

# frontier

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## *Violence on Campus*

**O**F LATE SOME PREMIER UNIVERSITIES AND ENGINEERING institutions are getting wide coverage for reasons other than academic excellence. They are rocked by politicisation of crime. The death of a 17-year-old 1st year student of Jadavpur University under mysterious circumstances has been hitting the headlines, both locally and nationally, for quite some time now. Local TV channels spend their prime time on the sensational news of 'Death on Campus' that triggered state-wide outrage from the civic society. Almost all parties, left and right alike, were out to derive political mileage by continually visiting the house of the deceased Swapnadip Kundu with the 'noble' desire of consoling his parents. But mere consolation cannot abolish rigging that was responsible for the death of the ill-fated boy.

Ex-facie police officials after their preliminary probe say Kundu was a victim of organised crime. That the seniors terrorise and torture new-comers in hostels in the name of making them 'smart' by way of resorting to ragging is a chronic disease. It is endemic. They create an atmosphere of fear- psychosis to force greenhorns to kowtow to 'unofficial' student lords, past or present. They always target simple students with rural or semi-urban backgrounds. They extort money from them. Torture even takes sexual turn—it is a nightmare for a fresher. Something similar allegedly happened to Swapnadip also.

What lies behind the sadistic campus culture is class question. The gang leaders invariably come from well-to-do families while the innocuous and poor students willy-nilly become their foot soldiers and the process continues year after year. The authorities everywhere know it and yet they do very little to eradicate the menace once and for all. The case of Jadavpur University is no different. As a result it is business as usual after the subsidence of initial furore. The anti-ragging committees armed with court orders and UGC guidelines to curb ragging are there and yet ragging goes on unabated. Exemplary punishment in such cases is rare. In the end nothing changes.

Some people in power blame it on student-politics in colleges and universities. It is ludicrous. A docile student community is in no position to oppose the dubious education policy of the union government, affecting the larger section of pupils seeking higher education. They have right to protest the high-handedness of the authorities. They cannot be denied freedom of speech. To rebel is justified. It doesn't matter whether they are students or

workers. If ragging looks an unmanageable malady today it is because campuses are devoid of radical and rational politics.

In the late sixties and early seventies of the last century the world witnessed how left student movement in Europe and elsewhere became an important instrument in bringing about radical change in consciousness in society. Gone are the days of Tariq Alis who once motivated a generation in student community across the world. Students revolted against Vietnam War. They fought ecological degradation by the corporates and became vocal against human rights abuses by authoritarian regimes. These days student politics hovers around petty issues having little impact on the

broader question of societal change for the better. In truth programmes of student organisations are too localised to address national and international problems. So the notorious New Education Policy of the union government virtually goes unchallenged by the students. Academics finish their duties by organising seminars in air-conditioned halls and political parties at worst issue some harmless press statements without showing any political will to mobilise masses, including student masses in their millions, against anti-people policies.

Strangely, incidence of suicides among students is on the rise. In an atmosphere of severe stress and strain they are committing suicides. After the IIT coaching hub of Kota re-

ported 20 suicide cases since January 1 this year the Rajasthan Government has set up a panel of experts, educationists and stakeholders to take measures to ensure stress-free coaching and safe environment in PG hostels. It remains to be seen whether the panel can deliver reassuring results. How ragging leads to suicide of Dalit students and scholars is being highlighted in the media quite often. After all the tragedy of Rohit Vemula is not a closed chapter. It's also a kind of ragging where caste, rather class dominance is apparent. Unless students rise against the socio-economic situation that produces social evil like ragging Swapnadip Kundus will continue to suffer and die. □□□

23.8.2023

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## COMMENT

### Partition of India

HERE IS A QUOTE FROM STANLEY Wolpert, in Chapter 2 of Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan: "If Nehru had realised how precarious the health of his arch adversary was, he might well have waited, instead of agreeing to Lord Mountbatten's proposed partition plan".

On February, 20, 1947, Prime Minister Clement Atlee announced His Majesty's Government's intention to quit India and to transfer its power 'to responsible Indian hands' by June 1948. Lord Wavell was recalled and in his place Lord Mountbatten was appointed Viceroy on March 24, 1947. He was given plenipotentiary powers. There had been no precedent for any Viceroy to have this power. The letter of March 1947 of the Prime Minister to the new Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, sets out the terms and dates of the transfer of power, as well as the date when he had to report back on the non-prospect of a settlement

(H.V.Hudson, The Great Divide, Appendix I). It says:

"It is the definite objective of His Majesty's Government to obtain a unitary Government for British India and the Indian States, if possible, within the British Commonwealth, through the medium of a Constituent Assembly, set up and run in accordance with the Cabinet Mission's plan, and you should do your utmost in your power to persuade all Parties to work together to this end, and advise His Majesty's Government, in the light of developments, as to the steps that will have to be taken.

"If by 1st October you consider that there is no prospect of reaching a settlement on the basis of a unitary Government for British India, either with or without the cooperation of the Indian States, you should report to His Majesty's Government on the

steps which you consider should be taken for the handing over of power on the due date.

"The date fixed for the transfer of power is a flexible one to within one month; but you should aim at 1st June, 1948, as the effective date for the transfer of power."

Within a few days of his assuming office, Mountbatten came to the conclusion that Jinnah would not accept anything less than Pakistan. He then proceeded to evolve his own plan of partition of India. After seeking the final approval of the British Government of the partition plan, Mountbatten returned from England on June 2, 1947. The next day on June 3, he announced the scheme of India's division from All India Radio. His broadcast was followed by those of Nehru and Jinnah accepting the Partition Plan.

Here, all of a sudden, Prime Minister Atlee's directive with all its emphasis on the deadline of transfer of power by June 1948, with the flexibility of only a month, had lost its importance. In short, the story of

the break-up of a country as great as India, which had thousands of years of its own governance and was an epitome of culture and civilisation, was a matter of only two months of assuming the Viceroyalty by Mountbatten.

Jinnah was so down with his

health that he died in September 1948; a year after the partition. The Viceroy knew well that Jinnah was about to die without whom the demand for the division of the country would fizzle out. So he was in a hurry to execute his vivisection programme. □□□ [Contributed]

#### NOTE

## Over to 'Nuh'

**Ram Puniyani writes:**

**T**HE INCIDENTS OF NUH have twin logics inbuilt into it. The annual Yatra, Brijmandal Jalabhisek Yatra with destination of Nalhar Mahadev Mandir, chose an interesting route. It did not pass through Hindu majority areas but chose the route where Muslims are more in number. The Mandir already had the presence of the VHP leader Surendra Jain, whose video is circulating; the Hate flowed abundantly in his speech just before the Yatra.

In addition Monu Manesar, the accused in the murder of Nasir and Junaid, who were killed and brutally burnt alive in a four wheeler, issued a video pronouncing his intention to join the Yatra and urging upon people to be there to welcome him. He is Chief of Cow Protection cell of Bajrang Dal in the area. Due to murder of Nasir and Junaid, he is quite hated in the area. His video did act as a provocation. On similar lines, Bittu Bajrangi, another member of Cow vigilante group also issued a similar provocative video. It seems both these worthies were advised by VHP leaders not to join the procession.

