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Business As Usual

SUMMER OR WINTER POLITICAL PLAYERS PLAY IT FINE. THEY know the art of transforming bad things into good in their favour even in adverse weather. Then they resort to time-testing practice of diverting public attention to areas of secondary issues while suppressing the oppressive conditions in which people are being forced to struggle for sheer survival. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] leaders spread lies day in and day out but the perennially divided Opposition fails to respond. Modi's guarantee of job creation and job distribution is as baseless as anything else. The foremost concerns for voters waiting in queues are rising prices and unemployment, as revealed in a pre-poll survey by the Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).

Only a few weeks ago the International Labour Organisation [ILO] stated that more than 80 percent of India's unemployed workforce comprises its youth. As for the educated unemployed the scenario is horrible. The same report said that the proportion of young individuals with secondary education or higher, among the total unemployed youth surged from 35.2 percent in 2000 to 65.7 percent in 2022—in just two years and that too in Modi's regime. Tragically enough graduate degree holders are mostly unemployed. What is more, in 2022, women not engaged in employment, education, or training, constituted nearly five times higher than the proportion of their male counterparts. In truth job opportunities at all levels have gone down drastically in the last five years of BJP rule. This is how Modi's guarantee works in what they call 'fifth largest economy' with dozens of billionaires looting natural resources, destroying ecological balance and displacing thousands of marginalised people in the name of development with impunity. Employment or unemployment situation is very critical. Getting even a low-paid job in informal sector without any social security has become much more difficult now. The magnitude of unemployment is so alarming and perverse that the conventional rural-urban divide has become irrelevant. For one thing unemployment crisis is not restricted to any particular spatial location. People find it hard to get economically sustainable occupations in big cities, small towns and even in villages.

The CSDS survey also points out how inflation is ruining middle class families. With inflation soaring, prices of essential commodities too continue to rise in tandem. The rising costs affected primarily the economically disadvantaged—Dalits, Muslims and scheduled caste people. They find it

increasingly difficult to maintain minimum standard of living in the ever-changing consumer society of the country.

As for the perennially divided Opposition the less said the better. They are always on the defensive, allowing BJP to set the agenda. Modi's biggest show-case of democracy is also the biggest prison house in the world. Opposition parties, including left parties hardly find any rationale in demanding release of thousands of political prisoners languishing in jails for years without any trial and develop mass movement against the elected autocracy over which Modi presides. Opposition parties are no less brutal than Modi's party where

they are in power in states. In a way all of them are worshippers of market and allow the invisible hands to control the price mechanism without being opposed in sustained manner. Just on the eve of announcement of general elections drug companies increased prices of 800 medicines, including life-saving ones without any murmur from any quarters. Not for nothing the drug companies purchased electoral bonds in such huge quantities. Again there is no effective protest against surge in prices of drugs.

The only issue that gets prominence in electoral culture is corruption. But no party is in a position to derive extra mileage from anti-corruption campaigns launched by dif-

ferent parties, ruling parties included. Fifty-five percent of respondents to CSDS survey indicated an increase in corruption over the past five years, with 25 percent attributing it to the Centre and 16 percent to the states. So no party is clean and thus anti-corruption agitation in most cases gets bogged down in the quagmire of inactivity. The end result: the status quo continues. The CSDS survey was conducted in 400 polling stations spread across 100 Assembly Constituencies in 100 Parliamentary Constituencies. How far this will affect the voter's psyche is anybody's guess because corruption is now a way of life in India's political culture. □□□

14-04-2024

COMMENT

Election and Deep Fakes

ON JANUARY 23, AN ICON OF Tamil cinema and politics, M Karunanidhi appeared before a live audience on a large projected screen, to congratulate his 82-year-old friend and fellow politician TR Baalu on the launch of his autobiographical book.

Dressed in his trademark black sunglasses, white shirt, and a yellow shawl around his shoulders—Karunanidhi's style was spot on. In his eight-minute speech, the veteran poet-turned-politician congratulated the book's author but was also effusive in his praise for the able leadership of MK Stalin, his son and the current leader of the state.

Karunanidhi has been dead since 2018.

This was the third time, in the past six months, that the popular leader of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party was resurrected using artificial intelligence (AI) for such public events.

“When the COVID pandemic ravaged the world, our Chief Minister ran in the direction of panicked

voices of people,” Karunanidhi said. “The nation knows the way you fought to save the lives of people, and so do I.”

Senthil Nayagam, founder of Muonium, the AI media tech firm that made the deep fake of Karunanidhi video, told Al Jazeera that “there is a market opening up [for such deep fakes].... You can attribute some statements to a particular person and that kind of gives more value to it”.

AI Karunanidhi's first public appearance was at a local media event last year in September, which was followed up by another for a campaign by his party members. The resurrected leader often felicitates party workers and specifically praises the leadership of his son MK Stalin—with the aim of boosting his popularity.

At the January book launch, AI Karunanidhi recounted everything from pardoning student debt and cash giveaways for the poor, to female-friendly policies and roping in

investments—a list of his son's achievements over the years that had propelled the state forward.

Karunanidhi's last public interview was in 2016, before his voice turned coarse, and his body frail. Nayagam used publicly available data of Karunanidhi to train a speech model and recreated the 1990s likeness of the leader when he was much younger. The script for the prerecorded AI speech was supplied by the local DMK cadre, and was vetted by party personnel.

As per local media reports, the reaction to these AI videos has prompted the DMK party leadership to think of creating AI Karunanidhi campaign speeches in the ensuing 2024 parliamentary election campaign.

But it has also raised some troubling ethical and legal questions: The use of AI to create synthetic audio and video by a living person who has signed off on the content is one thing. It is quite another to resurrect a dead person and ascribe opinions to them.

But the genie is already out of the bottle. According to Diggaj Mogra, director of Jarvis Consulting, one of India's largest political consultancies,

AI-facilitated content marketing for elections campaigns, including out-bound voice calls and SMS, avatar creation, personalised media outreach, and AI-created multilingual creatives on social media is an estimated \$60m market opportunity in India this election year.

Globally, over 60 countries are set to hold national elections in 2024, and the possible misuse of artificial intelligence to influence public opinion has caused a moral panic, turning into a global hot-button issue. □□□

[Contributed by Nilesch Christopher of Al Jazeera]

NOTE

Defeating a Dictator

Bhabani Shankar Nayak writes:

THE ENSUING GENERAL election in India [from April 19, 2024, to June 1, 2024], to elect the 543 members of the 18th Lok Sabha and the new Government of India, carries immense significance for the preservation of India's identity as a liberal, secular, and constitutional democracy. The prevailing fascist ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), coupled with the authoritarian rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the dictatorship of Mr Narendra Modi, poses a grave threat to every democratic achievement of the Indian working people. Their agenda appears to be focused on serving the interests of crony capitalists entrenched in Hindutva politics. These unscrupulous crony capitalists are driven by a desire to monopolise all natural resources and state revenues, prioritising the expansion of their business empires at the expense of India and its citizens.

