."

He further writes, "In the civilisational tradition of India, kings and emperors were never considered the highest incumbents. Whatever the emblem they were wearing—crowns, sceptres or golden circles—the priest of the court reminded the kings at the time of their coronation that religion is the supreme authority.

In a way, this event is another step towards the establishment of a Hindu Rashtra. It also shows how insatiable Modi has an insatiable desire to be a king. The event presented the values of monarchy in modern costumes and justified the crushing of democratic values in the name of religion. In the name of Christianity, one can see it in America and in the name of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. At the time when the grand inauguration programme was going on, the police were brutally manhandling the democratically agitating wrestlers. This is the government's commitment to democracy.

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CENTRALISATION AND DECENTRALISATION

Are Small States Desirable?

I Satya Sundaram

IS THE DEMAND FOR SMALL states justified? There is no consensus on this issue. The issue is important from more than one point of view. There is of course a broad agreement that the framework of centralised economic planning and governance on federal principles could not adequately provide a solution to the serious challenges of inter-state disparities, unemployment and mass poverty. Because of globalisation, the issue has become much more complex.

The poor, particularly in the poorest regions, are likely to get further marginalised, more so when some regions continue to stagnate and suffer. Of course, often a case is advanced for small States more for political reasons than for other reasons.

The State, big or small, requires economic viability which depends on the State's ability to:

1. match revenue and expenditures after meeting of debt servicing of the Centre's loans;
2. raise financial resources adequate enough to maintain minimum standards of service;
3. increase the revenue resources for ensuring a satisfactory rate of growth; and

4. improve revenues so that there is no too much dependence on central transfers which may lead to reverse flow of resources in the form of interest payments and loan repayments.

Of course, linguistic fanaticism and provincialism should be discarded to safeguard unity, strength and national security. A case is advanced for small States as they can bring people close to administration and ensure eradication of corruption. Also, it is easy to ensure rational allocation of resources, improve cost effectiveness, accountability and resource mobilisation.

In a State like Uttar Pradesh, governance has become very difficult. It is too big to succeed. Uttarakhand was spliced from UP in November 2000. It has been making satisfactory progress. Experts say the creation of smaller States is a necessary condition for better governance.

In his treatise, *Thoughts on Linguistic States*, Ambedkar argued "one State to have such preponderating influence in the Centre is a dangerous thing." He also said: "The Commission in designing linguistic States has created a consolidation of the North and balkanisation of the

South. It is necessary that this situation must be rectified. The only way is to divide the States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh."

There are some who believe mere division of a State does not ensure progress. The formation of Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand offer some lessons. Jharkhand with vast natural resources accounted for 70 percent of the GDP of Bihar before 2000. Yet, it remains one of the most backward States of the country. It also suffers from political instability. Chhattisgarh witnessed the largest displacement of tribal population in recent times.

The creation of smaller States is justified as it leads to decentralisation. But, decentralisation is not properly understood. If the State Government creates more districts, the general belief is that it would ensure more decentralisation. Even when there are more districts, the State may opt for centralisation. The fact is, there will be decentralisation only when the local bodies are empowered functionally and financially. In Andhra Pradesh, the panchayats have been pulverised. Yet, the Government says it has promoted decentralisation!

It may be concluded that what ultimately matters is not the size, but the intrinsic merits of the administrative unit.

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RIVALLING THE FRENCH NEWWAVE

Mrinal Sen 100

Devarsi Ghosh

THIS YEAR MARKS THE centennial of Mrinal Sen, one of India's most brilliant Marxist filmmakers. His work combined a formal inventiveness that rivaled that of the French New Wave with an unflinching commitment to attacking the hypocrisies of India's elite.

A hundred years have passed since the birth of Mrinal Sen, one of India's most brilliant and prolific postwar filmmakers. He was born in Faridpur, a city in what is now Bangladesh but was, at the time of Sen's birth in 1923, part of the British-ruled Bengal Presidency, a subdivision of the empire in

India. In the forty-seven years (1955–2002) in which he was active, Sen produced twenty-eight kaleidoscopic feature films. Each ran roughshod over barriers of time and geographical space. Poverty, hunger, class struggle, anger, revolution, and middle-class complacency haunted his films.

With these subjects, Sen developed and unleashed a kinetic, hypermodern aesthetic. This cinematographic language combined filmed fiction with documentary and

newspaper headlines, creating new ways of storytelling that went beyond classical Hollywood-style narrative. Sen's innovativeness explains why he became popular in Europe, where the experimental films of Jean-Luc Godard and the fairy-tale-like parables of *Éric Rohmer* were all the rage, but not in the United States. The great Hollywood films of the postwar era focused on stories of individual triumph and embraced an act-based structure that Sen eschewed. While his contemporary Satyajit Ray, author of classics such as *The Apu Trilogy* (1955–59), *Jalsaghar* (1958), and *Mahanagar* (1963), worked masterfully within the confines of traditional cinema, earning him praise from establishment figures such as Martin Scorsese, and, eventually, an honorary Oscar, Sen continued to work on the margins.