The claims are that Muslim minorities attacked the procession and also the temple. The videos of the incident show that from within temple premises there was a shooting by

vigilantes right in the presence of police force. Many in the procession were carrying arms, and preferred to pass through Muslim majority areas giving provocative slogans. Those who attacked the procession were also armed.

In the whole mayhem the police was either a bystander or looking the other way around as seen in one of the videos. The processionists also attacked a mosque, killing one Naib Imam. Early on Tuesday, two hundred strong Hindutva mob defied curfew and went on rampage spree. They entered the Masjid at Sector 57 in Gurgaon and attacked the three people sleeping there. They stabbed Imam Saad multiple times before setting fire to Masjid.

The violence is spreading beyond the Nuh area to NCR area. Citizens for Justice and Peace has complained to the DGP and NCM about the escalation of violence and urgent need to control it. Satyapal Malik, ex-Governor of Jammu and Kashmir, very well commented on the tragedy of Nuh, "The whole country will burn like Manipur if these people are not contained," he said. "Jats by culture or tradition believe in the Arya Samaj way of life and are not very religious in the traditional sense of the term. Neither are the Muslims of this area very traditional in their outlook. There-

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fore one has never heard of the two communities clashing in this manner ever since Independence. And these attacks will only increase in the run-up to 2024 as is evident in Manipur," he said addressing a packed hall at the Constitution Club.

As VHP plans to take out many processions in the area, the Supreme Court in all its wisdom has hit the nail on the head when it urged the authorities to ensure that no violence or hate speeches take place in the protest marches being held by Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

It is urgent to combat hate; it has to be a sort of movement. What people need is a state police and other authorities totally sensitised to the values of pluralism and diversity. The need of the hour is a state apparatus totally committed to Indian Nationalism and not to sectarian Nationalism.. □□□

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## THE CLASS QUESTION

## Of Reality and Political Illusions!

*Ranganayakamma*

IT IS OBVIOUS THAT THE majority of the polled votes are secured by such a party which follows crooked means like money, communalism, casteism, deceitful schemes in the name of the welfarism, national chauvinism, in the name of patriotism and so on. Though these unfair practices have been there for a long time in the past, they are increasingly followed in the present times. If a party secures majority of the polled votes, it is considered that the party has people's mandate. This is why; those who practise electoral politics describe polling as festival of democracy. Not only political parties but also some intellectuals who sincerely stand by the side of the people, think innocently in the same way. In one of his recent articles, an intellectual argued that no party should secure absolute majority so that there won't be a single-party dictatorship and its leader won't become a dictator. Such a hope indicates ignorance about the ruling class and its political leaders. At one point of time, this writer too was totally ignorant about classes.

In my 1969-novel titled "In the darkness...", as I was in political darkness, I showered praises on Gandhi, Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi. I, however, after reading Marx's "Capital", learnt how to understand rulers. Later, in one of the reprints of my novel, I confessed my mistake as follows: "In this novel I described Nehru as a

lover of democracy, as someone who did not believe in racial, religious and class differences. The reality is that Nehru too is a leader of the class of exploiters. When the poor peasantry in Telangana waged a struggle against feudalism during 1946-51 and distributed the lands, the Nehru government resorted to bloodshed, enabled the landlords to get back their lands with the help of the army and tortured the peasants. How can such Nehru be a lover of democracy and above the class distinctions?" This is how I corrected my mistake. I did the same thing in the case of Lal Bahadur Shastri.

"Lal Bahadur Shastri adorned the position of a Prime Minister due to his honesty and self-effort." This is how I depicted. If it is honesty, it is the honesty towards the Proper-tied class! That effort was meant to protect the interests of that class. I wrote that Lal Bahadur Shastri ruled in such a way that he destroyed the enemy during the India-Pakistan war. What does 'destroying the enemy' mean? 'Who are the enemies? People of Pakistan are not the enemies of the people of India. If there was a war between these two countries, it was between the capitalists of this country and the capitalists of that country. It is the poor people of both the countries who face losses due to the war. It is the poor people who work as soldiers. It is the poor people who die in the wars.'

Another episode. It was few years after I received the Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Academy Award, perhaps in 1966, Indira Gandhi visited Visakhapatnam. Then a police officer came to me and informed that there was an invitation to the "celeb-

rities" to meet Indira Gandhi and asked me to attend that meeting. Due to my political ignorance at that time, I too went and met Indira Gandhi. No conversation. Simply looks. Indira Gandhi walked in front of us by receiving our salutations and throwing a single common greeting at all of us! Those who knew about the regime based on exploitation of labour must not visit such ruling class representatives. But such was my political consciousness! When an intellectual expressed his wish that no party should get absolute majority, it is also political innocence.

Political parties work for the interests of the classes that exist in the society. Some parties exist across the country while some function in certain regions only. These parties are of two types: parties which are in the service of the ruling classes and those which are in the service of the working classes.

The ruling classes are those which live on incomes such as profit, interest, and commercial commission. The working classes include workers who perform labour day and night in fields, factories, mines, transport etc.; the tenant farmers, small scale traders, handicraftsmen and the like.

The Communist parties which were originally formed to work for the sake of working classes used to function independently to some extent at one point of time. However, during the past 60 years, they have been following some ruling party or the other. They search for some bourgeois party to follow under the illusion that 'this party is more dangerous than that party'. What in fact is the essential difference between those parties in terms of their class character? For instance, one ruling party tried to suppress the Adivasi movement in the name of 'Green Hunt' and another party too did the same thing under the label

For **Frontier Contact**

**DHYANBINDU**

COLLEGE SQUARE

“Prahar”! One party openly declared Emergency and the other party is resorting to repression without making any such declaration. Any party in power does misuse crime investigating agencies under its control in order to weaken its rival parties. The party in power throws the small industrialists to the wind and provide all facilities to big capitalists who donate crores of rupees to it. While chanting mantras like self-reliance, Atma Nirbhar Bharath, it wide opens the doors to the foreign capitalists. In the name of welfare schemes, it throws freebies as alms to the working-class poor, amasses their votes and tries to sustain its power again and again.

Though there is no difference between the Congress Party and the BJP in terms of economic policies, ‘majoritarian communalism’ is the special quality which BJP has additionally. If anyone questions this bad quality, they say, “we are not the only communalists. You may say that we did something to Muslims in 2002. But, did the Congress Party not burn Sikhs alive much before us way back in 1984?” This is how they defend themselves by counter-posing the Congress’ wrong doings against their own. ‘Did communal riots not take

place during the Congress rule? they say, though their Sangh Parivar played a role in those riots.

Of all the things, most amusing point is defections of MLAs and MPs from one party to another. Those who till yesterday abused each other in the most possible filthy language which can neither be uttered nor written, change their parties by the evening. Does this not mean that there is no difference between these parties in terms of their class nature, class interests and ideology? Another strange thing is that there are several MLAs and MPs in all parties against whom there are cases for committing crimes such as murders, rapes and economic offences. They are the rulers!