Indian democracy and its values are experiencing a decline under the Hindutva approach to public governance, characterised by the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment without trial of opposition leaders, academics, researchers, journalists, writers, political figures, writers, and social activists. This suppression is indicative of a broader erosion of democratic values. Constitutional institutions and laws are being undermined to sup-

press any form of opposition to Hindutva fascism and to stifle the struggles for the survival of Indian democracy. The defeat of the Modi-led BJP government is imperative to rejuvenate India as a pluralistic society founded on constitutional democracy. Reinstating respect for democratic principles and ensuring the protection of fundamental rights are essential steps towards preserving the integrity of Indian democracy.

Contrary to its purported intentions, Hindutva politics does not serve the interests of Hindus or Indians at large. Instead, it represents a perilous path, akin to a suicidal trap, fuelled by deceptive propaganda. Those advocating Hindutva ideology are not true nationalists; rather, they are adept practitioners of deceptive politics, employing diversionary tactics to further their agenda and promote corporate capitalism in India.

Approximately 970 million (97 crore) Indians, out of a total population of 1.44 billion (144 crore), are eligible to participate in the upcoming general elections. These numbers represent more than mere entries in the spreadsheets of political parties and the Election Commission of India; they signify Indian citizens with a keen political consciousness. The united electoral consciousness and collective struggle of these 970 million Indians possess the potential

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to consign Hindutva's electoral prospects to the annals of Indian political history. By defeating Modi, the BJP, and the RSS, they can pave the way for authoring a new chapter in Indian political discourse, one that seeks to rejuvenate Indian constitutional democracy on the bedrock of scientific principles and secular values. This collective effort holds the promise of steering India towards a future founded on peace, solidarity, science, secularism, inclusivity, rationality, and pluralism.

Should Modi, the BJP, and the RSS emerge victorious in the upcoming elections, the unchecked cocktail of arrogance and ignorance of Hindutva ideology will engulf the nation, laying waste to the beauty and diversity inherent in India.

History has borne witness to the downfall of every dictator and their oppressive schemes. But Hitler was not stopped until it was too late. Modi must be stopped now otherwise people will have to live in perpetual fear-psychosis. □□□

14-04-2024

ETHICAL PROBLEM FOR LEFT

Karl Liebknecht to Ben Arad

Yorgos Mitralias

THE REVELATION OF THE enormous ethical problem caused to the international left by the Russian war in Ukraine and the Israeli war in Gaza, is shaking it to such an extent that it is losing its internationalist and humanist compass, in other words, its very *raison d'être*! With the inevitable and nightmarish consequence to pave the way to the more or less fascist international far right!

Ethical deficit is evident in the attitude of many on the Left to Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinian people. And the unfortunate thing is that this problem has taken on enormous dimensions in Israel and the Diaspora. That is, precisely where the Left could and should play a decisive role in the struggle for an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of the Israeli army from Gaza and the occupied territories, as well as in supporting the Palestinians and their right to life and freedom.

This is a tragic and at the same time catastrophic development, similar to that which forever marked the international left in the week following the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914: the same withdrawal, literally overnight, of the vast majority of people on the Left in defence of their nation-state, the same demonstration of exacerbated patriotism, the same rallying to the armed defenders of the fatherland, and the same betrayal of the oaths of eternal fidelity to internationalist and humanist principles that some had been accustomed to making for decades.

It's no coincidence that in an article emblematic of this attitude, written by a well-known left-wing journalist, entitled "Israel is at a critical

crossroads", published on April 2 by a Greek business daily, Israel's present and future are mentioned without the slightest reference and without a single word (!) being devoted to the destruction of Gaza and its tens of thousands of dead civilians! As if all this not only didn't concern Israel, which provoked it and continues to do so, but didn't have a crucial impact on its own present and future! And what's more, the same article seems to be suffering from a sudden loss of memory, as it repeats that all the suffering began exclusively... on October 7 with the Hamas terrorist attack, as if the 76-year occupation of Palestinian land and the daily inhuman oppression of Palestinians by the Israeli state, which denies them the most basic democratic rights and freedoms, had never happened.

But there's also something serious enough to go unnoticed, which differentiates the current betrayals from the - alas, very many - past betrayals of internationalist and humanist oaths by the Left and people on the Left. Indeed, unlike in the past, no one can now say that they didn't know and didn't see the daily display of barbarity by their own state, in order to justify their attitude. From now on, all systematic and planned "patriotic" atrocities are broadcast "live", and no-one can hide behind alleged ignorance of the incredible suffering inflicted on Ukrainians, and even more so on Palestinian civilians.

Just as, moreover, none of the Israeli and diasporic leftists can justify their attitude by hiding behind the crimes of Hamas and invoking the absence of an alternative, when even the Israeli media can no longer keep quiet and evoke the case of at least

one Israeli who, like another Karl Liebknecht in faraway Berlin in August 1914, publicly protests, even alone, against the so sad and frightening warmongering "national unity" of his compatriots. This is the courageous young Israeli internationalist Ben Arad, who is in fact saving the honour of the entire Israeli and international left, by publicly declaring that he chooses to go to prison here and now rather than perform his compulsory military service in an Israeli army distinguished by its genocidal operations and countless war crimes! (1) And of course, it's no coincidence that Ben Arad willingly assumes the label of "traitor" that his compatriots have not failed to hurl at him, nor that on his balcony flies not the national flag with blue the Star of David, but the red flag once waved by so many great Jewish internationalist revolutionaries...

But in reality, it is the international left as a whole that is shaken by a major ethical crisis, as it is divided into two camps characterised by their symmetrical amorality: that of the supporters of the Ukrainian resistance who do not support the Palestinian resistance. And those who support the Palestinians but refuse to support the Ukrainians. The consequences of this situation are obvious and predictable: a total lack of credibility and the inevitable bankruptcy of the Left, which keeps applying double standards, despite the fact that the wars of extermination launched by Putin's Russia and Netanyahu's Israel against the Ukrainian and Palestinian peoples have far more similarities than differences. After all, Russia's Foreign Minister and Putin's right-hand man, Sergei Lavrov, would not contradict this stand when he insists categorically that "Israel pursues similar objectives to Russia", since it is doing in Gaza what Russia is doing in Ukraine. □□

A LETTER TO PRESIDENT LULA

In Defence of Prabir Purkayastha

[Letter sent to President Lula in the second week of March, signed by representatives of the eight Brazilian organisations that created the World Social Forum in January 2001. The worldwide campaign in defence of Prabir's freedom joins the campaign for Assange's release and will have a new letter to the UN Secretary General, António Guterres.]

