

# frontier

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## War Will Continue

**A**S FAMINE TAKES OVER IN GAZA, THE ISRAELI MILITARY IS purposefully targeting humanitarian aid operations to ensure that its genocidal plan can continue.

On April 1, Israeli warplanes repeatedly bombed a World Central Kitchen aid convoy as they drove away from distributing food in central Gaza, killing seven aid workers. Citizens from Australia, the UK and Poland were among seven people killed in an Israeli air attack.

It has become increasingly clear that anyone attempting to prevent people in Gaza from starving to death is interfering with the Israeli government's war aims—the genocide of Palestinians. They then become a target in their own right.

Aid agencies are getting the message. World Central Kitchen suspended its operations after the strike, and ANERA, another major aid agency, announced in the aftermath of the killings that it too is suspending its operations in Gaza “after six months of constant bombing and flagrant violations of international law”, UNRWA, meanwhile, has already been banned by the Israeli government from entering northern Gaza and defunded by the US through 2025 following unsubstantiated allegations against a miniscule portion of its staff, supporting Hamas.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is beyond dire. And as Israel forces aid organisations to withdraw, the few lifelines that exist are being cut.

Even if Israel's bombs stopped tomorrow, this genocide would continue through starvation and disease alone.

The Israeli government's determination to deepen the crisis in Gaza means that the world may be looking at even more cataclysmic levels of death and hunger in months to come.

Since October, when Israeli politicians jumped at the chance to cut food, medicine, power, and fuel from Gaza, the Israeli government has taken a two-pronged strategy: the total military decimation of Gaza, hand-in-hand with the deliberate creation of unliveable long-term conditions. Both have been carried out with the intention of killing as many Palestinians as possible. Even if the bombing ceases, the crisis conditions will remain just as deadly.

Six months later, the facts on the ground in Gaza paint a devastating picture of the crisis that the Israeli government has orchestrated.

- More than 33,000 Palestinians in Gaza have already been killed.

- At least 6,500 more “excess deaths” can be expected, even if there was a ceasefire tomorrow—the result of injuries, hunger, and disease. 5,000 others are “missing”, likely buried under the rubble.
  - This means the total number of people killed in this genocide is closer to 44,000.
  - 74,000 people are currently wounded in Gaza, and receiving very partial medical care: During the genocide, the Israeli military has damaged all 36 hospitals in Gaza and 100 clinics and health institutions.
  - In Gaza, children suffer from infectious diseases at a rate 23 times higher than normal.
  - 90% of children under the age of five in Gaza suffer from one or more infectious diseases.
  - 1.1 million People in Gaza are experiencing catastrophic food insecurity.
  - One-third of children under two are acutely malnourished in the north of Gaza.
- The levels of hunger and malnutrition in Gaza are “unprecedented in modern history”.

The Palestinian national economy has been shattered beyond recognition. The old arrangement that allows Palestinians to seek jobs in Israel and occupied territories, in sectors that lack sufficient Jewish labour, such as construction, agriculture and service industry, is gone and it is unlikely to get revived unless there is a permanent ceasefire the possibility of which seems remote at the moment. It means labourers who had some kind of social and economic security before the war started, are also starving. □

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## COMMENT

### Dream Merchants

IN HIS INITIAL DECADE AS Chief Minister, Mr Patnaik espoused the non-existent dreams of his father, Mr. Biju Patnaik, to the people of Odisha. Now, after two decades at the helm, he presents his own dreams of "New Odisha, Naveen Odisha." These dreams resemble the fictitious and supercilious American dreams or the aspirations of salvation in Hindu spiritual teachings—illusive and intangible. Their realisation remains elusive, as even the dreamer himself seems uncertain about their true essence.

By fielding tented MLAs and feeble leaders as candidates—many of whom are poised to lose against the well-organised Hindutva electoral machinery—Mr. Patnaik appears to be acquiescing to the impending dominance of these forces. His approach reflects a leader resigned to his fate, adopting the demeanour of a defeated commander in the political arena, rather than actively steering the state towards a more robust and resilient progressive political future.

In the ensuing general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sells Modi's dream, and the Biju

Janata Dal (BJD) sells Naveen Patnaik's dreams to the masses. What are these dreams? What do these dreams mean for the working masses? No one knows these elusive dreams. The truth is that the true essence of these elusive dreams remains shrouded in mystery. People must be careful of such political quacks who sell dreams during elections to control the everyday lives of the masses after their victory. People must defeat these dream sellers and choose candidates who talk about secular, scientific, successful, and alternative policy visions for the masses..

The current candidate profiles of all mainstream political parties in Odisha resemble an ideology-free zone in politics, devoid of principles, policies, and visions for people. The present and future of the state and its people are poised to be in the hands of individuals lacking vision. The prevailing camaraderie between the ruling party and the opposition party has transformed democracy in the state into a corporate joint venture aimed at capturing and sharing power to serve the ruling and non-ruling elites. This collusion sidelines

democratic scrutiny, allowing the state's resources to be monopolised by the corporate class unchecked. Politics for profit is the only motto of a market democracy led by the BJD and BJP in the state. Both the parties are working overtime in handling over the mining and marine resources of the state to the corporate class without any form of democratic scrutiny.

In this critical juncture, it is imperative for the people in Odisha to unite and reject both the BJP and BJD, seeking instead a political alternative rooted in substantive policies aimed at the development and welfare of the masses. Only through this concerted effort can the populace alter their democratic destiny, breaking free from the grip of various iterations of the ruling class and castes that serve the interests of crony capitalists. These vested interests have long plundered the state's forest, water, agricultural, mineral and marine resources, leaving the people mired in poverty and deprivation. It is only by dismantling this entrenched system and electing a government that genuinely prioritises the needs of the working masses that a new political dawn can emerge in Odisha. □□□

(Contributed by Bhabani Shankar Nayak)

## NOTE

## NATO Celebrates 75th Anniversary

*Bharat Dogra writes:*

ON 4 APRIL NATO COMPLETED 75 years. The alliance has nearly tripled in size since it was founded after WW2. NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg has proposed a new five-year plan in which NATO would assume coordination of international weapons deliveries from the US. They have this deal hammered out by July, but Ukraine will still not be getting what it really wants—to be the 33rd member of the alliance.

A military alliance can only be justified if it protects against any big threat. Such a threat is difficult to point out after the break-up of the Soviet Union—for the last over three decades. True, China can be quite a bully to some of its neighbours, but there is hardly any chance of China being the one to initiate any attack on any NATO member.

The most powerful NATO members are increasingly influenced by the military-industrial-political complex. Hence the aims of the NATO get unduly influenced in highly unethical and destructive ways in favour of forever wars due to the profit interests of a small number of persons, probably just 1 percent of the total population of NATO countries, or perhaps even less.

It is one of the most important requirements of creating a safer world that any direct confrontation involving the biggest nuclear weapon powers is avoided. This is complicated by the existence of NATO and military alliances like this.