When politics of exploitation are of such nature, it is meaningless to make arguments such as ‘this party is more dangerous than that party! Let us first remove this party from power. Will see the other later’. Similarly, it is also an illusion to wish that no party should secure absolute majority. What if a party does not secure majority? Can’t it come to power by forming an alliance with other parties? What great task that a party accomplish whether it remains the single largest party or

form alliance with other parties? Nothing but facilitating exploitation of labour without any hurdles.

Well, then, what should the intellectuals and political parties that stand by the side of the people do? To carry on class struggle related activities without aligning with the political parties which defend exploitation of labour. Instead, if they align with one of the two exploitative political blocs, how will the working masses benefit? They will have to remain like a tail to one or the other ruling class parties for any number of years. Well, then, when will they offer the working people a programme of class consciousness necessary to change this world of exploitation of labour? Only when they abandon all the illusions about the ruling class politics. To abandon the political illusions, people need to follow Marx’s suggestion: “Where the working class is not yet far enough advanced in its organisation to undertake a decisive campaign against the collective power, i.e., the political power, of the ruling classes, it must at any rate be trained for this by continual agitation against this power and by a hostile attitude toward the policies of the ruling classes. Otherwise, it remains a plaything in their hands”.

*(Translation from Telugu: B R Babuji)*

## CHAINING THE CONSCIENCE

### Returning Sahitya Akademi Award

*Sandeep Pandey*

**A** PARLIAMENTARY STANDING Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture has recommended making Sahitya Akademi award winners sign an undertaking that they would not return their awards at any stage to protest any political incident. It believes that political issues are outside the ambit of cultural realms and returning an award is disgraceful for the country. There was a voice of

dissent which said that India is a democratic country and India’s Constitution has provided to every citizen the freedom of speech and expression and also the freedom to protest in any form. Returning awards is only a form of protest.

It is to be recalled that 39 litterateurs had returned their Sahitya Akademi awards after the killing of Professor M M Kalburgi in Karnataka. It is interesting to note that the

panel comprising of 31 Lok Sabha and 10 Rajya Sabha MPs didn’t consider killing of Prof Kalburgi as ‘disgraceful’ to the country. For them it is more important to save the prestige of award than the lives of innocent who are made victims of hate crime. And how do they propose to put RSS, a supposedly cultural organisation and BJP, quite openly its political wing, in water-tight compartments? Nobody has used the culture for political gains more than the right wing organisations.

When the next day after receiving the Magsaysay award on 31

August, 2002, I was going to participate in a protest outside US Embassy in Manila against an imminent US attack on Iraq, I was asked by the chairperson of Magsaysay foundation to desist from participating in the protest as it'll harm the reputation of the award. I argued that my citation for Magsaysay award mentions that I organised a peace march for nuclear disarmament from Pokaran to Sarnath after the Indian nuclear tests in 1998 and that my anti-war position was well known. I was advised not to protest against US in Manila and do whatever I wanted against my government in India. After consulting my friends I decided to go ahead and participate in the protest.

Next day a Phillippine newspaper published an editorial, the box item of which said, 'If Pandey is the principled man that he would like us to believe then he should return the Magsaysay award to US Embassy before he goes back to India.' The \$50,000 award money came from Ford Foundation for the category in which I was chosen.

This challenge thrown at me made my task easier as I was in a dilemma. Magsaysay award has gone to people like Jayaprakash Narayan, Vinoba Bhava and Baba Amte, who are my ideals and it would have looked presumptuous if I were to return the

award itself. As the money came from US I decided to return that part. I wrote a letter to the Chairperson of the Foundation from the airport before boarding my flight back. I told her that I didn't want to disrespect either the spirit of late President Ramon Magsaysay or the esteemed people in my country who had received this award earlier hence I was not returning the medal and the citation but, accepting the challenge posed to me through a newspaper, I am returning the award money which came from the US. I had, however, also mentioned that if the Magsaysay Foundation thought that I was hurting the reputation of the award too much I would be happy to return the entire award as well.

To my pleasant surprise my decision went down well with people in India and often at events I would be extended double congratulations—one for the award and the other for returning the money.

There are times in one's life when one has to respond to one's conscience. For independent minded intellectuals of the country murders in quick succession of Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and M M Kalburgi by the right wing fundamentalist organisations were something about which they could not have kept quiet. Gauri Lankesh also got killed in the same manner for

the same reason – their opposition to religious fundamentalism. For the writers, returning their awards was the strongest means of protest that they could conceive. It should have been appreciated. If the government had taken note of the reason for return of awards and intervened immediately may be Gauri Lankesh could have been saved. But the government and its supporters were busy ridiculing the dissenters.

A self-respecting intellectual would never accept an award if it came with the condition that their power to protest against any political issue by returning the award was to be taken away. When the BJP supported Mayawati government wanted to recommend my name to the Union government for a Padma Shri, after my Magsasay, I clearly told the official who visited my home that I would not accept the award from a government which had 2002 Gujarat violence blood on their hands.

If the government thinks that by giving awards to individuals it can chain their conscience it is mistaken. Or, maybe the present government wants only people who are tuned to their ideology to receive the awards so that there is no danger of anybody returning the award. □□□

*[Sandeep Pandey is General Secretary of Socialist Party (India)  
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## E-COMMERCE

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# Threatening Local Businesses and Workers' Rights

*Hannah Ellis-Petersen*

**T**HE APPS ARE THERE FOR whatever you need: an extra mango, a carton of milk, a pint of ice-cream or a replacement phone cable for the one your dog chewed in half. For those living in India's big cities—and increasingly in

the smaller cities and towns beyond—almost anything can be delivered at the touch of a button—sometimes within less than 10 minutes.

Online shopping, otherwise known as e-commerce, is rapidly changing the way India shops and nowhere is

that clearer than through quick commerce: the apps that can deliver groceries and other essentials to one's door in the time it takes to hard boil an egg and at a cost of 30p—or less—for the service.

While only 6% of India's \$900bn retail market comes from e-commerce, the market is one of the fastest growing in the world. In 2022, 200 million people in India bought something online, while it was fewer than a million just a few years before.

But in a country of 1.4 billion

people and rising, with the economy growing faster than almost anywhere else in the world, companies and analysts say these numbers are still only scratching the surface. By 2027, the number of online shoppers is predicted to rise to 500 million in a market worth \$170bn.

While some say the innovations could make India a global leader in new ways of doing business online, others are more cautious in their predictions. Some analysts fear the rise in e-commerce has opened the door for large businesses to gain monopolies over retail, at a cost to the vibrant traditional marketplace, while others say the boom has been built on the back of the exploitation of India's growing gig workforce.

The sudden rise of e-commerce is all the more remarkable given the way that Indian people shop has not changed for decades. Unlike in the West, where vast supermarket chains command monopolies, strict regulations mean India has retained its hyper local way of shopping.

Fresh produce is predominantly bought from local markets and sabziwallas (vegetable sellers). Other essentials are often bought in the country's 11 million kiranas, neighbourhood shops that are often described as the backbone of India's economy. While big-name fashion brands are popular, people still mostly buy their clothes from locally run shops and markets, particularly those living outside the urban metropolises.