Dear President Lula,

WRITING TO YOU ARE old comrades. We are members of the group that created the World Social Forum and helped to spread it around the world. We are reaching out to communicate a grave matter and to request your support. The Indian journalist Prabir Purkayastha, one of the organisers of the World Social Forum in India in 2004, is currently imprisoned at the age of 78. He has been incarcerated for three months by the regime of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This imprisonment is political in nature. It aims to silence Newsclick, a democratic publication supportive of social movements, created and led by Prabir. It is based on an ultra-authoritarian law, previously declared as an attack on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by UN rapporteurs. As India, along with Brazil, is present in the BRICS, we believe that you can contribute to rectifying this injustice and this assault on political freedoms.

You will recognise, President, similarities between Prabir's imprisonment and your own arbitrary and infamous incarceration. The detention order is based on a trivial fact: a newspaper article. On August 5th of last year, The New York Times published a piece about an alleged international media network that supported China. It was said to be sponsored by an American millionaire, Neville Roy Singhan—who had become wealthy during the internet platform boom and allegedly decided to support publications with

editorial positions favourable to Beijing. Notice the hypocrisy, President. Media outlets favourable to large economic groups receive floods of money all the time, from local and international companies interested in maintaining the status quo. Yet they produce fake "reports" to complain that a single wealthy man supposedly decided to strengthen those who think differently.

Prabir's imprisonment was initially supposed to last for 6 days, but it has been extended since October 3rd and may continue indefinitely. In August 2014, the Indian parliament approved an amendment to the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) in a summary manner (24 days of processing in both legislative houses). Established since 1963, it was completely disfigured. The new text allows the government to designate groups or individuals as "terrorism suspects". The "evidence" can be as fragile as that which victimised Prabir. But citizens identified as suspects are kept in custody for the duration of the "investigations".

The "preventive" detentions are being extended until they turn into sentences without trial. Data from the Indian government itself pointed out, in 2022, the mass political imprisonment resulting from this provision. In four years, 24,134 people had been arrested under the UAPA. Of these, only 589 were brought to trial (386 of whom were acquitted). 23,545 remained imprisoned—or 97.5% of the total...

The law also authorises the confiscation of the assets of the individuals under investigation—which has

already occurred with the publication led by Prabir, Newsclick. On the eve of Christmas 2023, the newspaper's bank accounts were frozen. Salaries and other commitments have not been paid since then. The suffocation attempt is evident.

The Indian government wants to punish Prabir for his success. Founded in 2009, Newsclick has achieved great audience and impact. It produced compelling news and analyses about events in India and the world, advocating a clearly anti-neoliberal interpretation. It also allied itself with significant social movements, such as the major national farmers' protest of 2020-2021. This struggle resulted in the harshest defeat suffered by Modi in ten years of office, forcing him to abandon a set of counter-reforms that threatened peasant production and handed over the countryside to corporations.

Prabir's trajectory has been marked, for over 50 years, by social struggles and the desire to build a fairer world. You will remember, President, a significant event in which he was involved. In December 1984, then young engineers, Prabir and a colleague, reported to the world the tragedy of Bhopal. As founders, in 1978, of the Delhi Science Forum, they were called upon to investigate

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the disaster at an old Union Carbide warehouse, where pesticides were produced. The negligence of the American multinational had favoured, they found, the leakage of a highly lethal substance—methyl isocyanate. The shadow of death spread over the city. About 20 thousand people were poisoned and died in the following hours and days. Another 600 thousand still suffer from the consequences.

Prabir graduated in Engineering from the universities of Calcutta and Allahabad. He joined the Communist Party of India in 1970. In 1975, he enrolled in the School of Computing and Systems Science at Jawaharlal Nehru University. He worked in the information technology and energy sectors for over 40 years and served on Indian government committees related to these issues. In “Keeping up the good fight,” an autobiographical book released weeks ago, already with the author imprisoned, he writes: “I discovered that I had three ‘passions,’

and that I would always live with them: Science, Technology, and, of course, Politics. Only over time did it become clear how they would combine in the following decades.”

His passions combined in Prabir’s relentless fight to free knowledge from the mercantile barriers that limit its circulation. Among other initiatives, he articulated in India the international Knowledge Commons movement, which proposes alternatives to the concept and mechanisms of “intellectual property,” and the Free Software Foundation.

Imprisoned shortly before becoming an octogenarian, Prabir does not give up. He refuses the victim status. In his memoirs, he explains: “Victimisation robs us of the role of participants in creating history. It reduces us to mere objects. Instead, I would like to take on the perspective of the people who make history. Yes, the current governments wield powers that seem to belittle individuals and their organisations. But it is the people and their actions

that ultimately determine History; not as much as we would like or how, but in ways that neither the people nor their rulers can anticipate.”

And he concludes, with subtle irony: “I am as old as the Indian republic. In my life of over 75 years, I have learned a thing or two—maybe even three. I have learned how I can be a part of my country, rich and diverse, and at the same time a part of an even larger, more complex, and fascinating world. All I need to do is fight for a better world for all.”

This human being, Prabir Purkayastha, needs to be free, President Lula. A word from you to Narendra Modi can make a difference.

Antonio Martins

Cândido Grzybowski

Chico Whitaker

João Pedro Stedile

Maria Luísa Mendonça

Oded Grajew

Sérgio Haddad

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OPPOSITION UNITY

Riddles Remain Unresolved

Manas Bakshi

AS ELECTION WEATHER IS hotting up politics of blame game has begun while no party is highlighting the basic issues regarding unemployment, price rise, privatisation and all that. It’s more like a shadow-boxing. Exploring the possibility of a conglomerate of some opposition parties—INDIA by name—for a coalition at the national level in 2024 seemed not utopian at the beginning—in view of the fact that consecutive meetings—the first one having been held at Patna—of divergent political forces and/or groups have so far taken place. And the most recent one on 31st March—a rally at the Ramlila Maidan in Delhi—

is said to be in demand for ‘Loktantra Bachao’ which means—save democracy.

Attended by almost all the parties under the canopy of INDIA, the rally also laid emphasis on immediate release of Delhi’s Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal who was arrested ‘by ED in the excise policy case’ and of Hemant Soren, ex-CM of Jharkhand. On the other hand, Prime Minister Narendra Modi avowed in a rally at Meerut on the same day that “It is this war on graft that has put biggies in jail” and “action against corrupt will continue”.

At the outset when the meeting of INDIA was held at Patna, apparently there was no dearth of enthusiasm to

form a strong opposition against the ruling dispensation at the centre. A coordination committee for formulating election strategy was formed comprising fourteen members, old and young, from the constituent members of INDIA like Sharad Pawar (NCP), T.R Balu (DMK), D Raja (CPI), K C Venugopal (Cong) from the aged group and Tejashi Yadav (RJD) Abhisek Banerjee (TMC), Raghav Chadda (AAP) from the youth—to mention a few. But hurdles started surfacing even before the alliance took off. properly.

While Bihar C M Nitish Kumar’s return to the BJP-led National Democratic alliance (NDA) dealt a body blow to the opposition INDIA bloc far ahead of the election, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) decided to go it solo. Its chief, Mayawati contended that her party would contest the 2024 polls

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alone but it would remain open to a post-poll alliance provided it was given adequate representation in the government. Quite in conformity with this, W B Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, a key player in formation of INDIA 'formally pulled the plug on the INDIA effort in Bengal' claiming all 42 Lok Sabha contests for the TMC.