In particular the violation of earlier agreements to pursue relentless eastward expansion of NATO has greatly escalated the tensions between big powers and the present Ukraine conflict is closely related to this.

Smaller member countries of NATO are not necessarily protected by NATO as in case of aggression against them the more powerful NATO members will weigh their own interests and options; there is no assured commitment on their part to enter into war with the aggressor to protect the small country. They may decide to help in other lesser ways, so that the small country faces a difficult situation. In fact NATO membership may provide an exaggerated sense of security to small countries due to which they may neglect improving relations with other neighbours, or may be unduly, unnecessarily hostile or provocative towards them. When small countries are drawn into big power conflicts

by such military alliances, they may become the scenes of highly destructive wars, something which they can avoid by remaining neutral and non-aligned in big power rivalries.

Thanks to NATO, most of Europe becomes tied to a one-dimensional future of remaining tied to the aggressive ambitions of the USA, instead of seeking a world role more in keeping with the objectives of world peace and safety.

The actual role of the NATO in many countries has been mostly that of destruction instead of peace, leading to the avoidable death, due to direct and indirect impacts, of several hundred thousand innocent people, including women and children.

Even many senior diplomats and statesmen of the USA have argued that NATO often involves the kind of overreach on the part of the USA which is not even in its own interests (particularly keeping in mind the unmet needs of millions of poorer US citizens), and it has used NATO in unnecessarily aggressive ways, against the better advice of these statesmen and other important NATO member leaders, as in the context of relentless eastward expansion of NATO.

If NATO continues to be justified on false grounds, then this can also be used as a justification to promote other equally harmful military alliances in other parts of the world. □

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### OPPOSITION FREE INDIA

## It is Elected Autocracy

*Syed Ali Mujtaba*

THE ARREST OF DELHI CM Arvind Kejriwal has given a new spin to the general election of 2024. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is managing the fall-out of this spin in a bid to convert

democracy into electoral autocracy.

The United States has come out with the statement on Kejriwal's arrest saying, "it encourages a fair legal process" and is closely monitoring the recent arrest of the Delhi Chief Minister.

Last week, Sebastian Fischer, a spokesperson of the German Foreign Ministry said that the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister is "politically motivated".

While India has kept mum on the US comments, it has lashed out at the German reaction, risking its defence and economic ties with the powerful Western European nation.

At home, the arrest of Arvind

Kejriwal, the Delhi Chief Minister has triggered a near-unanimous condemnation from all the opposition parties.

Akhilesh Yadav, leader of the Samajwadi Party has warned of a people's "revolution" if Prime Minister Narendra Modi continues with his politics of vendetta.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has commented; "A scared dictator wants to create a dead democracy."

Derek O'Brien, Trinamool Congress leader said; "How can we expect fair elections in India if sitting CMs and prominent opposition leaders are arrested weeks before the national election?"

Tamil Nadu, Chief Minister MK Stalin described the arrest of Delhi's Chief Minister as a "fascist" step.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has said the arrest was part of an "outright vicious and callous design to silence the opposition voices."

Since the BJP government under the leadership of PM Modi came to power in 2014, 95 percent of the cases are taken up by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate against the politicians belonging to the opposition. This represents a rise of 60 percent for the CBI, and 54 percent for the ED, from the days of the

previous Congress-led government under Manmohan Singh that ruled India from 2004 to 2014.

Meanwhile, India has slipped in the international democratic indexes under Modi's rule after arrests and raids of the opposition leaders, the critics, and the journalists.

In truth the Modi government uses the Enforcement Directorate, the CBI, the Election Commission, and the Judiciary to achieve its nefarious ends.

The Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has complained that the party is unable to continue the political campaigning because all its bank accounts have been frozen in connection with the ongoing tax disputes.

Last month, the agency arrested Hemant Soren, the Chief Minister of Jharkhand, on charges of corruption. There have been similar arrests after raids on the houses and properties of the opposition leaders like the TMC leader Mahua Moitra, BRS MLC K Kavitha Rao, and DMK Minister K Ponmudi. These cases point to the fact that the BJP government is going all out to silence the opposition.

The arrest of Arvind Kejriwal is also seen as an attempt to crush the Aam Aadmi Party, a democratic political party that rose in the shadow of the BJP in 2014 and now rules two states; Delhi and Punjab, in opposition to the BJP.

Now, with the arrest of Arvind Kejriwal almost the entire top leadership of the Aam Aadmi party is behind bars. Former Deputy Chief Minister, Manish Sisodia, and former ministers Satyendar Jain and Sanjay Singh are all in prison. This is a grim reality of India, how democracy is subverted in the largest democracy in the world.

So far the Modi government has arrested two Chief Ministers, Delhi and Jharkhand, and many opposi-

tion leaders and possibly may arrest many more who do not endorse his style of governance. This style of Modi rule has silenced the opposition as they remain in perpetual fear and detest from raising any voice of dissent fearing they may be may also be guillotined.

The witch-hunt of opposition leaders is an attempt to crush any alternative rule to the Modi administration in India. This is unbecoming of democracy where democratically elected leaders are being harassed and arrested under one pretext or another.

Call it "dirty politics" or any other name foisting 'bogus cases' on the opposition leaders is a fact and this is a new normal in Indian politics.

The arrest of Arvind Kejriwal also demonstrates the desperation of the BJP government as it is jockeying for power for the third time. Some analysts believe that the Modi government is positioning itself to authoritarian rule by closing in on Kejriwal and other opposition leaders. It's a signal that the 2024 election will be undemocratic and farcical by all means.

There is no denying the fact that the BJP government is consolidating its power through authoritarian rule using the enforcement directorate, the CBI, and the election commission all to perpetuate its high-handed style of rule.

This style of governance has made some opposition leaders warn that the 2024 election will not be a free and fair exercise and there will be malpractices at the voting and counting stages. Money matters in elections. So does muscle power. And BJP has both of them in abundance.

All points to the fact that the 2024 Poll will be a one-sided affair due to the uneven playing field. Its results are taken for granted in favour of the continuation of the Modi rule.

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The latest World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, ranks India below Afghanistan and Libya, in a list of 180 countries, India comes in at 161st place. Under Modi's electoral autocracy, a single critical piece of reporting is sufficient to warrant the taxman's—or the policeman's—knock on the door.

Modi is a product of the ideology of the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh(RSS) which has never accepted the Nehruvian idea of India, has challenged its basic premise and

termed the constitution a replica of the western thought process in which nothing is Indian.

This General Election of 2024 could bring changes like no other in India. Should the ruling BJP return to power with a massive mandate, it is expected to change the Indian Constitution. The democratic space for opposition will go forever. Europe knows what fascism is and it is the turn of Indians to witness what it means in real life. □□□

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## NREGA WAGES

### Too Little, Too Late

*Atanu Chakravarty*

**T**HE MINISTRY OF RURAL Development revised wages of MGNREGA workers by 3 percent to 10.5 percent for various states for the financial year (FY) 2024-25 after getting a nod from the Election Commission of India in the thick of Parliamentary Elections. As per the latest available data, total NREGA active workers is 14.34 crore, and the nationwide average days of employment provided per household (HH) was 51 days. The revised wages are effective from April 1.