For 10 years the sector has been dominated by two companies, Flipkart—an Indian start-up that was later acquired by the US retail conglomerate Walmart—and US tech giant Amazon. Together they not only account for about 75% of the online shopping market, but given the lack of commercial chain monopolies in India, they are also the two biggest commerce players in the country overall.

Yet the e-commerce landscape is changing and expanding rapidly as India's economy, the fifth largest in the world, continues to grow. Companies including Swiggy, Zomato, Big Basket, Zepto, Meesho, Blinkit, Nykaa and Dunzo, which deliver everything from restaurant food and fashion brands to electronics, instant groceries and medicines, have become ubiquitous not just in the city centres but beyond.

While 90% of Indians still earn less than £250 a month, and those outside of rich urban centres are less likely to have disposable income, according to all e-commerce companies who spoke to the Guardian, much of their growth is in the smaller Indian cities, those with a population of between 20,000 to 100,000, indicating that shopping online is no longer solely the domain of the rich urban elite.

Swiggy, one of the first apps to offer restaurant food delivery and which has recently expanded into quick grocery delivery, operated in about a dozen Indian towns and cities in 2018; today it is close to 600. Rohit Kapoor, a company CEO, credits its growth in part to the "digital equalisation" he has witnessed across India, in which social media has exposed people from across social strata to new things while e-commerce platforms finally made it possible for people to access them.

According to Kapoor, while Swiggy's highest frequency customers are the middle and upper classes, and those in small towns are still often reluctant to go online for daily essentials, a shift was happening fast. "Honestly, I think this market is just starting out", says Kapoor. "I feel there's massive potential over the next 20 to 30 years".

Sameena Mir, 23, a student from Srinagar in Kashmir, says that she has stopped visiting markets alto-

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gether. “Online the prices are comparatively better and an amazing variety of products are available on different sites”, she says. “Also the products are genuine and original, especially the beauty products, unlike our local stores where copies are mostly sold”.

Much of the boom has been made possible by broadening access to cheap internet. There are 659 million people with smartphones in India and the cost of mobile internet data is among the lowest in the world. By 2025, 1 billion Indians are expected to have access to the internet and 33% of them will be online shoppers.

The Covid pandemic has also played a significant role, as lockdowns sent people online for groceries for the first time, while forcing traditional sellers to go digital as a means to stay afloat. It also prompted a wave of new e-commerce enterprises trying to take advantage of the sudden demand.

The third shift has been around digital payment systems. Only few years ago, India was predominately a cash-based society, with credit and debit cards used by only a small section of society. However, in the past couple of years this has been leapfrogged by a transition to a Unified Payments Interface (UPI), in which millions of Indians have bank

accounts linked to apps and smaller items—down to a cup of chai or a single banana—can be paid for using a QR code on a mobile.

According to the Indian government, which has proudly been pushing the scheme, there were 74bn UPI transactions in India in 2022, amounting to 126tn rupees, a 91% increase from 2021. It has not only made swathes of the population more digitally literate, but also made it much easier to pay for goods bought online.

Yet though e-commerce platforms have created employment for millions of gig workers at a time when jobs are scarce in India, the laws around their employment have lagged behind, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Shaik Salauddin, who leads the Indian Federation of App Based Transport Workers, says there are 23 million gig workers in India working without proper legal protection. Companies including Swiggy, Flipkart and Zepto emphasise that they offer their workers benefits such as medical insurance, accident cover and maternity leave, but agreed that more could be done across the sector.

Salauddin says that, as competition has increased and growth slowed over the past year, many e-commerce companies have gone on cost-cutting sprees that have directly targeted gig workers in order to stay profitable. Wages sometimes barely cover petrol costs, while workers have to endure harassment, violence and “inhumane” conditions.

Recent incidents have included one female gig worker whose throat was slit and another who was murdered by someone who wouldn't pay for a delivery. Meanwhile, those who speak up against poor conditions are often banned from working or threatened by bouncers. According to a survey by the think tank Center for Internet and Society, one-

third of Indian gig workers fear violence or assault at work.

The issue recently came to the fore after the workers for Blinkit, one of the e-commerce apps promising 10-minute delivery, went on strike in April after their wages were cut by over 50% to 15 rupees (15p) a delivery. Workers told the Guardian how they were not given access to a toilet or shelter in between deliveries, they had no days off with working Sundays compulsory and if any customer complained they were automatically made to pay out of their wages. Some workers say they were threatened with police if they complained about conditions.

The workers also say nothing has been done to address the rising tide of abuse they are facing. Mohammad Yaqoob, 40, a Blinkit driver in Delhi, says he is often treated badly by customers because he is a Muslim.

“A customer recently cancelled the order and abused me when I went to deliver an order on the day of Hindu festival of Holi. ‘These are products for Holi. I can't take it from the hand of a Muslim’, he yelled at me”, said Yaqoob. “I felt helpless and humiliated. I consulted my manager but they did not help. They also misbehaved with me”.

Zepto is one of the country's “unicorn” start-ups, which offers 10-minute delivery of groceries and other essentials in hundreds of cities. While “10-minute” grocery delivery has been piloted in several countries, including the UK, nowhere has it been rolled out at such scale as in India, a country almost the size of Europe. In just two years, quick commerce has become the fastest growing sector in Indian online shopping.

But even as more players enter the market, some are fearful that the boom is also opening the door for the large corporations and powerful industrialists to monopolise India's retail sector and made it difficult for

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independent e-commerce start-ups such as Meesho—a popular app for affordable and second-hand fashion—to compete and survive, despite having raised nearly \$1bn in funding.

The Tata group, India's largest conglomerate known well as a producer of cars and steel, has recently become a major player in e-commerce, opening its own online shopping site and investing in online grocery delivery app Big Basket.

Reliance, one of the most powerful retail, petrochemical and telecom conglomerates has also made significant inroads into e-commerce through its online shopping platform jiomart and a 25% stake in quick

grocery delivery app Dunzo. A recent report by the research firm Bernstein predicted that Reliance would soon be the top e-commerce player in the country, feeding wider concerns that the gains of India's economic growth are being concentrated in the hands of a few corporations and their billionaire owners.

Yet for all the growth, India is still hampered by a significant digital divide. More than 50% of the country is still without internet access, considerably more in rural areas, while the aspirations of online shopping remains out of reach for the poorest in society, who still number in the hundreds of millions.

Hira Lal Raigar, 62, a retired teacher from the village of Sarangpura in Rajasthan, is among those who remain suspicious of e-commerce. He has spent his life buying daily necessities from the local kirana and a few times a year popping to the nearby town if he needs clothes or shoes.