That the prospect of India as a united force seems to be in a shambles in view of some of the recent strategic developments is not without reason. And that was evident when the Bharat Jodo Yatra followed by Naya Yatra took place. It gained support in varied proportions in some states—no doubt. In Assam, CPM and TMC both featured—whatever is the extent. But inconsistency loomed large with both the parties staying away when it came to West Bengal. Neither of the parties came forward to lend support to the Yatra on the ground that they were not invited though, finally, CPM leaders like Md. Salim and Sujan Chakrabarty joined the Yatra. Not only that, on 13.2.24 CPM and Congress joined hands in the procession to demonstrate solidarity as also highlight the Sandeshkhali turbulence issue.

Needless to point out that issues to be addressed at national level may differ with issues at state level where regional politics holds sway; but unfortunately, one can hardly expect unison on ideological standpoints of parties coming together at present to fulfil some common objectives. Which is why temporary nexus—often hurried—takes place on some specific issues which take little time to jumble up and peter out. Earlier experiences of coalition governments at the centre have not been as soothing as were expected at the time the governments were formed.

While the Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge opines that 'an alliance can happen anytime', TMC chief affirms 'CPM and Congress claim to be part of INDIA but there is

no alliance actually'. The point is to be viewed with an eye to how far the Modi factor will be effective in the ensuing Lok Sabha polls; because, in 2023 Assembly polls, the saffron storm that swept Madhya Pradesh, Chattishgarh and Rajasthan also bore another indication; and it was that BJP's pulling ahead in those states could be well attributed to Congress' taking victory in those states for granted or failing to read the mood of the people there. With BRS not performing so well, whatever Congress gained in Telangana could bring it some comfort but BJP also fared well—its number rising from one to nine.

For one thing neither CPM nor Congress is supposed to budge an inch from their stand of distancing from TMC as far as the state-level politics of West Bengal is concerned. While Congress, AAP and Shiv Sena have different way of thinking with regard to polls in Delhi, Punjab, Haryana and Maharashtra, UDF and LDF in Kerala will hardly come together for a compromised equation though, in Bihar and West Bengal, it has happened. As everyone knows 'wrestling' at state level and coalition at centre bear no indication of healthy politics—a must for opposition unity. Again, the initial difference of AAP with Congress on denouncing the Delhi ordinance issue and its earlier stance on Uniform Civil Code are factors to reckon with if chalking out a strategy for fighting together BJP is the target.

As a matter of fact, allegation of state against centre is often of deprivation but, this time, it is accompanied with two other issues—one of electoral bond and the other is of CAA. The first one will take time to be resolved since hardly a political party can claim to be sacrosanct in this respect; but the other one—CAA—is sensitive. And the controversy over the threat of implementation of Citi-

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zenship Amendment Act in BJP-dominated states and its avoidance in non-BJP states will continue to sting. Despite BJP's assurance that CAA concerns only those ousted from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh before 31.12.2014 but others including Muslims have no reason to be apprehensive of it, "Trinamul and the Left will try to intimidate" people harping on the issue. So, it depends on how well can BJP defend CAA and how effectively the opposition can clarify the threat behind CAA.

Even after all this, it is to be admitted that bringing heterogeneous political segments under the same umbrella for attaining some common minimum objectives to elbow out a regimented political party like BJP—despite some of its inherent drawbacks—is not a cakewalk. The Patna meeting was not devoid of such inconsistencies as have erupted later. For a viable alternative to BJP, the differences of opinion between Non-NDA political parties need to be resolved first—because the line of political thinking and dynamics moving the regional parties are not always the same as to ensure an easy consensus at national level. More so when it comes to their political attitude and approach to positioning of Congress without which the venture is bound to remain incomplete. □□□

STATEMENT OF CONCERNED CATHOLICS

The 'Kerala Story'

ON THURSDAY 4 APRIL 2024, Pope Francis in a very incisive message to the participants in the First Colloquium between the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, held in the Vatican said, "We need to support each other in fostering harmony between religions, ethnic groups and cultures. In particular, I want to emphasize three aspects...: respect for diversity, commitment to our common home and the promotion of peace."

Unfortunately, on that very day, in Kerala, the Idukki Diocese, of the Syro-Malabar Church screened a controversial film 'The Kerala Story'. The film was shown to students of Stds. X to XII, as part of the Annual Summer Catechism programme. On 8 April, several English and vernacular media both in Kerala and elsewhere, detailed this event under the title, 'Idukki Diocese

screens 'The Kerala Story' for Catechism Students'. A spokesperson of the Diocese has gone on record saying that the film was 'shown to Christian students to raise awareness about the issue of 'Love Jihad'.'

That a Catholic Diocese has screened this film, defies logic! First of all, the movie is clearly a propaganda film created to further the Hindutva narrative that is trying to destroy the secular nature of India. Secondly, it is replete with lies, factual inaccuracies and half-truths; so much so, that the director of the movie, publicly admitted falsehood and had to correct the figures given in the original curtain-raiser from "32,000 girls embracing Islam to just THREE!"; besides ten obnoxious scenes, had to be deleted before the Censor Board gave its certification! Thirdly, and far more importantly, this is a film which goes against the teachings of the Church and the person and message of Jesus.

The decision by the Church authorities to screen the film, is deeply concerning because it actively sows seeds of hatred, intolerance and prejudice, among children, instead of promoting peace, compassion, and acceptance, which are the core values of Christianity. By screening such a propaganda film that is filled with lies, the Idukki Church is instilling negative emotions and discriminatory attitudes towards people of other faiths and failing to teach children about love and respect for all religions and cultures. Such actions can have adverse effects on the future generation and society at large, particularly in the present politically charged context where hate is being weaponised to destroy the country.

Besides, the film has been given

an 'A' certificate by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). How could this film be ever shown to children? Will the Diocese of Idukki now be prosecuted for screening the film to children?

The Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue has emphasised the importance of strengthening and building good relations between Christians and Muslims during this Holy month of Ramadan; the Diocese of Idukki, on the other hand, seems to have chosen to promote conflict and tension between the two communities. Like in the time of Hitler, there are always those in authority in the Churches who wish to kowtow towards those who have political power in order to keep their own 'little empires' safe.

A contextual adaptation of Mathew 23:15 could serve as a reminder to all of us, "woe to you bishops and religious authorities, pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land, to try to ensure that your flock does not desert you, but in the bargain, you make the members of your flock twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."