MGNREGA is one of the flagship poverty alleviation programmes, and this legal entitlement was the product of a people's movement which was inspired by the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act, 1977. This was the outcome of a powerful grassroots socio-political movement after the drought that wrecked havoc in the state during 1970-73. (Fifteen Years of India's NREGA: Employer of the last resort? Swati Narayan). This is one of the few public entitlements where women are paid equal wages with men for unskilled labour.

Wage rates are revised every year,

using CPI-for Agricultural Labour (CPI-AL) taking 2010-11 as the base year. In February this year, The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural development and Panchayati Raj noted that "the practice of revising wages keeping CPI- AL values taking 2010-2011 as the base is not coherent with the present inflation cost of living".

In terms of maximum increase in wages compared to last year, Goa (10.56 percent) and Karnataka (10.4 percent) increase are highest, while wage rates in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand will see the lowest increase at 3 percent for FY 2024-25. Goa got the highest increase of Rs 34 per day. The revised wage is now Rs 356 per day compared to last year's Rs 322 per day, which is a 10.56 percent year-on-year hike. But the average wage of all states and Union territories for the financial year 2024-25 is around Rs 284 per day, which was Rs 267 last year.

The government appointed Mahendra Dev Committee strongly recommended to link NREGA wages with state minimum wage and to index rural labourers (CPI-RL) in-

stead of Consumer price index of agricultural labourers (CPI-AL) or to fix Rs 375 per day as proposed by Anoop Satpathy Committee. Sadly, the Central government has not implemented these recommendations. The meagre increase has never been adjusted with inflation and cost of living in the past few years. The wages paid are calculated based on a piece rate and not a daily wage. This piece rate is anchored on a wage rate stipulated by the central government which is revised every financial year as mentioned earlier.

The newly revised wages are much lower than the earnings of agricultural labour which is Rs 105 lower than the daily wages for agricultural labour as of 2023. The parliamentary standing committee also noted that daily wages of NREGA as of FY 2023-24 were lower than the daily wage for agricultural labourers as of FY 23 in all major states except Gujarat.

The difference between the NREGA daily wage and that of the agricultural daily wage was highest in Kerala, where the daily wage of the former for FY 2023-24 was Rs 333 while the daily wage of the latter for FY 2022-23 was Rs 764.3—a difference of Rs 431! After the newly revised wage, for Kerala it is now Rs 346, an increase of 3.9 percent.

The central government has not transpired the methodology of calculating NREGA wage every year, which is extremely arbitrary and an assault on the workers right. Though a few states like Jharkhand hiked wages of NREGA workers from Rs 198 to Rs 225 from their own state budget. Notwithstanding the legal obligation of this unique poverty alleviation scheme, Modi Government repeatedly unleashed attack on NREGA, introduced unprecedented ceiling on the expenditure by State governments, deletion of lakhs and lakhs of workers from their muster roll by making Aadhaar based payment system mandatory, delayed payment system have created a huge number of disgruntled workers who

have moved away from this work to other job. While the proposed demand of budgetary allocation was Rs 98,000 crore in 2023-24, only Rs 60,000 crore was allotted. Reduced budgetary allocation negatively affected timely release of wages and materials, the Parliamentary Standing Committee noted. For example, 57 percent of wages were not paid within the stipulated time, in 2019-2000 Rs 10,000 crores were pending as wages, material and administrative costs due to inadequate budget.

MGNREGA has emerged as the world's biggest public works programme and also proved to be the employer of last resort across rural India. In 2020-21 NREGA provided employment to an unprecedented 76

million rural HH. The moot question is, since this is a government programme, why the government is denying to pay minimum wages? Why the legality of wage will be based on budgetary constraints?

A week before, the panellists at the Mint India Investment Summit, 2024 observed, improving consumption, especially in rural areas and addressing the pervasive income inequity remain significant challenge for India.

Increasing wages of the workers engaged in NREGA, adjusting it with rising inflation and to pay wages not below the State level minimum wages are some of the challenges this programme is facing, which should be resolved on priority basis. □□□

#### TRAPPED BY DESIGN

## A Painful Tale of Suru Bindhani

*Durgaprosad*

**A** FORTY-YEAR-OLD WOMAN from Odisha named Suru Bindhani came to West Bengal's Hooghly district eight years ago after losing her mental balance. She was rescued by Tarakeswar Police Station and was handed over to an NGO Jana Shiksha Prochar Kendra in Hooghly district on 6th February 2016 on the order of Chandannagar Sub-Divisional Magistrate. She recovered within a few months. Then twice her family members came to take her back. But these illiterate people were inexperienced about government regulations and bureaucratic intricacies, Twice they were turned back for lack of "proper documents". This time some employees of the NGO helped them to prepare "proper documents". Documents included a photocopy of the order by which she was admitted, a certificate from the Panchayat head of the area as proof that the persons coming to take her back were her

relatives. The Panchayat Pradhan records their relationship, signs with date and stamps each person's photo. Those who come to take her bring originals and photocopies of their own and if possible resident's government identity card. Based on these documents the Magistrate, who admitted her, directs the concerned NGO to hand over the resident to her relatives. There is no difficulty even if the old Magistrate who admitted her is transferred; the new Magistrate can make the release order. Suru's son and son-in-law met Chandannagar Subdivisional Magistrate on 24 January, 2024 with necessary documents. Chandannagar Subdivisional Magistrate's office now said that the NGO has to write a letter requesting Chandannagar Subdivisional Magistrate to release the resident, then he will order the resident to be handed over to her relatives. Although earlier many residents have been handed over to

relatives by order of various Sub-Divisional Magistrates, no such letter was required. However all the documents were sent to the NGO on WhatsApp, the NGO was also informed about the whole matter. The NGO now mailed the documents along with a letter to the office of Chandannagar SDO. The letter requested the SDO to hand over the resident to her relatives. Chandannagar Subdivisional Magistrate now asked the District Social Welfare Officer (DSWO) whether to release the resident in their hands. Chandannagar SDO then gave the phone number of the District Social Welfare Officer to Suru's relatives and asked them to speak to DSWO. The District Social Welfare Officer instead of asking the NGO himself for the documents, told the relatives to tell the NGO to mail the relevant documents to his office. Earlier the clearance from District Social Welfare Officer was not necessary before release of residents. However, the documents were already given to Chandannagar Subdivisional Magistrate's office by Suru's son and son-in-law, which were also mailed

