

frontier

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"Sideline Diplomacy"

INDIAN PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI TALKED WITH CHINESE President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg on August 23. Nobody knows whether they discussed something serious or sweet nothings. Generally this sideline business in diplomacy has very little significance in the real world of hard bargaining. India and China have varying versions of the conversation between Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping. The meeting was reportedly arranged at the request of India. And the Indian side didn't dispute the Chinese claim. In other words China didn't attach much importance to such informal parley though 'there was a pending request from the Chinese side for a bilateral meeting'. As per the Chinese foreign ministry press release "two leaders had a candid exchange of views on current India-China relations and other questions of shared interest. President Xi stressed that improving India-China relations serves the common interests of the two countries and peoples, and is also conducive to peace and development of the world and the region". But the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin remained non-committal about whether the two leaders agreed to intensify efforts to deescalate tensions at the disputed border. It was not clear whether they agreed on maintaining tranquillity along the LAC. Nor did they specify whether both Modi and Xi directed their relevant officials to expedite de-escalation and disengagement.

Several rounds of military commander level talks have failed to produce any atmosphere of non-engagement. LAC is a peculiar phenomenon. Nobody likes it and yet there is no option for India and China to discard it. In case of Pakistan it is LC—line of control. LAC means shifting control of boundary and all sides try to interpret LAC according to their own perception. The Chinese are in a better stand all along the LAC while India's attempt to realign their position in some areas frequently creates friction leading to violence.

Nowhere in the world border disputes are amicably settled without adjustment and give-and take formula. As both India and China are not interested in ceding an inch of land they presently administer, no permanent boundary in the Himalayas will emerge in the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, Rahul Gandhi, Congress Party's prime ministerial face in 2024 general elections has been consistently accusing Narendra Modi of selling out India to China. He has been repeatedly highlighting in the media

how the Modi dispensation has allowed China to occupy Indian Territory in Ladakh. Very recently he reiterated the same allegation in Ladakh while interacting with local people as a part of his much publicised 'India March' campaign.

Strangely enough, Mr Gandhi had support from an unexpected quarter—Asaduddin Owaisi of AIMM. Only the other day Mr Owaisi said on 'X': "Our PM@PMO India is going around asking for meetings with Chinese President while keeping his own country in the dark about the real situation on

the Ladakh border. What is Modi trying to hide? Our brave soldiers have stayed on the border for 40 months and are not cowed down by the Chinese. Why can't Modi stand up to Xi, and trust our soldiers? Is this loss of territory acceptable to Modi?" India's China policy has been diabolical right from the beginning and Modi continues the tradition of his predecessors.

India cannot get back pre-liberation China days when Tibet used to enjoy a kind of semi-independent existence. And there was no border

skirmishes as they occur these days frequently. There was no passport--no visa. People on both sides of the 'unmarked fence' used to travel freely to attend festivals, religious or otherwise, and market places. That atmosphere has gone forever. Independent Tibet is also now a closed chapter as the Dalai Lama himself has dropped the idea in lieu of greater autonomy. China is all set to erect an iron curtain, not a bamboo curtain along the boundary to be demarcated according to their terms.

□□□

COMMENT

BRICS Alignment and the Empire

ARRANGEMENTS IN THE PRESENT US-dominated world order face a bolder threat as BRICS gains momentum. The Johannesburg II Declaration that the BRICS summit in the South African city has espoused tells those days of "either with me the Empire or 'go to hell'" are gone. The geopolitics-geostrategy that the Empire pursues now stumbles.

The world's largest collective of the developing economies—BRICS—has declared its position: Comprehensively reform the UN; make it more democratic, representative, effective; there should be wider representation of the developing economies in the UN Security Council; stick to multilateralism, international law, and non-selective and non-double standard approach; reform the WTO and the Bretton Woods institutions with equitable, transparent, rules-based multilateral trading system, and with leadership positions of the emerging economies in these institutions; a fairer international order; and strengthening of the Global South's voice in the G20 agenda.

These demands are a strong challenge to the structure the Empire has built up since the WWII. Even,

in the Cold War-days, the Empire and its subordinate western allies did not hear such voice.

The initiatives that the BRICS is encouraging—use of local currencies in international trade, financial transactions and banking settlements, strengthening of banking network within the collective—are much threatening to the Empire's mechanism for dominance.

The emerging Global South-Global East bloc, increasingly manifested in the BRICS, is now specifically telling: No to weaponisation of major reserve currencies and financial and payment systems for the Empire's geopolitical conquests, no to economic coercion.