We the undersigned, whilst strongly condemning this insensitive and unchristian act of the Diocese of Idukki, earnestly urge all Church authorities to do all they can to promote inter-religious, dialogue, reconciliation, fraternity, harmony and peace, remembering that our future as a country, is at stake! □□□

Signed

Dr. Kochurani Abraham, Kerala Adv. Susan Abraham (Bombay High Court) Adv. M A Britto, (Forum for Secularism and Democracy, Tirunelveli) Dr. John Dayal (Ex Member, National Integration Council, GoI, Ex President, All India Catholic Union, New Delhi) Brinelle D'Souza (Chairperson, Centre for Health and Mental Health, TISS, Mumbai) Dr Ruth D'Souza

WOMEN AND CYCLE IN INDIA

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Production: Hema Vaishnavi

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9 April 2024

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ELECTORAL BOND ISSUES

Corruption is Highly Profitable

Arun Kumar

MONEY DONATED BY loss-making companies could be cases of money laundering. However, can the official agencies be trusted to carry out independent investigations against the ruling dispensation?

Daily new exposes of the issues linked to the electoral bonds are appearing in the media. What should have been exposed by the official agencies is being unearthed by the media, thereby testifying to its vibrancy, in spite of its capture by the establishment. With the vast majority of the bonds bought in denominations of Rs 10 lakh and Rs 1 crore, it is clear that these were purchased by the wealthy and businesses. Businesses work to maximise profit by minimising costs. So, expenditure is incurred by businesses to enhance profit.

How do donations lead to more profits? Via manipulations of policies based on quid pro quo. That explains why even companies running at a loss or having little profit donated to the ruling party. Since the donation would have led to increased loss or wiping out the small profit, the benefit must be much greater than the donation.

Corruption is known to be highly profitable.

Returns from donation to the ruling party take many forms. Lucrative contracts, manipulation of policy to favour the business, closing of prosecution for some illegality and overlooking of illegality committed in business. There can also be arm-twisting of businessmen to extract donations. Examples of all these have been revealed by the data on the bonds. Ruling party leaders seem to be unperturbed by these revelations.

The Prime Minister in an interview to Thanthi TV, on April 1, 2024, exuded confidence. He made several points. One, electoral bonds were a mechanism to trace the origins of funding to political parties and bring about transparency in electoral funding. Second, the issue has neither embarrassed the party nor led to a setback to the BJP. Third, the opposition will regret the exposes that have appeared. Fourth, before 2014 no one could tell where the political party funding was coming from. Finally, he said the scheme was good but if there were deficiencies, they could be removed.

What stands out is that he feels that the opposition needs to worry,

not the ruling party. But, more than 50% of the donations went to the ruling party. The implication is that the opposition will be investigated but not the BJP.

Further, the scheme was designed to keep the names of the donors a secret. So, how could the scheme be a transparent mechanism for funding political parties? The names of the donors have come out consequent to the Supreme Court judgment declaring the scheme 'unconstitutional' and asking the State Bank of India to reveal all the data. In fact, according to those who designed the scheme, not only the names of donors but even the trail of funds was not to be made public.

Soon after the Supreme Court judgment came, the Union Home Minister in an interview said, now on, elections would be funded by black money. He implied that electoral bonds were bought with white money, so electoral funding was being done with legitimate funds. He also justified the large sums of funds received by the ruling party by comparing proportionate amounts received by political parties. He argued that per MP in parliament, the BJP received less funds than some opposition parties.

The Home Minister also said that once all the details of the bonds are out, the opposition will not have any face to show. The implication is

that he knew who got how much from whom. But that was contrary to the design. SBI also implied in its initial response that it did not have this record and would require three months to collate the data which was held in two separate silos. S C Garg, secretary in the Ministry of Finance, who was apparently in charge of the design of the scheme in 2018, had also said that there is no way that the donors and the recipients can be matched. This has proved to be incorrect.

The critics and the opposition parties had feared from the start that only the government would get to know who donated how much to which party. The implication was that not only the scheme was opaque, it was open to manipulation by the ruling party. It could squeeze the funding of opposition parties by threatening their donors.

Thanks to the media, quid pro quo and the money trail have been exposed in the case of several of the donations. The official agencies should by now have started to investigate and prosecute. Money donated by loss-making companies and where the donation is far higher than the profit could be cases of money laundering. Donations by unknown companies could be cases of shell companies. Investigation and

prosecution should be quickly launched in these cases.

Can the official agencies be trusted to carry out independent investigations against the ruling dispensation? There is a need for an independent committee monitored by the courts. While the recent experience with the court-appointed committee on the Hindenburg-Adani episode was not very encouraging, there is no other option.

Scroll.in, on March 27, has in detail brought out how "Eutelsat OneWeb, which is in a prime position to get satellite spectrum without an auction, is owned by Bharti Enterprises, UK government, SoftBank, among others". Data shows that Bharti Group donated a total of Rs 150 crore to the ruling party before and after the government introduced a new Telecommunications Bill in December 2023. The Bill was hurriedly passed and became law on Christmas eve.

Bharti Airtel bought bonds worth Rs 100 crore and donated them entirely to the BJP. On November 21, OneWeb got authorisation from the space regulator to qualify to get satellite spectrum. Bharti bought another Rs 50 crore of bonds which were encashed by the BJP on January 12, 2024. Data shows, Bharti group companies Bharti Infratel and

Bharti Telemedia also donated funds.

There is more. Bharti Airtel is the biggest loss-making company donating to the ruling party. Its cumulative loss was Rs 76,954.7 crore, it received a tax refund of Rs 8,250 crore and donated Rs 198 crore, of which 99.7% went to the BJP. Did the company also pay to receive the tax refund?

Just as the Delhi liquor scam has been under investigation by official agencies for the past two years, shouldn't the agencies also pursue the Bharti Airtel case? Similarly, just as in the case of the Aam Aadmi Party, shouldn't businessmen and political leaders be arrested to uncover the truth, since the money trail is evident in black and white in the accounts, unlike in the case of AAP?

The argument that the electoral bonds, declared unconstitutional by the apex court, were brought in for transparency or for financing the elections is incorrect. Data reveals potential quid pro quo with policymakers granting favours to businesses in telecom, pharmaceutical, infrastructure, and so on. All such cases need to be actively pursued since the money trail is revealed by the data. □□□

[Arun Kumar is the author of *The Black Economy in India*. Source: *the wire*]

A NATIONALIST ANTHROPOLOGIST

Haran Chandra Chakladar

**Abhijit Guha*

THE NAME OF HARAN Chandra Chakladar (1874-1958) is not well known in the present day Indian anthropological circles. He was a brilliant anthropologist and not an ivory tower scholar. Chakladar was also a social activist with a very strong anti-colonial spirit, which guided his scholarship and activities.

He was born in a village named Daskhinpara in the Faridpur district of present Bangladesh and graduated in 1896 and obtained his MA degree from the University of Calcutta in 1897. Haran Chandra had deep knowledge in Sanskrit and a number of European languages. He translated a book from Italian to English entitled *The First Outlines of a Sys-*

tematic Anthropology of Asia by a famous Italian physical anthropologist V Giufrida-Ruggeri, which was published by the University of Calcutta in 1921 (Chakladar 1921). He first joined as a lecturer in the then Ripon College (now Surendranath College) and at that time the Department of Anthropology was not opened in the University of Calcutta. Then he joined Calcutta University and organised the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture. In 1920 the Department of Anthropology at the

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University of Calcutta was established and Chakladar's services were requisitioned for the department where he worked for about twenty years and retired in 1937.