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from the NGO, but he himself did not send the documents to the District Social Welfare Officer. Earlier the NGO sent documents to SDO but this time refused to send the same to District Social Welfare Officer's office. For one thing, if the District Social Welfare Officer himself asked for the documents to the NGO, the NGO would have been forced to send it. The next day (25.01.2024), Suru's son visited the office of Chandannagar Sub-Divisional Magistrate and said that if SDO needs any document other than the ones they have already brought to release his mother, SDO should give it in writing with his stamp and signature. In response, SDO wrote on a plain white paper that all the documents should be submitted to the office of the District Social Welfare Officer. When the District Social Welfare Officer was called, he said to submit all the documents to the "Jan Shiksha Prochar Kendra" NGO "Jan Shiksha Prochar Kendra" accepted documents but the management did not provide any receipt copy. And wrote on a white paper, to visit the social welfare section of Sadar block (sub division), Balasore district of Odisha. It is not understood why block and sub division were written at the same time! They were not allowed to take any picture of Suru. In this situation, Suru's son and son-in-law got out of there and

bought general tickets for unreserved compartment and took the night train to go back to their Odisha village home. Poor illiterate people, that's how they suffer.

Suru's family members came and went back three times in last eight years. First two times they came without proper documents but this third time they came with proper documents. Still Suru could not go back home due to at least inefficiency and negligence of government officials and NGO. Suru's family members are unlikely to come again to take her home. Now government has to take complete responsibility to send back Suru to her home. If government fails, fate of Suru will be like many other "lifer" residents. There is similarity between them and prisoners who are imprisoned till death. The only difference, being there is no complaining of illegal activities against them. Some time in their lives they were mentally ill and lost route to home and came to some unknown place. A report of this case has already been published in "Sambad" Oriya daily of its Bhubaneswar edition on 12th February 2024. Incidentally it may be mentioned that in this report inefficiency and negligence on the part of West Bengal government and NGO didn't come up. Reading this report one may think, Suru's relatives didn't go to the proper office with proper

documents, so how can she be released! It is not reported there that this time Suru's relatives went to proper office with proper documents. It is not reported there that the NGO management received the documents and denied to give receipt against it. Still one hopes this report will make the file move in government office and Suru will be released. But till date Suru has not been released.

It is not known whether the government officials and NGO know the Act properly. Or do they simply neglect work, avoid responsibility, and think that they can do whatever they like, that these "vain" people are totally powerless.. Incidentally, NGOs receive money from the government as per the number of residents. As a result, NGOs often do not want the residents move out to lead normal life or go back to their homes. It is not known if the government employees somehow got involved with this unfair practice making an unholy nexus. However, this correspondent has seen the same thing in those NGOs that claim to do "rehabilitation" work for the mentally ill with thousands of rupees per month. They don't work to that direction so that mentally ill residents go back home or live independently. In truth they exploit residents while making money unscrupulously.

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**JUSTICE IN CRISIS**


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## Veiled Threat to Judiciary

**Maitreyi Krishnan**  
**Clifton D' Rozario**

**I**N A RATHER PARADOXICAL turn of events, a Lawyers' Group including several lawyers who openly identify with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Sangh Parivar, had issued a letter to the Chief Justice of India on 26.03.2024,

cautioning about what they call a "vested interest group" who they allege is trying to "pressure the judiciary, influence the judicial process and defame the courts based on frivolous logic and state political agendas". The letter goes on to add

that this "heated interest group" operates in various ways – primarily by creating a false narrative of a supposed "better past"/"golden period" of the courts as opposed to its present state, and secondly, by concocting a theory of "bench fixing". The letter further states that such modus operandi is deployed by this group "at very strategic timings when the nation is all set to head into elections". Saying so, the Supreme Court is urged "to stand strong and

take steps to protect the courts from these attacks” while assuring that the Lawyers’ Group would support the judiciary “against these underhanded attacks, making sure our courts stay strong as pillars of our democracy, untouched by these calculated attacks”. Within hours, Prime Minister Modi issued a tweet attacking the Congress for trying to “browbeat and bully others” and aiming for a “committed judiciary”. Unsurprisingly also came the outpouring of support from the online right-wing ecosystem.

Bereft of any particulars or details, this “letter” is an exercise in obfuscation and misdirection. It is particularly telling for its timing. It comes on the heels of certain judicial actions that have ruffled the executive’s feathers—the electoral bond judgment declaring the scheme unconstitutional and directing SBI to disclose the names of donors (which the Modi government desperately tried to avoid), the stay on the Fact Checking Unit under the IT Rules 2021, the setting aside of the Office Memorandum of the Environment Ministry diluting environmental

norms regarding linear projects and the judgment holding that it is not a crime to criticise the decision of Modi government to abrogate Article 370 and withdraw special status to Jammu & Kashmir. Moreover, it comes at a time when the Supreme Court is slated to hear crucial cases concerning the use of EVMs, the constitutionality of CAA, and the arrest of Opposition leaders and political activists.

Unsurprisingly, this letter prompted an immediate endorsement from Prime Minister Modi whose vitriol about the Congress and its desire for a “committed judiciary” made apparent what the letter was trying to imply. The irony is unmissable given the concerted attack by the Modi government on the independence of the judiciary. Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar and Union Law Minister Kiren Rijiju have taken turns to publicly berate the collegium system of appointment of judges with the Vice President castigating the Supreme Court for striking down the National Judicial Appointment Commission Act and repeatedly attacking the Supreme Court for declaring the doctrine of the basic structure of the Constitution as law of the land. Similarly, the Union Law Minister has cautioned the Supreme Court not to hear bail pleas or PILs and has accused the Supreme Court of crossing the “Lakshman Rekha guiding various institutions including the executive and the judiciary” while condemning the Supreme Court judgment on the appointment of Election Commissioners.

An indicator of the Modi government’s attempt to control the judiciary is the selective acceptance of the Court’s collegium recommendations on appointments and transfers. It has become more than apparent that the BJP is attempting to stack democratic institutions includ-

ing the judiciary with people subscribing to its ideology including judges described by renowned legal academician Dr Mohan Gopal as “theocratic judges”, who look beyond the Constitution, to find the source of law in religion. Judges speak through their judgments, and the message has been loud, particularly about judges who’ve received immediate and plum post-retirement posts from the Modi government. Supreme Court judge Arun Mishra, who as a sitting Supreme Court judge praised Modi as a “versatile genius” who “thinks globally and acts locally”, was appointed Chairperson of the NHRC. Ranjan Gogoi and Abdul Nazeer, part of the Bench in the Ayodhya judgment among others, were appointed as a member of the Rajya Sabha and Governor of Andhra Pradesh. Justice Ashok Bhushan appointed as head of the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal was one of the dignitaries to attempt the Ram temple inauguration earlier this year. The latest is Justice A.M. Khanwilkar, author of key judgments favouring the government (Gujarat riots, PMLA, UAPA, FCRA), who has been appointed as the Lokpal chairperson. The icing though is Abhijit Gangopadhyay, who secured a BJP Lok Sabha ticket just days after resigning as a Calcutta High Court judge.