"I have never used the internet for online shopping and do not think I will ever be able to do so", says Raigar. "How can I buy a shirt without checking the quality of its cloth by hand? Online shopping might be a thing in big cities but here in the villages, it is still very odd". □□□

[Source: *The Guardian*]

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## EXCLUSION, MISTRUST AND COERCION

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# Religious Minorities in Pakistan

*Imran Ahmed*

PAKISTAN WAS CREATED IN the name of Islam in August 1947 and emerged as the culmination of a Muslim nationalist struggle based on the two-nation theory: that Muslims and Hindus in (colonial) India comprised distinct nations and required separate, sovereign states. While the ideological underpinnings of the Pakistan movement often proved ambiguous and at times conflicting, the vanguard of its leadership promised an Islamic utopia often using powerful metaphors including the founding and archetypal Medinan state of the Prophet Muhammad to describe the future state.

Independence, however, brought forth sobering realities. Pakistan was set up not as the first Islamic state, but as a sovereign dominion with a Westminster style secular, parliamentary system of government where both the role of religion and the place of religious minorities remained uncertain and contested. Not surprisingly, the initial process of consti-

tution-making revealed deep divisions between those who reasoned that Pakistan should be an Islamic state and others who argued for a secular Pakistan—warning that entangling religion with state affairs would denigrate religious minorities and involve undue state intervention into their lives. These fundamental differences were frustrating for Pakistan's constitutional framers, not least since squaring classical conceptions of Islamic government with the framework of the modern nation-state proved difficult. This meant that it was easier to draw on Islam in symbolic or aspirational terms than it was to detail the minutiae of Islamic governance in concrete or specific forms. Indeed, the Objectives Resolution of 1949, a vague and opaque document, laid down the foundational principles of a future constitution and bound Islam to the identity and sovereignty of Pakistan (much to the dismay of religious minorities). But the earliest constitutional drafts said little about

the role of Islam in the state except in nominal terms.

The consequence was an unclear situation. This was concerning for both minorities and religious groups pushing for an Islamic state. Despite assurances made in the Delhi Pact of 1950 (Nehru-Liaquat Agreement) and the Report of the Committee on Fundamental Rights of Citizens of Pakistan and on Matters Relating to Minorities (adopted by the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on the 7th September 1954) that minorities would enjoy full rights and safeguards, the mixed messaging apparent in the constitutional drafts and documents suggested that the fate of religious minorities would be uncertain. The 1949 Resolution, too, promised that adequate provision would be made for minorities to freely profess and practise their religion and develop their cultures. But what those provisions were, and whether they emanated from Islam, and consequently derived from religious mandates insulated from political deliberation, was notably unclear.

The ulama (traditionalist Islamic scholars) and Islamists such as the influential Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi petitioned against the con-

traditions in constitutional drafts, noting in a joint statement entitled the Ulema's Amendments to the Basic Principles Committee's Report that concrete policies and detailed steps are required to turn Islamic social and political aspirations into something tangible.

The twists and turns of these developments were taking shape alongside debates over the national language of Pakistan. The differences on this issue generated heated political tension and confrontation over which language and culture was more Islamic than the other. Advocates of Urdu noted the revered founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who reasoned that Urdu was the obvious choice since it was 'a language which, more than any other provincial language, embodies the best that is in Islamic culture and Muslim tradition and is nearest to the language used in other Islamic countries'. Those who suggest otherwise, he argued, are 'really the enemy of Pakistan'. Jinnah's goal was to weaken ethnic, provincial identities which posed a threat to the territorial integrity of Pakistan. Islam and Urdu afforded him the opportunity to build a supra-ethnic identity, but the unfolding politics around the issue of a national language signalled a troubling message that to be more Islamic is to be more Pakistani and that those who were not as Islamic could not be trusted. Bengalis, who formed the majority, opposed the move to constitutionalise Urdu as the sole national language. But this resistance was met with state suppression, suspicion of Bengali culture as a lesser culture of questionable Islamic credentials and a discourse around the need to Islamise Bangla which included a proposal to change the Bengali script to an Arabic script.

These events explicate a trou-

bling pattern of distrust and repression of those rendered either un-Islamic or not Islamic enough; and religious minorities receive the brunt of this suspicion. As Pakistan continued in its struggle to establish a constitutional compact, the political deadlock proved frustrating and raised the stakes of the deliberation. Religious minorities were framed as a potential fifth column and a stumbling block to the realisation of an Islamic Pakistan. Indeed, the debate over separate electorates for religious minorities centred on whether these communities wielded political influence disproportionate to their size and would then conspire to obstruct the Islamisation of the state. Notable ulema-led Islamist groups like the Jamiat Ulema-e Islam propounded this fear urging that separate electorates would contain the political power of minorities. The tensions over the place of minorities and the Islamic commitment of Pakistan's political leadership climaxed during the anti-Ahmadi riots in 1953 as Islamic groups demanded the removal of politicians and civil servants of the Ahmadi sect from government. The findings of a court investigation into the tumult (famously known as the Munir Report) revealed that no two Islamic scholars agreed even on the foundational questions of who was in fact a Muslim. The investigating judges noted: 'if we adopt the definition given by any one of the ulama, we remain Muslims according to the view of that alim but kafirs according to the definition of everyone else.' If an Islamic state was the ultimate goal of Islamist activists, the findings of the court spotlighted difference far more often than consensus in matters of religion, theology, and state.

A fundamental conundrum for the judges was this: 'None of the ulama can tolerate a State which is

based on nationalism and all that it implies; with them millat and all that it connotes can alone be the determining factor in State activity.' This tension was difficult to square, and the approach of the Constituent Assembly was to ignore suggestions or propositions based on the classical concept of a caliphate.

The Constitutions of 1956 and 1962 emerged under authoritarian rule with little care for, or consideration of, Islamist ideologies and politics. The 1956 Constitution established Pakistan as the 'Islamic Republic of Pakistan' and prescribed Islamic provisions which extolled Islamic social and moral virtues, relegated Islamic principles of governance to directives of state policy, featured non-justiciable repugnancy clauses which mandated that all laws should conform to Islamic injunctions and laid down instructions for the creation of advisory Islamic institutions. In other words, these provisions were a far cry from the Islamic sharia state Islamists in Pakistan long struggled for. The 1962 Constitution, drawn up under the dictatorship of Ayub Khan, offered almost an identical set of Islamic provisions and it too was short-lived and lasted as long as the regime itself could endure.

The third and current 1973 Constitution declared Islam as the state religion in Article 2 of the document alongside Islamic provisions similar to those found in both the 1956 and 1962 texts. But more was required to prove the state's Islamic resolve. The Second Amendment of 1974 which rendered Ahmadis as non-Muslims arose out of this pressure and in a context of both Islamic opposition to the political leadership of then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his manipulation of Islam for political legitimacy. The Second Amendment was a defining constitutional moment for the prece-

dents it set against religious minorities since it translated theological difference into legal and political exclusion. It also fixed the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad as a symbol of ongoing political and constitutional contestation. The Amendment was a disastrous moment for Ahmadis in Pakistan.