Life and works

S K Ray in his invaluable book *Bibliographies of Eminent Indian Anthropologists (with Life-Sketches)* commented:

To some critics, Chakladar was a 'perfectionist' and they feel that perhaps this quality made it difficult for him to contribute papers until he was satisfied with their 'perfection' (Ray 1974:33).

Before joining Ripon College, Chakladar worked for a brief period in the Indian Postal Department. In 1910 he joined the National Council of Education (hereafter NCE) as one of its organisers and teachers and during this period he came in contact with the famous nationalist, revolutionary, and spiritual leader Shri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950). The NCE in Bengal was founded by a group of dedicated Indian nationalists to promote science and technology as part of the nationalist movement (Swadeshi Andolan) and established Bengal National College and Bengal Technical Institute which later merged to form the present Jadavpur University. The major aims of the NCE were to criticise the syllabus and teaching of the University of Calcutta which was founded by the British in 1857. The other aim of the NCE was to create an alternative anti-colonial system of education for the Indians. Haran Chandra Chakladar wholeheartedly joined in this nationalist movement. At this time, Chakladar also came in contact with one of the founders of NCE, Shri Satish Chandra Mukherjee (1865-1948) and Mukherjee's ideological influence was immense in the later life of Chakladar. In 1902 Satish Chandra Mukherjee established the Dawn Society with the aim of spreading the anti-colonial

and nationalist system of education and a monthly organ of the Dawn Society was started.

Haran Chandra Chakladar contributed a good number of articles in this magazine in order to raise the consciousness of the Indians about the poor and wretched conditions of the Bengal peasantry as well as on the rich ancient cultural heritage of India. So, from the very beginning Chakladar wrote research articles with a purpose, which was intimately related with the then anti-colonial struggle against the British government (Raychaudhuri 1958:138-140).

In 1905 Chakladar wrote his remarkable article in the Dawn society magazine entitled 'Fifty years ago—the woes of a class of Bengal peasantry under European Indigo planters'. It is a 19-page full-blooded research article based on archival materials, an exemplar in the history of anthropology in India but curiously omitted by the authentic biographers of Indian anthropology. Take for example, T C Raychaudhuri and S K Ray. T C Raychaudhuri, a former faculty of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta in his two-page obituary on H C Chakladar published in *Man in India* did not mention about this remarkable article of Chakladar, although Raychaudhuri enumerated the article in his select bibliography of Chakladar at the end of the obituary. The same kind of omission could be noticed in the book *Bibliographies of Eminent Indian Anthropologists (with Life-Sketches)* by S K Ray, a reference librarian of the Anthropological Survey of India, Govt. of India, in his article on Chakladar; Ray also mentioned the piece of writing on indigo plantation in the bibliography of Chakladar but did not elaborate on it.

Indigo revolt in the writings of Chakladar

Chakladar's account of the brutal

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and inhuman oppression of the British indigo planters narrated in detail how the ordinary peasants of Bengal disliked the plantation of indigo on the land in which they used to grow food crops. In the inimitable words of Chakladar:

How intense a dislike to the cultivation of indigo had been bred in the minds of the raiyats by ages of such terrible oppression until they abhorred the very name of indigo was reported to the Indigo Commission. In answer to the question of the Commission a raiyat said that even if his throat is cut, he won't sow indigo (Chakladar [1905] 1972: 193).

People now know that the peasants of Bengal revolted against the British government and the famous play named Nil Darpan by Dinabandhu Mitra played a historic role in this revolt. The anthropologist Haran Chandra Chakladar described this revolt of the peasants in his article:

While the feelings of the raiyats were in a state of the greatest tension, two villagers, Vishnu Charan Biswas and Digambar Biswas, of Chowgacha in the Nadia district, raised the banner of rebellion against the planters. They were formerly, Dewans of indigo concerns, but resigned their offices, in bitterness of mind at the oppressions of the planters. They made up their mind to throw off the yoke of serfdom, and roused the raiyats to take up arms against their sworn enemies. They sent the "fiery crosses" of revenge from village to village and even indentured clubmen from the district of Backergunge, at their own cost, for any outbreak that might happen. They also financed the raiyats in their law-suits with the planters and infused new hopes in them. The raiyats now began to gather round their standard and break out in open revolt. The Biswases made immense sacrifice for the cause they took up.

Their money losses were about seventeen thousand rupees. Thousands of indigo raiyats and other Bengalees showed a degree of patriotism, self-sacrifice and a power of combined and united action as had scarcely been witnessed in the annals of the country before (Ibid:196).

Chakladar's academic contribution and commitment for the cause of Bengal peasantry under colonial oppression was unparalleled in the history of anthropology in India.

Chakladar on Kamasutra

Haran Chandra Chakladar's another remarkable contribution was on a classic Sanskrit Indian text named Kamasutra by Vatsyayana. The book entitled Social Life in Ancient India: Studies in Vatsyayana's is now almost forgotten. I quote from the preface of the book:

I took up the study of Vatsyayana's Kamasutra which gives a beautifully vivid picture of Indian society in the early centuries of the Christian era. It wonderfully supplements the account one receives from the sacred literatures, Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain. Dealing with an avowedly secular matter as it does, it depicts society from an independent point of view, and gives details, especially of the darker features of social life, with a fullness that people naturally miss in the sacred texts (Chakladar 1929: i).

With this secular starting point, Chakladar went on to describe in meticulous detail marriage customs, courtship, sports, arts and crafts in the life of the citizens (N a g a r a k a) of ancient India including the position of women and commercial sex-workers. Finally Chakladar concluded:

Vatsyayana does not cast a charm over illicit love, nor does he invest it with the halo of romance. He merely gives a frank and matter of fact account of the social sore, proceeds to a masterly analysis of

the psychology of the man who seeks such love—the jealousy, anger, hatred, passion, greed, selfishness that working within the brain of the human animal, cloud his judgment and pervert his tastes (Chakladar 1929:210-211).

In lieu of a conclusion

Apart from his works in social-cultural anthropology Chakladar conducted field based works on physical anthropology and applied statistical methods to analyse anthropometric data which he presented in the Indian Science Congress in 1928. He had also presented scientific papers on physical anthropology in the Indian Science Congress in 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934 and 1936. Chakladar published his articles on the prehistoric culture of Bengal in Man in India in 1941 and 1942. (Ray: 1974). He was a complete anthropologist who contributed to all the three major sub-disciplines of anthropology. □□□

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WHITEWASHING DEMOCRACY

Drinking Milk With Closed Eyes

Subhash Gatade

IT WAS THE EARLY PART OF last year when the chorus of India as ‘mother of democracy’ gathered pace.