It is unsurprising that the “Lawyers’ Group” maintains stoic silence at this concerted assault on the judiciary by the Modi government. Unsurprising since they are part of a ploy to unsettle the highest judiciary from holding the Modi government accountable to the Constitution in any manner whatsoever. Senior Advocate Chandar Uday Singh rightly calls this the classic playbook of the autocratic to bring the judiciary to heel. He cites a 2020 scholarly article, ‘Complicity in the Perversion of Justice: The Role of Lawyers in

## WOMEN AND CYCLE IN INDIA

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Eroding the Rule of Law in the Third Reich', in which the author Cynthia Fountaine writes: "The new rules of professional ethics established by the Bar mandated an ethical duty of all lawyers to show unwavering support for Hitler and his policies in both professional and personal contexts. These rules would be enforced by a new Court of Honour, which operated under the authority of the German Supreme Court as the final arbiter of professional conduct and discipline. Lawyers were penalised, and even disbarred, if they deviated from loyalty to the Nazi agenda in their personal or professional lives. For example, one lawyer was disciplined for refusing to return the Nazi salute in court because the lawyer's failure to salute diminished the public's confi-

dence in the legal system."

This letter, bereft of any semblance of constitutional morality, is an open declaration by this "Lawyers Group" of their allegiance to the Modi government, and their disregard for its attack on the Constitution and the judiciary. Michael Kirby, former Judge of the High Court of Australia said: "Where there is no independent legal profession there can be no independent judiciary, no Rule of Law, no Justice, no Democracy and no Freedom."

The highest judiciary failed to interfere even as the Modi Government blatantly attacked the Constitution [read: Constitution]—Babri Masjid/Ram Mandir, Demonetisation, Abrogation of Article 370, PMLA, FCRA, UAPA, EWS, among others. Perhaps this is best exemplified by

the Covid cases, where the Supreme Court dismissed PILs seeking relief for migrant workers, by accepting the government's sweeping claims. Retired Supreme Court judge Gopal Gowda declared that "ADM Jabalpur will no longer be remembered as the darkest moment of the Supreme Court. That infamy now belongs to the Court's response to the preventable migrant crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic.". Even so, the ruling dispensation has deployed its forces in the legal profession, at the first sign of any assertion of judicial independence, and is targeting (without naming) lawyers who, in the words of retired Supreme Court judge Madan Lokur, are doing their utmost to preserve and protect the independence and integrity of the judiciary. □□□

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A LETTER TO PM MODI!

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## Hindu Mahasabha, not Congress Colluded with Muslim League

*Shamsul Islam*

PRIME MINISTER DESCRIBES himself as 'Hindu' nationalist and member of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). He proudly shares the fact that he was groomed to be a political leader by one of the two fathers of the Hindutva politics, MS Golwalkar (the other being VD Savarkar) and given the task of establishing Hindutva polity in India after eradicating secularism.

PM Modi in the eyes of Hindutva crusaders represents the resurgent Hinduism and defender of Hindu nationalism against its enemies. The pre-Independence Muslim League led by MA Jinnah is a favourite punching bag for him which also helps him in spreading hatred against Indian Muslims. In any election PM takes the form of a relentless warrior against Muslim separatism. Reacting

to the release of Indian National Congress' manifesto for the ensuing parliamentary elections in an election rally in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh (which has a substantial population of Muslims and history of religious polarisation) he declared that "The manifesto of the Congress, released yesterday [April 5, 2024], shows that it cannot fulfill the aspirations of the country. The Congress manifesto has the imprint of the policies of the Muslim League before Independence".

'Congress manifesto reflects policies of Muslim League before Independence: PM Narendra Modi', [The Indian Express, Delhi, April 7, 2024.]

Modi as a leader and ideologue of Hindutva can be forgiven for indulging in blatant lies (RSS is the biggest Gurukul or university in the

world which trains manufacturing-speaking lies) but not as PM of India. In any accountable democracy he would have been charged for perjury and forced to step down. But in the present scenario when the regulator of Indian elections, Election Commission of India is more an appendage of the ruling party only people of India can teach a lesson to the advocates of lies.

Savarkar, one of the originators of the politics of Hindutva was the Hindu nationalist who developed the most elaborate Two-nation theory. The fact should not be missed that Muslim League passed its Pakistan resolution in March 1940 only but Savarkar, the great philosopher and guide of RSS, propagated the Two-nation theory long before it. While delivering the presidential address to the 19th session of Hindu Mahasabha at Ahmedabad in 1937, Savarkar declared unequivocally,

"As it is, there are two antagonistic nations living side by side in India. Several infantile politicians commit the serious mistake in

supposing that India is already welded into a harmonious nation, or that it could be welded thus for the mere wish to do so. These our well-meaning but unthinking friends take their dreams for realities. That is why they are impatient of communal tangles and attribute them to communal organisations... Let us bravely face unpleasant facts as they are. India cannot be assumed today to be a Unitarian and homogenous nation, but on the contrary there are two nations in the main: the Hindus and the Moslems, in India."

[Savarkar, VD. *Samagar*

*Savarkar Wangmaya (Collected Works of Savarkar), vol. 6, Hindu Mahasabha, Poona, 1963, p.296.]*

The RSS, following into the footsteps of Savarkar, rejected out-rightly the idea that Hindus and Muslims together constituted a nation. The English organ of the RSS, *Organiser*, on the very eve of Independence (August 14, 1947) editorially chalked out its concept of nation in the following words:

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"Let us no longer allow ourselves to be influenced by false notions of nationhood. Much of the mental confusion and the present and future troubles can be removed by the ready recognition of the simple fact that in Hindusthan only the Hindus form the nation and the national structure must be built on that safe and sound foundation...the nation itself must be built up of Hindus, on Hindu traditions, culture, ideas and aspirations."

Dr B R Ambedkar, a keen researcher of the communal politics in pre-independence India, while underlying the affinity and camaraderie between Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League on the issue of the Two-nation theory wrote:

"Strange it may appear, Mr Savarkar and Mr Jinnah instead of being opposed to each other on the one nation versus two nations issue are in complete agreement about it. Both agree, not only agree but insist that there are two nations in India—one the Muslim nation and the other Hindu nation."

[B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India, Govt. of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1990*

[Reprint of 1940 edition], p. 142.]