None, but the Empire itself has triggered the process of pushing others to move against the Empire's economic-financial weapon. The triggering act was imposition of unprecedented sanctions against Russia as part of America's proxy war in Ukraine, and subjecting Europe as its province. While the economically advanced continent of Europe is increasingly submitting itself to the Uncle Sam, the BRICS is increasingly moving against the Empire's

hegemony—a two-way process. The Pentagon's Ukraine War is steaming this process, one contrary to the other. The BRICS' gradually widening moves are in the perspective of a crisis created by the Empire in the war fields of Ukraine. BRICS has undermined the White House's strategy on Ukraine by countering the western use of sanctions on Russia. Economically, it has sought to chip away at US dominance by weakening the dollar's role as the world's default currency. Washington tried to sabotage the BRICS. It coerced countries tilting towards the BRICS.

But, the emerging collective approach will turn bolder, as it'll increase economic cooperation. This sphere of cooperation includes widening of de-dollarisation, enhanced use of national currencies in mutual transactions, increased role of the New Development Bank, the bank that was primarily known as the BRICS Bank, improvement in interconnectivity of supply chains, and going for fair transfer of technology. The BRICS countries produce one-third of global food production. With the aim of having food security, the BRICS, now covering 46 percent of global population, plans to increase cooperation among its members in the area of agriculture.

These steps favour the Global South-Global East. Furtherance of these measures will make the BRICS a force standing opposed to the empire-led system in the imperialist world order.

Significant is the promise of the BRICS to strengthen strategic partnership among member states, and that's for, as the summit document said, the benefit of peoples in these countries. It plans to increase cooperation in the areas of political, security, economic, financial, cultural and people-to-people relationship.

The promised strategic partnership, if it moves in real term, will create a heavy headache for the America-led defence grouping across

the world. As BRICS turns 'bloc like' US global interests are at stake.

If the planned people-to-people cooperation materialises in its actual sense, not under control of coterie having sole motive of profit, will give peoples in member countries a better opportunity to build up a democratic, dignified life, as a real people-to-people cooperation requires people's participation in many areas.

Capitals and markets outside of the BRICS will be impacted by the emerging collective striving for a multi-polar world. Its chain reaction on investment and competition will be felt in the North. The Empire will find it difficult to favourably contain the march of BRICS. This will have long-term impact if the process re-

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lated to capitals and markets sustains. No doubt the recently concluded BRICS summit showed seeds of these possibilities. □□□

[Contributed]

NOTE

Singing about 'Floating in Tears'

Sonia Sarkar writes:

FARMER PROBIR MANDAL, 51, recently planted seeds of two traditional paddy varieties on his one-acre land in Kalitala, the last border village in the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest on the Indo-Bangladesh frontier.

He is fervently hoping for rain, so he can transplant the gobindobhog and kamini seedlings into the field.

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed for the rains", said Mandal, who lost 25,000 rupees (US\$300) from low yields arising from unexpected drought, cyclone and floods over the past three years. "We have been cursed with erratic weather for more than a decade, making it extremely difficult to produce rice".

To convey their desperation at the lack of rain and the changing weather pattern, Mandal and two other local farmers have written some 50 songs in Bengali, encapsu-

lating the challenges of economically and socially marginalised farmers in the Sundarbans—a region commonly ravaged by rains, floods, cyclonic storms and cyclones caused by climate change.

Part of Tridhara (which means "three tributaries" in Bengali), a cultural group formed in 1982, the three farmers composed bhatiali songs—a form of folk music to bring rivers and their communities to life—that describe the stories of struggle, loss and resilience of farmers in the Sundarbans.

In one song, Mandal wrote: "Disastrous excessive rain, you destroyer, flooding my farmland, breaking my happy home ...I am an unfortunate farmer, floating in my tears". In another, he wrote: "Farmer provides food to the nation, death of a farmer is a stigma for the nation".

Tridhara co-founder farmer Palas Mandal, 58, said that little was known worldwide of the farmers in

the Sundarbans, a region famed as one of the last habitats of man-eating royal Bengal tigers, but their songs will tell the world about human lives there.

A New Delhi-based non-profit in 2021 recorded 42 songs by Tridhara and filmed six videos featuring the singer-farmers. The songs and videos were subsequently released on YouTube, to bring Sundarbans' rice farmers closer to global rice consumers.

In truth farmers in the Sundarbans had been written off as "hapless" future climate refugees. But as nobody knew the land and the ecosystem better than these farmers, recording these songs was a "nascent attempt" to give them a voice and "sense of agency" to tell their own stories of resilience.

In 1999, after Cyclone Aila killed more than 78 people in West Bengal, Tridhara's singer-composer Bishnupada Sarkar, 65, wrote in a song: "Cruel Aila, you turned our golden [West] Bengal into a crematorium."

The cyclone had ravaged houses, fields, livestock, roads, grain storage and river embankments, and con-

taminated drinking water across Sundarbans.

“Aila was the turning point in the life of people in Sundarbans,” Mandal said. “People started migrating to other states—Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh—to work as daily wagers in an unprecedented manner.”