The summit for Democracy held in March, witnessed PM Modi in his virtual address sharing his pearls of wisdom as India being “indeed the mother of Democracy” citing reference to Vedas and Mahabharata

Delegates who arrived for the G 20 summit in Delhi were similarly greeted with the slogan Welcome to the ‘Mother of Democracy’.

Rightwing think tanks were not behind to project India’s past experience in its very own Indic Democracy despite proofs to the contrary.

With the slow ebbing of G 20 rhetoric and the growing hiatus between this ‘mother of democracy’s claims and unfolding world reality, perhaps the chorus became redundant. One could even say that the Gaza conflict which witnessed unprecedented genocidal war against the Palestinian people—where the excuse was provided by attack by Hamas militants on civilian population inside Israel—perhaps exposed this highly inflated mother of democracy rhetoric to no end.

The news that India wants to devise / create / plan its own democracy index’ has rekindled this debate again.

Reports have appeared in a section of the media that India wants to develop its own homegrown democracy ratings

As per reports the government approached a friendly think tank ‘The Observer Research Foundation’—which is supposed to be itself close to one of the biggest corporate houses in the country—to develop

these democracy ratings which can show India’s situation in a better light.

One learns that the idea is to announce these ratings before the elections—which start on 10th April—so that they serve the dual purpose of countering the ‘Western Propaganda’ (as the government wants gullible citizens to believe it) and also ensuring them that things are not bad but better vis-a-vis these ex Colonial countries and how India is taking great strides under Modi led dispensation.

Unconfirmed reports even tell that The NITI Aayog (<http://www.niti.gov.in>)—which was created after dismantling the Planning Commission which was in force since independence—‘the government’s own public policy think tank’ has also been involved in this process of developing the rankings.

It is well known how it has been closely involved in defending India’s position on international forums whenever leading think tanks in the western world have raised questions on democracy’s trajectory in India or its downgrading in global rankings.

A cursory glance at the reactions of NITI Aayog, whenever such critical reports appeared in the world media makes interesting reading.

Right from the days when Freedom House—a US based think tank called India a “partially free democracy” in 2021 to India being classified as “electoral autocracy” by the V Dem Institute, based in Sweden, it was in the forefront to defend India’s image. It not only debunked these classifications as part of Western Propaganda or as part of the ex-colonial countries growing envy at

the strides made by India under Modi.

In fact, the need to develop homegrown ratings was underlined during internal discussions within NITI Aayog and government functionaries, officials, after such adverse reports appeared in a section of the national and international media

The Economist Intelligence Unit was no less scathing in its own evaluation of India which had ‘ranked India 53rd in its 2020 Democracy Index, labelling it a “flawed democracy”.

It is highly debatable whether such homegrown index which basically strives to prepare an index which as per an analyst looks akin to a child ‘surreptitiously changing the marks on one’s report card in case of a poor showing’.

One would even say that its striving to whitewash its image resonates with a Sanskrit Subhashitam which says that ‘ACat Drinks Milk with closed eyes and think that the world does not see it’.

With elections knocking the doors and the ruling dispensation displaying its increasing nervousness about the results—by attempting to stitch up alliances with unlikely partners or arresting of opposition politicians and usher into ‘opposition mukt India’ which have even attracted attention of the western world. It was rather unprecedented that not only Germany but a senior official in the US government recently raised questions about India arresting opposition politicians on the eve of elections. □□□

[Source: Kafila]

For Frontier Contact

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LETTERS

Aid Workers Killed

The World Central Kitchen (WCK) said it was “devastated to confirm” that seven members of the organisation had been killed while travelling in a convoy in Deir el-Balah after unloading 100 tonnes of food aid at its central Gaza warehouse.

It said the group was travelling in a “deconflicted zone” in two armoured vehicles that were branded with the WCK logo and that it had coordinated their movements with the Israeli military.

“This is not only an attack against WCK, this is an attack on humanitarian organisations showing up in the most dire of situations where food is being used as a weapon of war,” WCK CEO Erin Gore said in a statement. “This is unforgivable.”

WCK was involved in the distribution of some 200 tonnes of food aid that was brought to Gaza via a sea corridor from Cyprus in March.

WCK said it would pause its Gaza operations immediately. “We will be making decisions about the future of our work soon,” it said in the statement.

The UN has issued stark warnings about the dire level of hunger now facing Gaza’s 2.4 million people. In truth famine is already setting in Gaza.

Andres, a Spanish-American chef, set up the NGO WCK after an earthquake in Haiti killed an estimated 220,000 people. WCK initially provided emergency food aid to the survivors of the disaster and says it has now served more than 350 million meals in crisis situations around the world.

Al Jazeera

Release all BK Detainees

PUDR expresses relief at the Supreme Court’s granting of bail to Prof Shoma Sen on April 5, after nearly six long years of pre-trial incarceration.

Charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in the infamous Bhima Koregaon (BK) conspiracy case, Shoma Sen is the fourth accused to be released on ‘bail on merits’ by the Supreme Court, after Anand Teltumbde, Vernon Gonsalves, and Arun Ferreira. Extending the line of reasoning pursued in the granting of bail to other co-accused, the Court ruled that on perusal of the material brought before it, there was no prima facie evidence against Sen for commission or attempt to commit any terrorist act, for lending support to terrorist funding, or for membership of a banned organisation (paras 30, 31, 33). Two others, Gautam Navlakha and Mahesh Raut, had also been granted bail on merits by the Bombay High Court which similarly ruled that despite the voluminous nature of the charge sheet, which runs into 20,000 pages, there wasn’t sufficient evidence to suggest their prima facie involvement in any terrorist activities. Significantly, the three Arsenal reports unravelled the planting of evidence through malware in the electronic devices of the accused, leaked databases that showed Pegasus spyware attack on the phone numbers of eight BK accused, and finally a series of bail orders on merits which reiterate that there is no evidentiary basis to the charges framed against the accused, point to the fabricated nature of the conspiracy. The reliefs, however, have been few and far between as bail has been granted to only some after years of custody. Besides the continuing custody of several others who have been implicated in this case, it cannot be forgotten that the octogenarian Stan Swamy died for want of proper medical treatment as a pre-trial detainee.

In a scenario where cases of UAPA are registered routinely and the pendency rate of disposal of cases is

increasingly high – 1005 new cases registered in 2022, 80% pendency rate of police disposal, and 89% pendency rate of court disposal, as per the latest NCRB statistics – the current judgment granting bail to Shoma Sen makes two important points. First, it reiterates that courts must guarantee constitutional protections to the accused. The delay in framing of charges and trial, and consequent period of pre-trial detention are grounds that courts cannot ignore. Second, it specifies that for an offence of terrorist activity under UAPA, there must be cogent material to connect the accused to acts committed with the intent to strike terror in people, individually or via terrorist associations. Mere meeting with “accused individuals or being connected with them through any medium” cannot be read as an offence under UAPA (para 35). This is an important reminder to the executive entrusted with the use of law.