The children of Hindu nationalist Savarkar ruling India presently are oblivious of the shocking fact that Hindu Mahasabha led by Savarkar entered into alliances with the Muslim League in order to break the united freedom struggle, specially, the 1942 Quit India Movement against the British rulers. While delivering Presidential address to the 24th session of Hindu Mahasabha at Cawnpore (Kanpur) in 1942, he defended hobnobbing with the Muslim League in the following words,

"In practical politics also the Mahasabha knows that we must advance through reasonable com-

promises. Witness the fact that only recently in Sind, the Sind Hindu Sabha on invitation had taken the responsibility of joining hands with the League itself in running coalition Government. The case of Bengal is well known. Wild Leaguers whom even the Congress with all its submissiveness could not placate grew quite reasonably compromising and socialable as soon as they came in contact with the Hindu Mahasabha and the Coalition Government, under the premiership of Mr Fazlul Huq and the able lead of our esteemed Mahasabha leader Dr Syama Prasad Mookerji, functioned successfully for a year or so to the benefit of both the communities. Moreover further events also proved demonstratively that the Hindu Mahasabhaites endeavoured to capture the centres of political power only in the public interests and not for the loaves and fishes of the office." Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League also ran coalition governments in Sind and North-Western Frontier Province.

[Savarkar, VD. *Samagar Savarkar Wangmaya (Collected Works of Savarkar), vol. 6, Hindu Mahasabha, Poona, 1963, pp.479-480.]*

It is a tragedy of this nation that a person occupying Prime Minister's office resorts to brazen lies which even Hindutva archives do not corroborate. He is betraying the honour, prestige and decorum of the office. The nation must request PM Modi that if he wants to act as a cadre of RSS he should resign from the office and take a seat in the hierarchy of RSS. □□□

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**A DANGEROUS TREND****Saffronising Sainik Schools****Astha Savyasachi**

**S**AINIK SCHOOLS, RUN UNDER the Defence Ministry's guidance, send cadets to India's armed forces. The new initiative however relies on ideologically slanted organisations to train future cadets.

In one of the holy cities in the country, Vrindavan, Hindu nationalist ideologue Sadhvi Ritambhara runs a school for girls, Samvid Gurukulam Girls Sainik School. Founder of Durga Vahini, Vishwa Hindu Parishad's (VHP) women's wing, she was a key figure in the Ram temple movement.

During one of the school events in June last year, the 60-year-old saffron-clad woman gets on the stage to address the students about 'honour', traditions and rituals during a personality development camp. Her girls' school in Vrindavan and another, Raj Luxmi Samvid Gurukulam in Solan, Himachal Pradesh recently joined the list of at least 40 schools that have signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with the Sainik Schools Society (SSS), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Defence (MoD), to run Sainik Schools under Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model.

In 2021, the Union government opened doors for private players to run Sainik Schools in India. In their annual budget that year, the government announced plans to set up 100 new Sainik Schools across India.

Any school having SSS specified infrastructure—land, physical and IT infrastructure, financial resources, staff etc—could potentially be approved as one of the new Sainik Schools. As per the approval policy document, infrastructure was the only

specified criterion that made a school eligible for approval. This limitation enabled schools linked with the Sangh Parivar and organisations with similar ideologies to apply.

While the government expects the new PPP model to bolster the recruitment pool for the armed forces, the initiative that brings in political players and right-wing institutions into the military ecosystem has raised concerns.

In the history of the Sainik School education system, this was the first time the government allowed private players to get affiliated with the SSS, receive "part financial support" and run their branches. On October 12, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi led a cabinet meeting that approved a proposal to run the schools "as an exclusive vertical which will be distinct and different from existing Sainik Schools of MoD."

Until the new policy, 33 Sainik Schools housing 16,000 cadets existed in the country with SSS acting as its parent body. SSS is an autonomous organisation under the Defence Ministry. Multiple government reports point to the importance of Sainik Schools in sending cadets to defence institutions. The Standing Committees on Defence have often emphasised Sainik Schools' role in preparing cadets for the National Defence Academy (NDA) and Indian Naval Academy. In one of the most sought-after military entrance exams to join NDA, according to the 2013-14 Standing Committee, nearly 20% of Sainik School students appearing every year for the exam make the cut. According to data submitted in Rajya Sabha

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earlier this year, over 11 percent of Sainik School cadets joined the armed forces in the last six years. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh credits Sainik Schools for contributing more than 7,000 officers to the armed forces.

Sainik Schools, along with Rashtriya Indian Military College and the Rashtriya Indian Military Schools, send more than 25-30 percent of the cadets to various training academies of the Indian armed forces.

According to the RTI responses, at least 40 schools have signed MoAs with the Sainik Schools Society between May 05, 2022 and December 27, 2023. A closer review reveals that out of the 40 schools, 11 are directly owned by BJP politicians or managed by trusts chaired by them, or belong to friends and political allies of the BJP. Eight are managed by RSS and its allied organisations directly. Additionally, six schools have close ties to Hindutva organisations or far-right rabble-rousers, and other Hindu religious organisations. None of the approved schools are run by Christian or Muslim organisations or any of the religious minorities of India.

From Gujarat to Arunachal Pradesh, a large number of these new Sainik Schools either see direct involvement of BJP leaders or are owned by trusts that they head.

Tawang Public School in Arunachal's border town of Tawang is the sole Sainik School approved in the state. The school is owned by the state chief minister Pema Khandu. Hitendra Tripathi, Ex. Office Secretary of the school managing committee, who also serves as the school principal, confirmed Khandu's role as chairman of the school committee. Khandu's brother Tsering Tashi, a BJP MLA from Tawang, is the managing director of the school.

In Mehsana, Gujarat, Shri

Motibhai R. Chaudhary Sagar Sainik School is affiliated with Dudhsagar Dairy, which is chaired by Ashokkumar Bhavsangbhai Chaudhari, a former BJP general secretary for Mehsana. Last year, Home Minister Amit Shah had virtually laid the foundation stone of the school. Another school in Gujarat, Banas Sainik School in Banaskantha, is managed by the Galbabbhai Nanjibhai Patel Charitable Trust under Banas Dairy. The organisation is led by BJP MLA from Tharad and the current speaker of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly, Shankar Chaudhary.

In Uttar Pradesh, Shakuntlam International School in Etawah is run by Munna Smriti Sansthan, a non-profit chaired by BJP MLA Sarita Bhadauria. Her son, Ashish Bhadauria, who oversees the functioning of the school said, "We don't have any experience in running Sainik Schools. We will be starting it from the coming session." He claimed, "The selection process was very extensive." When asked whether their application was favoured for party association, he said, "You should ask this from the government."

The investigation found many of the people benefiting from this new PPP model include several BJP politicians. This long list has BJP leaders from different states.

In Haryana, Shri Baba Mastnath Residential Public School of Rohtak is now a Sainik school. Former BJP MP Mahant Chandnath founded it and is currently run by his successor Mahant Balaknath Yogi, the incumbent BJP MLA from Tijara in Rajasthan.

Maharashtra's newly approved schools include Ahmednagar's Padmashree Dr Vithalrao Vikhe Patil School—an institution chaired by former Congress MLA Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil who joined BJP in 2019. Former Sikar district BJP president

in Rajasthan, Hariram Ranwa is the chairperson of the trust that manages the Bhartiya Public School. SK International School in Sangli, which got Sainik School affiliation, was founded by Sadabhau Khot, a BJP ally who was a minister in the 2014 Devendra Fadnavis-led Maharashtra government. In Katni, Madhya Pradesh, Syna International School which received approval is headed by Nidhi Pathak, wife of the BJP MLA in Madhya Pradesh, Sanjay Pathak.