Nevertheless, these constitutional measures still failed to steer Pakistan towards an agreeable Islamic destination. An opposition coalition to Bhutto's growing authoritarianism called for the installation of the Nizam-e-Mustafa (Order of the Chosen One), but this vision too was vague. Bhutto was overthrown and executed in 1979 and the dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq, which emerged in its place, sought to appropriate the Islamist cause (and some of its proponents). Zia promised to transform Pakistan into an Islamic state and his method was not so dissimilar to Bhutto in that it included measures which spotlighted the constitutional importance of Islam. Zia, for instance, made the Objectives Resolution a substantive and effective part of the Constitution. A notable point of departure however was Zia's efforts to initiate a process of Islamising criminal, evidence, and taxation laws and install a structure of religious appellate courts. But this was contested since his Islamisation programme was rather superficial, politicised vulnerable groups and designed to broadcast the need for Islamic legal reform without augmenting or limiting his own dictatorial powers.

Indeed, Zia's Islamisation programme and constitutional reforms sought to reign in state and political institutions under his control. The specific Sunni flavour of his Islamisation reforms was motivated to appease Sunni Islamists in a context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, US-Saudi backed Af-

ghan jihad and the growing Shia Muslim political consciousness in Pakistan in the wake of the Iranian revolution. Zia's Islamic reforms should be seen more as a political instrument seeking to capitalise on and respond to regional and international developments than a genuine, broad or consensus driven Islamic agenda. A Sunni-bias in his Islamisation programme, in other words, paid him handsome political dividends for his foreign policy and domestic political ambitions. And although his Islamic reforms are often characterised as puritanical, the Islamisation agenda was far more a manifestation of his politics than a demonstration of doctrinal coherence. While classical Sunni or Quranic doctrine may have provided some reference or inspiration for particular laws, it was politics and political considerations which would determine their amorphous and unusual shape. This meant that these laws sought to appease or address the goals and concerns of one group, while marginalising another, facilitating a process of in-group/out-group relations centred principally around sectarian and theological boundaries.

The infamous blasphemy laws were promulgated under Zia through changes made to the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). These laws were drawn up not just to protect Sunni Muslim sensitivities through the criminalisation of the beliefs and practices of non-Sunni Islamic sects, it also laid the burden of blame on these sects for their supposed innate capacity to injure or enrage Muslim feelings simply through their existence or religious practice. Section 298-C of the PPC, for instance, stated that Ahmadis who, in 'any manner whatsoever outrages the religious feelings of Muslims', shall be punished with imprisonment and shall also be liable to a fine. The striking and fundamental design flaws of

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Pakistan's blasphemy laws open the door for abuse, exploitation, stigmatisation, and the persecution of vulnerable or marginalised communities. Section 298-A (which is aimed at criminalising Shia Muslims and outlawing fundamental elements of their belief system) and Section 295-C (which relate to punishing derogatory remarks against the Prophet Muhammad) do not require proof of intention for an offence to take place. The vagueness of what constitutes a breach of Section 295-C renders this law an ongoing danger for religious minorities as their beliefs differ from foundational Sunni beliefs about the theological status of the Prophet.

While sectarianism and suspicion of minorities were present since the creation of Pakistan, historians have long noted that the policies, laws, and politics of the Zia era transformed Pakistan significantly for the worse. The Islamisation programme he left behind has proved difficult to reform, let alone repeal. Intimidation and the threat of violence continues to silence critics of Zia's lega-

cies. The assassination of Salman Taseer, the former governor of Punjab, following his efforts to reform the blasphemy laws is a notable case in point. The troubling inheritances of the Zia era continues to facilitate the growth of religious intolerance and vigilantism, the rise of violent sectarian extremism, and a virulent and divisive discourse vilifying religious minorities (including minority Islamic sects) as active and hostile detractors, agents or fifth columns working towards the unravelling of an Islamic Pakistan. This view of minorities as villainous miscreants is not just a fringe position held amongst far-right Islamist groups but is often a stance emanating from the state itself. The government of Pakistan issued a pamphlet justifying the introduction of Section 298-C in 1984 on the basis that 'The most sinister conspiracy of the Qadianis after the establishment of Pakistan was to turn this newly Islamic state into a Qadiani kingdom subservient to the Qadiani's pay masters. The Qadianis had been planning to carve out a Qadiani State from the territories of

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Pakistan'. Ahmadis, in other words, posed a danger to both Islam and Pakistan. This discourse on minorities as enemies from within continues through to the present and has a direct relationship to the discourse of keeping Pakistan 'Islamic'.

In 2014, the Supreme Court directed the government of Pakistan to constitute a National Commission for Minorities in order to probe into the 'dismal state' of minority rights and ensure that textual guarantees of rights matched empirical realities. The construction of this Commission, however, proved to be a contentious affair especially in negotiating its composition, jurisdiction and function. The government of recently former Prime Minister Imran Khan argued that Ahmadis should not have representation in the Commission. Noor-ul-Haq Qadri, Pakistan's Federal Minister for Religious and Inter-faith Harmony Affairs, defended this position arguing that 'whoever shows sympathy or compassion towards [Ahmadis] is neither loyal to Islam nor the state of Pakistan.' Ali Muhammad Khan, State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, further labelled Ahmadis as 'agents of chaos. That Shia Muslims are Iranian proxies seeking to turn Pakistan into a Shia state remains a concerning discourse since the Zia period, and the 'Sunnification' of the Pakistani state is often an electoral promise of right-wing Sunni Islamist groups. There is also a growing campaign to declare Pakistan as a Sunni state and Shias as non-Muslims. Meanwhile, Shia, Hindu and Christian places of worship are frequent targets of terror, vandalism, and desecration. These communities face mounting safety and security concerns from radical or far-right Sunni militants.

The indiscriminate killing of minorities signals the message that non-Muslims have no place in an Islamic Pakistan and that their lives are

dispensable. A contracting definition of who is a Muslim amongst these militant groups means that it is open season on more and more communities in Pakistan including the institutions and personnel of the state itself. The most disturbing manifestation of this development has been the growing intra-Sunni violence between Deobandi and Barelvi Muslims and the emergence of the radical Islamic State militant group which renders most Muslims in Pakistan as apostates.

Political opposition to the building of a Hindu temple in Islamabad in 2020 spotlights the spatial dimension of political exclusion. While the incident demonstrates the continued contestation over the place of minorities in the country, it also brings to the fore questions concerning the kinds of rights minorities have to space in an Islamic Pakistan. The debate further reveals a dissonance between constitutional guarantees afforded to minorities to practice and profess their faiths, and religious arguments that the construction of new places of worship of non-Muslims is impermissible and against the spirit of Islam and the sharia. The debate revealed that minorities continue to find themselves squeezed between Islam and the Constitution with little room or autonomy to manoeuvre in matters which profoundly impact their lives and are adjudged without consideration of their input. It also revealed ongoing ambivalence in the state's governance of religious matters since arguments for or against the temple's construction were all grounded on Islam. This also meant that what the Constitution had to voice would be in contest with various interpretations of Islam. What happens when Islam diverges from constitutional norms and prescriptions is a complex, manifold, and difficult question to resolve. The Supreme Court

judgement in the *Asia Bibi v. The State* blasphemy case spotlights some of these tensions as the verdict defended Section 295-C on Islamic grounds even though the law continues to infringe upon the constitutional rights and protections allotted to religious minorities. Both the Court and then Prime Minister Khan argued that Section 295-C is the solution, rather than the cause, of blas-

phemy despite convincing evidence to the contrary. Khan has gone so far as to urge other countries to introduce blasphemy laws.