At present, six of the BK accused have been released on bail while nine others continue to be in custody since the first round of arrests carried out in June 2018. Of these, the release of Gautam Navlakha and Mahesh Raut stayed despite the grant of bail by Bombay HC till the NIA’s appeal against the grant was disposed of by the Supreme Court.

**Joseph Mathai and
Paramjeet Singh
Secretaries, PUDR
www.pudr.org**

Gaza in Ruins

As the Gaza war enters its seventh month, EL PAÍS used satellite imagery and damage assessment data to document the devastation in the Strip caused by the Israeli offensive. Up to 57% of buildings in the enclave have been damaged or destroyed, according to analysis carried out at the University of Oregon, but that figure rises to 75% in the

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capital, Gaza City. Khan Younis, from which Israeli troops withdrew last weekend, has been razed to the ground, according to returning residents. In total, one million people have lost their homes, and two out of three have been displaced, according to a report by the U N and the World Bank. EL PAÍS also spoke to Palestinian journalist Wael Dahdouh, who has lost his wife and three of his children in the war. "Israel is deliberately killing journalists in Gaza," said the bureau chief of Al Jazeera television in the Strip. "They do not want us to continue documenting what is happening." Nearly six in 10 buildings in the Strip have been damaged or destroyed by Israeli attacks and its largest medical complex is an 'empty shell', according to the WHO.

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Dreams of mega development herald disaster for a highly vulnerable island. Great Nicobar Island is the southernmost and largest landmass in the chain that makes up the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal. A Rs 72,000 crore project that is planned for the development of this island will result in ultimately destroying both the island's delicate rainforest ecosystem and its indigenous people. In *The Great Nicobar Betrayal*, Pankaj Sekhsaria, one of the best known chroniclers of contemporary issues in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, has compiled articles written by various experts across publications that examine the proposed project from every angle—environmental, geological, impact on local communities, law, due pro-

cess, and ecology. These pieces together shed light on the magnitude of the disaster that will be unleashed on this pristine place if the project comes through. The book is a warning and a catalogue of the manmade catastrophe that lurks on the horizon, one that will destroy more than the tsunami of December 2004 ever did. What Amitav Ghosh, author of international repute has said about the book is self-revealing:

"Even at a time of accelerating environmental vandalism around the world, what the Indian government is planning in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands stands out for its sheer folly and short-sightedness. As this excellent collection of essays shows in painful detail, these plans are a perfect example of 'disaster capitalism', in which the government is taking advantage of the displacement of the native Nicobarese by the tsunami of 2004 to make a massive land grab for a completely senseless plan of 'development'."

thelastwave

Gautam Navlakha's 'House Arrest'

On April 9, 2024, the Supreme Court bench of Justices M M Sundresh and S V N Bhatti told Bhima Koregaon-accused Gautam Navlakha's advocate, Shadan Farasat, that Navlakha has the "liability" to bear the expenses for availing himself of 'house arrest'. The Bench said: "If you have sought for it (house arrest), you have to pay. The liability you know you cannot escape because you asked for it." (Quoted in *The Telegraph*, April 10, 2024) The National Investigation Agency (NIA), represented by the Additional Solicitor General (ASG), S V Raju, told the Bench that Navlakha is required to make a payment of Rs 1.64 crore towards expenses for security provided during his house arrest. On March 7, 2024,

Navlakha's lawyer had disputed the figure in the apex court and accused the Agency of "extortion". (See *The Indian Express*, April, 10, 2024). In the hearing on April 9, Navlakha's advocate, Farasat, submitted that paying the expenses was of no difficulty and that the issue is about calculating such expenses. (www.livelaw.in)

It may be mentioned in this connection that an earlier Supreme Court bench of Justices K M Joseph and Hrishikesh Roy had granted Navlakha's appeal for 'house arrest' in November 2022. To put it in the words of *The Wire*: "The apex court had on November 10 allowed Navlakha to be placed under house arrest on account of his health, against a payment of Rs 2.4 lakh to cover the expenses of security while under house arrest." (*The Wire*, November 20, 2022)

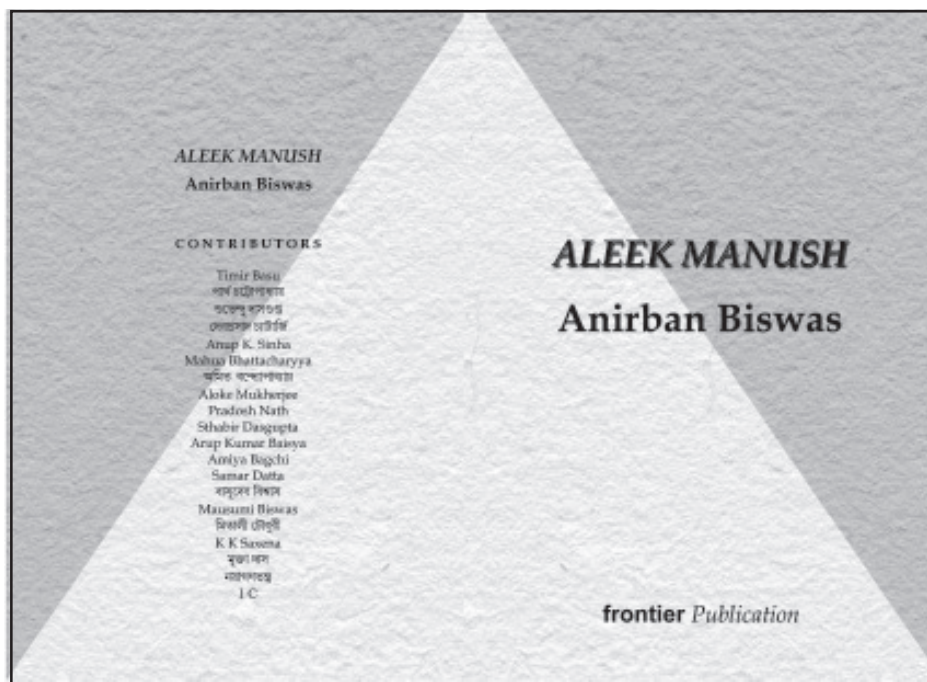
However, the Supreme Court bench of Justices M M Sundresh and J B Pardiwala doubted in September 2023 its November 2022 order allowing human rights activist and Bhima Koregaon-accused Gautam Navlakha to be released from detention and placed under house arrest on grounds of his deteriorating health. The Bench orally observed that such an order might set the 'wrong precedent.' (www.livelaw.in)

Gautam Navlakha case has two serious and alarming implications. One serious implication is that the notion of 'justice' varies from bench to bench in the apex court, depending on its composition. The other implication is really alarming: One may avail the Supreme Court-ordered right of 'house arrest' and be released from detention in the prison provided he/she can afford the 'high' cost of state security associated with it. These developments do not speak well for the health of democracy.

Arup Kumar Sen, Kolkata

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