Some of the above-mentioned schools are existing schools which have received approval to become Sainik schools. Sainik schools, like many other government-run schools in the country, primarily follow the Central Board of Secondary Education curriculum with a few additional subjects, such as moral values, patriotism, communal harmony, and personality development, among others.

A school run by a foundation under the Adani Group, which is close to BJP, was also given affiliation.

Adani World School, in Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh, was also affiliated. The school is located near the Krishnapatnam port, a deep water port operated by the Adani Group on the eastern coast. The school is owned by the Adani Community Empowerment Foundation.

Aditya Mukherjee, co-author of the book RSS, School Texts and the Murder of Mahatma Gandhi: The Hindu Communal Project, found it shocking that such schools received sponsorship and official support from the Defence Ministry. "In a democracy, Vidya Bharati kind of schools shouldn't even exist because of the hatred they have been spreading against minorities. But at least they were only RSS schools. By affiliating them to national institutions, particularly defence, the government is bringing unspeakable danger to



the country. This is bound to infect the defence forces with a majoritarian, communal outlook.”

Infamous for her speeches leading to the demolition of Babri Masjid in December 1992, historian Tanika Sarkar described Ritambhara and her speeches as “the single most powerful instrument for whipping up anti-Muslim violence.” The Liberhan Commission which probed the Babri

Masjid demolition in Ayodhya, accused 68 people including Ritambhara of leading the country “to the brink of communal discord.”

She remains significant within the Sangh Parivar and close to several BJP leaders. Union Home Minister Amit Shah travelled to Vrindavan in December 2023 to wish her on her birthday. In January, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated an

all-girls Samvid Gurukulam Girls Sainik School. During the ceremony, Singh commended Ritambhara for her pivotal role in the Ram temple movement. “Didi Ma [Ritambhara] made a significant contribution during the Ram temple movement. She has considered society as her family,” Singh was quoted by the news agency Press Trust of India. □□□

[Courtesy: The Reporters' Collective]

## DISTORTING HISTORY

# Swatantraveer Savarkar

*Ram Puniyani*

WITH THE ASCENDANCE of the majoritarian politics, identity politics related divisive issue and the ideology of Hindu nationalism, many in the film World have been coming out with films which promote a particular narrative, a divisive one, which is based on sectarian views of politics and history. The common theme among these is a tilting of truth and in most cases glorification of Hindu Nationalist icons. The clever undermining of truth and building up of ‘fiction as fact’ is the underlying theme of most of these films. One of these was heavily promoted by the likes of Prime Minister Modi and RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat; ‘Kashmir files’. The affluent BJP supporters bought the tickets of this film in bulk and distributed these in their areas to encourage people to watch this. The worthies who promoted these claimed that finally the truth of these events is being brought to fore.

Another one was Kerala Story, where the figures of those being converted to Islam and recruited for IS were exaggerated to the sky. Many other such fiction like films flopped at the box office like 72 Hoorain, which tried to present ‘Islamic Terrorism’, presenting the political problem as a religious one. This film

suppressed the social understanding that similar allurements of Apsaras in Swarg and Fairies in Heaven are also there in the mythologies of other religions.

These films were mainly to promote Islamophobia. On another level, the film on Godse (2022) was an attempt to glorify Godse by putting together many falsehoods that Gandhi did not try to save Bhagat Singh from hanging and he opposed the Congress resolution mourning Bhagat Singh’s death. And now comes the film ‘Swatantraveer Savarkar’ by Randeep Hooda. This one takes the fictions as truth at a higher level. It claims that Bhagat Singh went to meet Savarkar and told him that he wants to translate his book, ‘First War of Independence’ from Marathi to English!

What is the truth? Many revolutionaries read this book and appreciated it. The fact is the book was written in Marathi around 1908 or so and was translated into English a year later. Bhagat Singh was born in 1907 and as a matter of fact never met Savarkar in his life!

The film shows Savarkar stating that ‘we shall win Independence by 1912 i.e. 35 years before we actually got Independence’. The fact is that Savarkar was in Andamans

from 1910 and had started writing mercy petitions and by 1912 had written three of them. In these petitions he had sought apology from the British for his earlier actions and committed to serve the British loyally if he is released. And that’s what he did after his release by the British. India’s freedom struggle picked steam in 1920 when due to the Non-Cooperation movement, most of the people started associating with the freedom struggle.

Film goes on to question why no Congressman was sent to Andamans and most of them were sent to Indian jails alone. This may not be factually true. As such after 1920 the anti-British movement took the path of non-violence led by Gandhi-INC. The sentences given to them were of different types like imprisonment in jails. Andaman or hanging (Like for Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru) were for involvement in acts of violence. As non-violence was the basic credo of the movement led by Gandhi they were neither sentenced to death nor sent to Andamans.

The film argues that the Country got Independence not through non-violence but through violence. The major revolutionaries operating in India belonged to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. After Bhagat Singh and his comrades were killed or hanged there was no major violent movement. Savarkar’s Abhinav Bharat had

abandoned anti-British stance with Savarkar's mercy petitions. Subhash Bose, who formed Azad Hind Fauz, was killed in 1945 and the soldiers of Azad Hind Fauz were imprisoned and kept in Red Fort as prisoners. It was the INC which formed a committee to defend these soldiers. In this Nehru had taken the lead to form the committee for release of these prisoners of war.

There are claims in the film that it was Savarkar who advised Bose to form the army and to fight the British. This is totally in contrast to what are the real facts. Bose after leaving Congress had made up his mind to fight the British through armed might with the help of Germany and Japan. When Bose was fighting against British, Savarkar was urging Hindu Mahasabha to get the

Hindus recruited to British army, to help British,

"Addressing the Mahasabha's Calcutta session, Savarkar urged all universities, colleges and schools to 'secure entry into military forces for youths in any and every way'. When Gandhi had launched his individual satyagraha the following year, Savarkar, at the Mahasabha session held in December 1940 in Madura, encouraged Hindu men to enlist in 'various branches of British armed forces en masse'."

About Savarkar, Subhash Chandra Bose wrote: "Savarkar seemed to be oblivious of the international situation and was only thinking how Hindus could secure military training by entering Britain's army in India." Bose concluded that "...nothing could be expected from

either the Muslim League or the Hindu Mahasabha."

Bose in an address to Indians via Azad Hind Radio said "I would request Mr Jinnah, Mr Savarkar and to all those who still think of a compromise with the British to realise once and for all that in the world of tomorrow there will be no British Empire".