As evidence, look no further than a scene from Sen's anthology film, *Calcutta 71* (1972). In one scene, the director takes the audience to a party full of uptown liberals waxing eloquent about India's burning political issues in the 1970s: poverty, corruption, unemployment, and so on. Leading the pack is a political figure who laments about the 1943 Bengal famine, widely attributed to Winston Churchill's policies, which claimed millions of lives. But, it was the famine that helped this person grow his business as a black marketeer. Later, this same profiteer drunkenly argues for revolution. Meanwhile, striking workers have forced his factories to sit idle. What, the scene raises the question, does politics mean to a middle class that can throw around the word revolution so casually while exploiting workers?

Leftist ideas and a concern for the oppressed masses made it hard for him to translate his cinema into something that a primarily middle-class theater going Bengali audience were comfortable with.

All the while a rock band performs live. The music is intercut with images of the famine and on-screen text: "unemployment, degeneration, hunger, betrayal of our ancestors." Finally, the charade is interrupted by an explosion. From the darkness emerges the disembodied head of a communist activist who was shot dead by the police. He announces that he is dead before adding:

Can you guess why I am here? I have come to tell you that I know who murdered me. But I won't tell you their names. I want you to find out who they are. You might experience discomfort in the process, but you will not stay so comfortable, so indifferent.

The roots of such storytelling lie in Sen's past. Unlike Ray, Scorsese, and most great filmmakers, Sen came to filmmaking later in life. He was first an activist, then an intellectual, followed by a short stint as a film critic, after which he eventually managed to find a gig as a director.

Sen's father Dineshchandra was a lawyer closely associated with Indian freedom fighters. His son had his coming of age as a student in the teeming metropolis of Calcutta, now Kolkata. There he witnessed firsthand the savagery of the Bengal famine. While riots and World War II raged on, Sen associated with the Communist Party's cultural wing and locked himself up in the library. During the war years he discovered Rudolf Arnheim's influential *Film as Art* and turned his attention to aesthetics and film theory. In 1945, Sen published the article "The Cinema and the People" in a magazine rolled out by the Indo-Soviet Friendship Society. By the early 1950s, his first book on cinema, about Charlie Chaplin, was out.

It would take Sen almost a decade and a half to really find his groove as a director. Leftist ideas and a concern for the oppressed masses

made it hard for him to translate his cinema into something that a primarily middle-class theatre-going Bengali audience were comfortable with. It was only after the political ferment of the 1970s hit India, creating by a massive distrust in the state, rampant corruption, and the rise of militant communism, that Sen's career took off. The tumult of the world brought out the best in him.

Sen's most notable films in his early period include *Baishey Shravana* (1960), *Akash Kusum* (1965), and *Bhuvan Shome* (1969). *Baishey Shravana* literally means the twenty-second day of the Shravana month in the Bengali calendar, August 7, 1941, according to the Gregorian calendar — the day Rabindranath Tagore died. Sen upends the meaning of this day in Bengali cultural life by making it the wedding date of a doomed rural couple. Plagued by famine and extreme poverty, the man and woman drift apart until the latter decides to take her own life on the anniversary of their wedding.

In *Akash Kusum*, Sen turns to the story of an urban couple. A young man wants to get rich quick and conveniently falls in love with a rich woman. But this romance comes at a cost: the man feels compelled to present himself as a successful entrepreneur and fabricate a whole life story. The lies compound and eventually their weight becomes too much for him to bear. The film is typical of Sen's oeuvre insofar as it depicts individuals caught in dilemmas that are the product of their contradictory ambitions. In one scene, a friend tells the protagonist, "Don't you see how big business is dominating? You cannot make it as a small businessman. Those days are gone." The hero disagrees: "Don't talk like a communist."

Among the film's highlights is Sen's use of freeze frames and still photographs. These experiments get

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intense in *Bhuvan Shome*, which ended up being a commercial success. Made in Hindi, a decision that guaranteed a wider market in India, the film is a quirky drama about a hoity-toity bureaucrat who rethinks his life after meeting a young rural woman. Although a gentle film by Sen's standards, his most well-known techniques were born here: use of documentary footage, documentary-like narration and commentary, and animation, all interspersed with freeze frames.

The film's success gave Sen leeway to make cinema as he pleased, just when Naxalism, a Mao-inspired militant guerilla movement, had taken off in Bengal before spreading to the rest of India in the 1970s. Sen figured he could use the skill set he had developed so far to become a chronicler of the movement. This led to his second period that resulted in the critically acclaimed Calcutta trilogy, which includes *Interview* (1971), *Calcutta 71* (1972) and *Padatik* (1973).

In these films, Sen is at his most aesthetically footloose and politically blunt. *Interview* follows a young Bengali man's daylong ordeal to find the right suit to wear for a job interview with a British company. When his traditional Bengali kurta and dhoti doesn't impress his prospective employers, a kernel of revolutionary animosity develops in the hero. He hurls stones at a clothes shop and strips a mannequin of its suit.