Religious minorities in Pakistan have been constructed as the 'Other' in the process of searching for and defining a collective sense of Islamic 'Self'. But both the 'Self' and the 'Other' have proven to be unstable and contested categories since map-

ping the boundaries of theological tolerance between unbelief, heterodoxy and orthodoxy in Pakistan remains the subject of intense political contestation. Furthermore, as violence and coercion, especially through law, state policy, vigilantism, formal politics, and acts of terror, form the means to decide and institutionalise theological positions, the results are tenuous and fragile. □□□

## DEFINING WOMEN

### Potuas of Kalighat

Noor Anand Chawla

**I**N THE LATE NINETEENTH century, a compelling example of Indian "tradition" intersecting with Western "modernity" was observed in the colonial sensibility that affected local Bengali artistic practices, widening the gulf between "mass art" available on the market and refined oil paintings gaining popularity under the Calcutta school. The former was created largely by the Kalighat potuas (traditional painters who worked near Calcutta's Goddess Kali temple at Kalighat) while the latter was created by local artists educated in Western techniques. Despite differences, however, both approaches influenced each other, especially in their depiction of women.

Historian Tapati Guha Thakurta's 1991 article "Women as 'Calendar Art' Icons: Emergence of Pictorial Stereotype in Colonial India" traces the history of "feminine images" that have become the "stock-type of today's 'calendar' pictures". She relies on early prints—lithographs and oleographs (chromolithographs)—created for mass consumption to reconstruct the perception of the feminine image at the time.

"Gender featured as the central plank in the construction of new 'icons'," she writes. "The woman's image, like the very ideas of womanliness and womanhood, exuded strong

'iconic' potentials". Women's roles as icons ranged from being seductive and erotic to mythical and religious as they imparted social, political, and ethical values.

Apart from deification, the feminine figure was also effectively employed to spread a nationalistic message: "rousing her 'sons' to patriotic action".

The introduction of printing altered the existing imagery of women, which became more "dramatic" as it began to draw inspiration from Western art. Hence, female characters from Indian epics took on European aesthetics while still fitting into the mould of the Indian "feminine divine". By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the clientele of Kalighat art "widened into an undifferentiated mass clientele", fed by mass-produced picture prints featuring this aesthetic and philosophical fusion.

One sees this in the rising popularity of the art works of Raja Ravi Varma, the famed painter from Travancore who founded India's largest lithography presses in 1894. Writing of his work, Guha Thakurta notes that the "woman's image became the main site on which the artist (and his critics) negotiated and reconstructed notions of the 'mythic' and 'sacred', of 'tradition' and a new

national ethos".

Ravi Varma clothed his women in Indian finery and placed them within a mythic narrative, yet they were often inspired by the "nude Venuses and Psyches and their allegorical images of Chastity or Charity" made by Boulanger and Bouguereau, two artists from the French academy. Apart from deification, the feminine figure was also effectively employed to spread a nationalistic message: "rousing her 'sons' to patriotic action".

According to Guha Thakurta, such depictions made the female image the central figure in both popular and high art. She terms this process as "one of 'resacralisation', where the rise of modernity, instead of separating the secular from the sacred, draws the two into a new synthesis".

At the same time, these images also portrayed women as sexual objects designed to please the "male gaze" of the artist as well as the audience. Likening Indian mythological paintings to European allegorical ones, she asserts that "the act of male voyeurism was legitimised in these pictures by directly incorporating the erotic experience within the religious and mythological narrative".

The female figures that weren't sexualised overtly were portrayed in their roles as middle-class wives and mothers, often captured performing daily household tasks or rituals of personal vanity. Yet these, too, argues historian Chitrita Banerji, fed the hunger of the male gaze.

□□□

## LETTERS

## **Bulldozing of Sarva Seva Samiti**

12th August, 2023 witnessed a horrific and shameful attack on the ideas and values of Gandhi, Vinoba and Jayprakash Narayan by this fascist regime. Sarva Seva Samiti, situated in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, which has been active in the last 6 decades, fostering democratic ideals was brutally bulldozed by the BJP Govt. The Samiti campus consisting of more than 10 thousand progressive books, which preserved a remarkable history of the country, was razed to the ground.

The Hon'ble Supreme Court in its Order dated 7th August, 2023 had directed the lower court to conduct the hearing expeditiously. Despite being pending in the court, the process of demolition started at 6 am on 12th Aug morning without any competent order.

On 11th August, 2023, a large public protest meeting was organised in which representatives of people's organisations from all over India and hundreds of common citizens of Banaras were also present. The meeting was addressed by many well-known leaders and activists including Prof Anand Kumar, Rakesh Tikait, Medha Patkar, Yogendra Yadav, Faisal Khan, Dr Sunilam, Feroze Mithiborewala etc. The meeting challenged the ruthless bulldozer policy of the Government, be it in UP or Haryana, especially targeting Muslims and also raised the issue of illegal occupation of lands of fisher people and other marginalised communities in the name of 'development'. The Sarva Seva Samiti played an important role in strengthening the Indian progressive ideas. Hence, this should be seen as an attack by the present ruling party on the ideas that strengthen Indian democracy.

Besides, there are concerns that the Government plans to hand over

this land to capitalists in the name of 'Railways'.

National Alliance of People's Movements strongly condemns this unconstitutional, subversive activity by the BJP Government.

**National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM)**

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## **RGW Bill and Gig Workers**

Rajasthan Government has taken a pioneering step in recognising the importance of gig workers by introducing the Rajasthan Platform-based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill, 2023 (RGW Bill). The Bill was passed on 24th July. This landmark legislation sets a precedent not only within India but also holds global significance as it addresses the challenges faced by gig workers and strives to provide them with social security measures. With an estimated 300,000 gig workers in Rajasthan, the state government's proactive approach reflects the growing global recognition of the need to protect and promote the rights of this emerging segment of the workforce.

The RGW Bill in Rajasthan shares common objectives with initiatives from around the world while tailoring them to the Indian context. It defines gig workers, establishes a Social Security and Welfare Fund, incorporates a grievance redressing mechanism, and emphasises gig worker representation and participation. These provisions reflect global trends in acknowledging the need for gig worker welfare and fair working conditions.

While the Rajasthan RGW Bill represents a significant step forward, it also faces challenges and raises questions that resonate globally. Striking a balance between funding welfare measures without disincentivising gig work and coordinating state and federal-level laws are among the challenges. Additionally, addressing the

cross-border implications of gig work requires international cooperation and coordination.

The Rajasthan Platform-based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill, 2023 sets an example for the global gig economy. Policymakers worldwide can learn from Rajasthan's efforts to protect gig workers' rights while promoting innovation and entrepreneurship. Collaboration, knowledge sharing, and continuous adaptation of regulations are crucial in addressing emerging challenges in the gig economy.