As far as associating Savarkar with Subhash Bose in the film, Chandra Kumar Bose, grand nephew of Netaji after seeing the trailer told Hooda, "Please refrain from linking Netaji with Savarkar. Netaji was an inclusive secular leader and patriot of patriots."

The film is yet another one based on distorting the truth to strengthen the Hindu Nationalist politics, with an eye on the 2024 elections. □□□

## LETTERS

### **The Places of Worship Act, 1991**

The recent controversies surrounding the Places of Worship Act, 1991 have posed significant challenges to one of the most cherished tenets of secularism—faith. Faith is a deeply personal matter, constituting the right of individuals to their personal relations with their maker, creator, or cosmos. The Act not only seeks to protect the status quo of existing places of worship but also safeguards the faith of the people attached to these places.

Religion, being a fundamental aspect of human nature, deserves protection akin to the protection of people's natural rights. The assertion of religious freedom affirms the claim of human nature on behalf of human beings, as it allows individuals to express their beliefs without fear of suppression or persecution. However, recent events surrounding the Act have raised concerns about the secular ethos of the nation.

Justice Thakur, in the case of

Abhiram Singh v C D Commachen, (2017)2 SCC 629 emphasised the importance of remaining aligned with constitutional provisions and ethos while interpreting legislative provisions. The state is obligated to allow complete freedom for practising, professing, and propagating religious faith, respecting individual choices and preferences in matters of religion.

However, the judiciary's interpretation of religious matters has sometimes been contentious, with courts attempting to dictate beliefs rather than protect them. This trend undermines the secular ethos of the nation and risks eroding the foundational principles of the Indian Constitution.

The importance of safeguarding minority rights and preserving communal harmony cannot be overstated. The Places of Worship Act, 1991, was enacted to protect the religious rights of all sections of society and prevent the dominance of the majority over minority communities. Any attempts to reinterpret history or promote divisive narratives through proxy litigation undermine the pluralistic

ethos of the nation and must be strongly condemned.

**Socialist Party (India)**

### **Shoma Sen Gets Bail**

The Supreme Court on April 5 granted bail to Professor Shoma Sen, accused in the Bhima Koregaon case. She was arrested in 2018. Shoma Sen is a former professor at Nagpur University. She was booked under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act 1967 (UAPA) for alleged Maoist links in connection with the Bhima Koregaon case. Shoma Sen will not be able to go out of Maharashtra during the bail period without informing the Special Court. They will have to give information about their mobile number.

In the year 2018, Pune Police had made several arrests in the Bhima-Koregaon caste violence case. Apart from Shoma Sen, Surendra Gadling, Mahesh Raut, Sudhir Dhawale and Rona Wilson were arrested from different cities. Nagpur University suspended her for alleged Maoist links.

Shoma Sen is a human rights activist. After her arrest, daughter Komal Sen alleged that she had never

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been arrested or questioned before. She had claimed that apart from Dhawale, Shoma did not know any of the arrested people. The political environment of the country has become such that no one is ready to listen to the people of the so-called lower community and when they speak, it becomes necessary to put them down.

06-04-2024

**Rahul Mahajan**

### **Democracy & Ecology for All**

The next phase of the ongoing struggle in Ladakh, for the 6th Schedule has begun. Recently, renowned environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk completed his 21-day hunger strike. Alongside him, thousands of Ladakhi citizens participated in this movement, receiving support from all over the country. Yet, the Indian government remains silent and has not engaged in meaningful dialogue with the activists and people.

The Leh Apex Body (LAB) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) are raising two main demands:

1. Grant statehood to Ladakh and initiate democratic processes in the region.
2. Include Ladakh in the Schedule 6 of the Constitution, giving local communities the right to self-determination and decision-making.

These demands for democratic rights should be supported as they are aimed at protecting the Himalayas from centrally imposed 'development' plans that destroy the environment and unjustly profit the corporations.

Gandhiji's longest hunger strike lasted 21 days. Sonam Wagchuk and other local activists are taking inspiration from the Dandi March to organise the Pashmina March. This is a historic moment.

National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), supports the Ladakh movement, and will express solidarity through active participation from across the country.

Articles 243 and 244 of the Constitution, as well as the 73rd and 74th Amendments broadly cover the legal framework for de-centralised governance in tribal, rural and urban areas. Currently, the Sixth Schedule is applicable to four north-eastern states and Fifth Schedule to 10 other states that facilitate local democratic participation through laws like the PESA (Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. The three-tier frameworks through the Panchayati Raj Acts and Municipality Acts in rural and urban areas, that includes Gram Sabhas and Ward Sabhas are meant to be key decision-making bodies, although often neglected.

While there are many successful examples of people's movements and interventions across India, leading to assertion of these rights, a lot more needs to be done, especially in today's time of centralisation and corporate loot.

**NAPM**

### **Terrorising Voters**

After the Election Commission of India announced the date for the 2024 Elections, the ruling party is on a systematic campaign to instil fear amongst citizens owing allegiance to opposition political parties. The arrest of Arvind Kejriwal, Chief Minister of Delhi demonstrates this. The Modi Government used the services of the police and Para-military; central investigative agencies; judiciary—trial court, high court, Supreme Court; and corporate media to send a political message to voters who are forced to see 24×7 in all the TV channels how their popular leader gets arrested and paraded like a common criminal. This has a chilling effect on voters who may decide not to come out of their houses on the voting day; or may be forced to vote for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The undecided voter may swing towards the BJP out of fear; this constitutes voter suppression and intimidation.

**P S Sahni****PIL Watch Group**

### **The Shape of Things to Come**

In 2014, the BJP had polled 31% of polled votes. While this was pretty much slated to come down in 2019, it actually went up to 37%—under the impact of Pulwama-Balakot. This time, as yet, India had Ram Mandir: Modi has provided (homeless) Lord Ram an appropriate shelter. Then the Electoral Bonds!

Of course, the narratives of Vikash v Vinash form the larger backdrop. As compared to 2019, (i) the poison of Hindutva—with a proactive state machinery at its service—has spread wider and deeper and (ii) the "field" has turned significantly more tilted—via the blatant weaponisation of ED, IT, CBI, ECI and also the mainstream media and the Courts largely going with the regime.

Yet, it's still not Putin's Russia, rather Erdogan's Turkey. So, it's the final chance and it's for all those opposed to this monstrous regime—the political parties, civil society organisations, conscientious individuals—to try their utmost, in an admittedly very tough situation to defeat BJP.

And, finally, a short excerpt from an appeal by the CPIML [Liberation].

'In the ten years of Modi rule, the undermining of parliamentary democracy has already reached an alarming level. And now the government is aiming at manufacturing a 400+ majority to inflict more damaging blows to the Constitution. A third successive term for the Modi government will be an absolute disaster for the constitution and parliamentary democracy, for India's cultural diversity and everyday existence.

The government is using every unconstitutional measure and unscrupulous trick to hold on to power with the backing of its corporate cronies and the Godi Media'.

**Sukla Sen**

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