Like Brecht, Sen insists on the theatricality of the whole performance and never lets the audience forget that they are watching something staged. When lead actor Ranjit Mallick, called Ranjit in the film, is confronted with a film magazine carrying a photo of himself, he turns to the camera and explains that he is in Mrinal Sen's new film and points to the cinematographer K. K. Mahajan, who has his camera pointed back at

Ranjit. Near the end of the film, an agitated Ranjit has to debate an unseen audience in the darkness about his attitude about the whole day. The effect is to prevent the viewer from falling into a passive consumerist relation to cinema and instead maintain a critical attention on what is happening before them.

Calcutta 71 is perhaps Sen's most ambitious film. In it, he connects three stories about poverty and its dehumanising effects on oppressed and oppressor alike. The first is set in an unspecified time, possibly in pre-independence India, the second during the Bengal famine, and the third shows the post-independence generation's simmering anger. All three stories collide in the fantastic aforementioned party sequence.

Sen was as much a brilliant humorist as his was a social critic. A wonderful sequence in *Calcutta 71* involves a group of business owners revolting against the Communists, carrying banners reading "Rulers of the World Unite," and play-acting armed violence while the audio track plays the sound of gunfire and bombing.

It is in the third film in the series, *Padatik*, that Sen starts to question the methods and achievements, if any, of the Naxalites. A young revolutionary finds shelter in the house of an affluent woman who secretly sympathises with his politics. During his stay, he questions the dogmatic nature of the Naxalite leadership and wonders if there is any point to his revolution.

By the late '70s, something in Sen had shifted. A melancholy mood, born out of the pyrrhic victories of radical politics, characterises his films of this period. After the left government won the 1977 state elections in West Bengal, he turned his gaze inward to investigate the responsibility and complacency of the middle class, of which Sen had become a part.

The Left ruled West Bengal for the next thirty-four years. During this time, Sen's work became sparse and quiet, aesthetically stripped down but thematically intense.

Kharij (1982) involves a middle-class family reconsidering their values after their domestic help, a little boy, dies accidentally from carbon-monoxide poisoning. Sen's 1991 film, *Mahaprithibi*, is his reaction to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany: a family in Calcutta is broken when an elderly woman kills herself. Why? She wonders what was the purpose of her Naxalite son's death. What did her other son achieve by escaping to Germany? What was the point of it all?

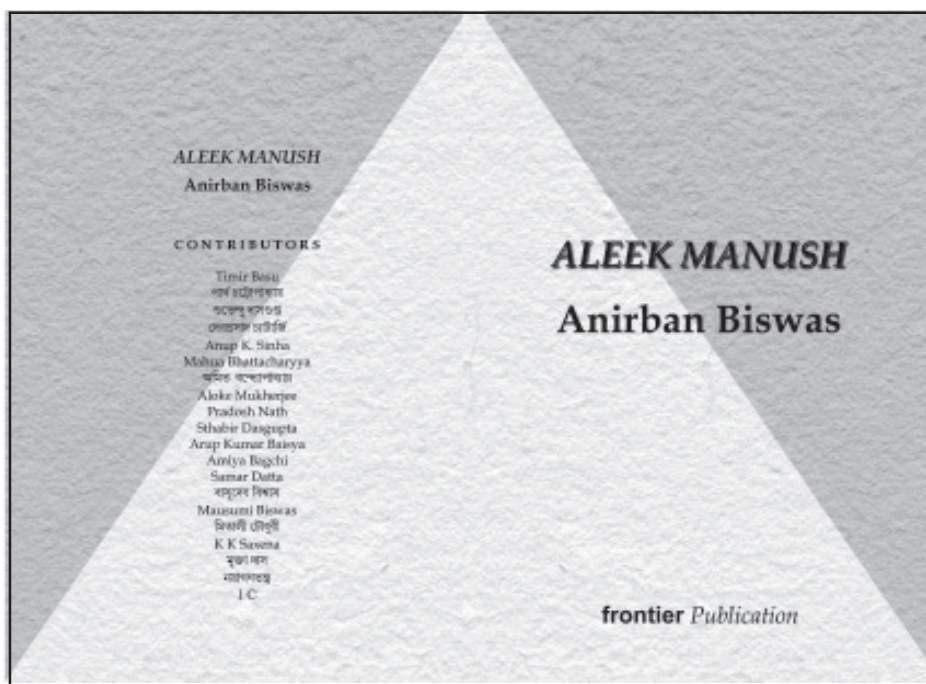
For almost a decade, Sen stayed away from cinema, emerging finally in 2002 to produce his final film, *Aamar Bhuvan*. Its mood, gentle and optimistic, breaks with that of many of his previous works. Had two decades of global neoliberalism, terrorism, the rise of the Hindu right-wing in India, and old age softened Sen? *Aamar Bhuvan*, which translates to "my world," deals entirely with an all-Muslim community in a village. Despite the world burning and breaking, as on-screen text announces in the beginning, people continue to live with love, compassion, and empathy. The film is remarkably kind and full of good-natured people despite all darkness. Rather than a withdrawal from reality, the film is an attack on the prejudice meted out against India's Muslim minority, made more radical by the Hindu nationalism of Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party.

One hundred years on, Sen still stands as one of the most inventive filmmakers of his generation. His work provides a model of how politics and formal inventiveness can be fused in art without kowtowing to didactic simplifications. □□□

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