**Vikram Raj**

## **China's Economic Miracle**

As prices rise in the United States, they are falling in China. In the twelve months leading up to July, China's Consumer Price Index fell by 0.3 percent, the National Bureau of Statistics announced this week. (During the same period, consumer prices rose by 3.2 per cent in the United States.) On the face of things, lower prices are a boon for Chinese consumers. But this deflation has been accompanied by other signs of economic weakness, including a sharp slowdown in GDP growth, sluggish retail sales, a fall in exports, and a renewed downturn in real-estate prices. These developments have raised fears that the world's second-largest economy, which for many years looked like a miracle, could be descending into an extended slump. It is a perilous moment, for China.

Many analysts attribute some of the current weakness to public concerns about Chinese authorities' economic stewardship.

But the larger issue is the nationwide real-estate bust, which has left many Chinese banks burdened with bad debts, and many homeowners facing decreases in their net worth. To relieve the pressures on the property market and the financial system, the government has eased some bor-

rowing restrictions for developments, reduced some reserve requirements for banks, and cut interest rates slightly. Earlier this year, these measures appeared to be stabilising the property market, but home prices are now falling again, and that is putting more pressure on the highly indebted developers.

### **John Cassidy, *The New Yorker* Religion and Caste**

One can change religion easily but it is not that easy to change caste. After conversion converts carry their previous caste identity. No matter where the convert goes, his caste won't go away even after death.

70 out of 250 Christian families in Ayyampatti village of Tiruchy district in TN are Dalits. Members belonging to BC community have an issue with Dalits taking part in festivals held at St Mary Magdalene Church and in using the community hall.

Following protests, collector M Pradeep Kumar inspected the place on February 26 and gave an assurance that Dalits would be allowed to take part in church festivities. Following the assurance, the church constituted a 12-member panel involving Dalits. But, members of BC communities allegedly did not want the panel to play any role in the church's annual festival. They also allegedly tried to stop the Dalits from mobilising funds.

At a peace meeting scheduled on July 20, when a Dalit raised the issue of their community having a separate graveyard, the tahsildar said, "You are what you are born. Your caste will never change and you will have a separate burial ground."

CPI's Tiruchy sub-urban district secretary Rajkumar said, "Tahsildar is an executive magistrate in the taluk. In this case, he has acted in favour of the BCs. Casteist motives of excluding Dalits from a decision-making body and discrimination cannot be accepted. The state government

should not allow such persons to hold office."

Nacchinarkkiniyan M, Tiruchy

### **Gagging the Media in Kashmir**

Gagging the media has a long history in the Kashmir valley. Anuradha Bhasin, the editor of Kashmir Times, offered a vivid narrative of what happened to the media world on the day of abrogation of Article 370, which provided a special constitutional status to the State: "Mobile internet stopped functioning in the plains of Jammu and Ladakh. In the rest of the state, including the hill districts of Jammu, everything fell silent – landline phones, mobiles and the internet...Kashmir had disappeared. Kashmir-based reporters, including our entire bureau, remained untraceable. So it was, in the hill districts of Rajouri, Poonch, Doda and Kishtwar." (Anuradha Bhasin, *A Dismantled State: The Untold Story of Kashmir After Article 370*, Harper Collins, 2023)

Very recently, Muzaffar Raina reported in *The Telegraph*: "The Centre has blocked the website and social media handles of *The Kashmir Walla*, one of the few surviving independent media outlets in the Valley since the 2019 crackdown following the revocation of the erstwhile state's special status under Article 370." It is further reported: "The *Kashmir Walla* is one of the few media outlets that spoke truth to power after the 2019 scrapping of special status, writing on the government crackdown on dissent and on alleged rights violations". (See *The Telegraph*, August 21, 2023)

The above narratives testify what kind of 'normalcy' prevails in the Kashmir Valley.

**Arup Kumar Sen**

### **Appeal to the Supreme Court**

The PUCL appeals to the Supreme Court to appoint a Supreme Court monitored-Special Investigation

Team (SIT) drawn with police officials of proven integrity from outside the state, to investigate all the significant criminal cases registered in the wake of the ethnic violence. The names must include those suggested by civil society and fresh FIR's must be lodged wherever necessary. At least three major alleged incidents need to be investigated. The SIT should necessarily investigate:

- A. 3rd May incident in Churachandpur
- B. Sexual violence incidents reported across the state
- C. Khamen Lok massacre

The PUCL also appeals to the Supreme Court to appoint a Women's Committee made up of respected women's jurists, academics, activists and others, whose names should include suggestions by civil society, to visit Manipur and give an independent report directly to the SC.

Considering the difficult nature of the terrain and the large number of victims who still live in their thousands in IDP Camps, the PUCL requests the Supreme Court to appoint a Team of Advocate Commissioners, based on suggestion by civil society, to visit all the camps and record statements of victims.

The PUCL also appeals to the Supreme Court to appoint a Committee of Mental Health Experts including Trained Counsellors, Psychiatric doctors, Trauma specialists and others to give a report on the state of mental health and remedial measures to be undertaken on an Emergency basis.

**Kavita Srivastava, President, PUCL**  
**Dr V Suresh, General Secretary, PUCL**

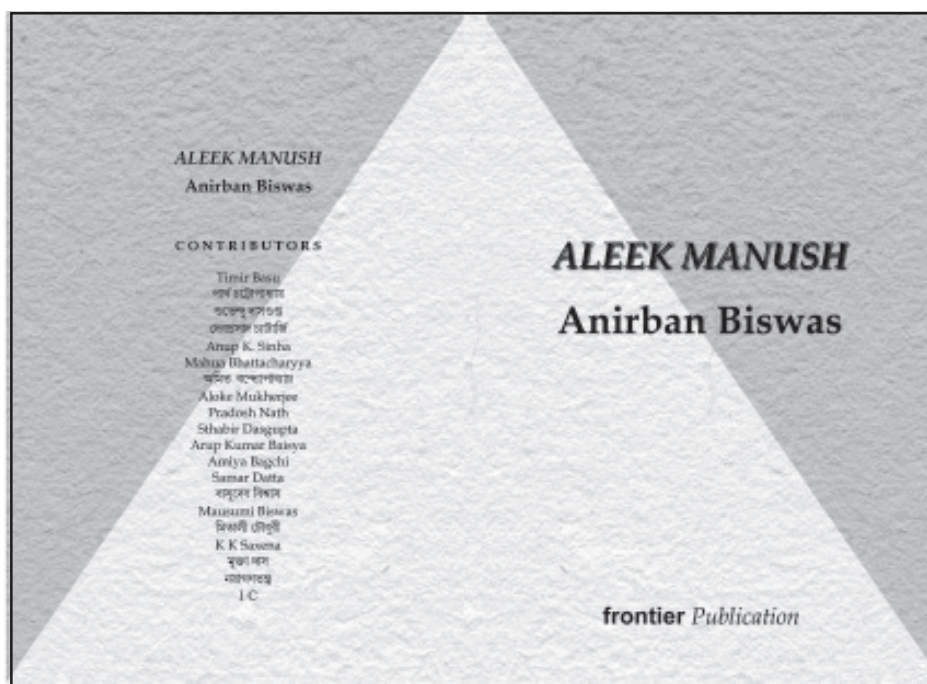
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