Few like Mandal, who refused to

migrate, remain in rice cultivation despite significant losses.

Last year, Mandal lost 28,000 rupees (US\$340) to pesticide-free production of the traditional variety of black rice because of a lack of buyers.

“Changes in weather have forced many local farmers to switch to fish and prawn cultivation and poultry

farming, while some have started driving public transport and running grocery shops to earn their livelihood”. It is important to archive songs about the daily struggles of people of Sundarbans because they reflect their perception of climate variability and climate change and their effects on ecological and socio-economic systems. □□□

ATTACKING ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Vishwa Guru’s Sleuths!

Subhash Gatade

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN the Parisian police had been given the onerous task of keeping the greatest writers of late 18th century who were living in Paris at that time under their watch. Poor fellows, one can imagine their difficulty in maintaining files on writers and artists and scholars 'beyond criminals and political figures.' (The Statesman and The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 26th September 2006)

The Modi dispensation at the centre is no different.

It could be said that it may be a step ahead.

The French Monarchs—who within few decades witnessed a mass upheaval which finally overthrew them—were wise enough to ask their minions to be rather discreet in their activities, not to offend the writers, scholars directly; the harbingers of today's 'New India' have even abandoned that discretion for good.

Close on the heels of a Parliamentary Committee's recommendations to prevent an 'award wapsi' embarrassment in future which has asked potential award winners sign an undertaking that they would not return their awards at any stage, has come the news that a team of Intelligence Bureau Officials suddenly landing at a leading private university in full public glare when the

Institution itself is in the eye of a storm because of a research paper written by one of its (former) Professors from the Economics Department which focussed itself on the 2019 elections to the Parliament.

Apropos they were keen to meet former Prof Sabyasachi Das, who worked for the Economics Department and to probe his research paper 'Democratic Backsliding in the World's Largest Democracy' whose tentative conclusions about the 2019 elections had unsettled the ruling establishment which pointed towards 'possibility of electoral manipulation in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections'. As they were unable to meet him as he was out of station, they even wanted his colleagues from his department to interact with them but when these sleuths formally refused to give their queries in writing to the department people they firmly refused to meet them.

One learns that they have informed they will come back soon.

This unprecedented episode in the academic history of the country has raised concerns but before moving further it is necessary to share few more details.

The publication of this research paper generated a lot of heat on social media and its tentative findings were attacked by the Bharatiya

Janata Party (BJP) leaders. Instead of defending the scholar's right to research the management of this 'liberal institution' distanced itself from its findings. It created such a situation that the Professor Sabyasachi Das resigned from the post, causing tremendous unease in the academia within the University as well as elsewhere.

Contrary to what has happened in many earlier cases, when rest of the academia has wore silence or decided to look the other way, this episode prompted an entirely different reaction.

Prof Pulapre Balakrishnan, another senior Professor from the same department who has served at various international Universities like Oxford and has even worked as Consultant to the ILO, RBI and UNDP, and has many published books to his credit resigned from his post in solidarity with Prof Das.

This solidarity action was followed by a growing call to ensure academic freedom.

A statement was issued by around 400 leading economists from India and abroad expressing their solidarity with Prof Das and even many departments within this Private University passed resolutions about 'academic freedom' and asked the management to support ensure it at any level.

The university was asked to reinstate Prof Das as well as Prof Pulapre Balakrishnan with immediate effect. In fact, the University's

Student Parliament also seconded this demanded and according to unconfirmed sources the management of the University was seriously contemplating to take back the two resignations.

The unannounced visit by the IB people is an ominous development—perhaps unheard of in academic world.

Could one say that it was a signal to the private university—which is seriously considering the formal reinstatement of the author Prof Sabyasachi Das and also Professor Pulapre Balakrishnan because of unprecedented turmoil within the academic community within and outside to 'save academic freedom' that such a step would be inimical to its own interests in future?

Could one say that it was also a reminder to the University establishment that the Private University's FCRA licence has to be renewed

soon and perhaps if it does not take any step which will impact this decision? Merely few months back CPR—a leading think tank in Delhi—which has been engaged in research with a focus on India's 21st-century challenges since 1973 found its FCRA licence suspended for 'allegedly violating the provisions of the law' compelling it to shed a significant part of its academic and other teams. Whatever might be the formal reasons offered to withdraw the FCRA licence to this institution, one knows that some of its research and its conclusions—which centred on industrial houses in good books of the government had not gone well with the persons in authority.

Next few days are important to watch. Whether the 'liberal Institution' sticks to its resolve or not will be important to watch.

Whatever happens one cannot but notice a silver lining of sorts in

these developments.

Since last more than nine years the BJP government has made tremendous attempts to change the character of education and educational institutions.

Not satisfied with the radical changes it has undertaken in revising academic courses, or installing its people in key positions, or introducing an educational policy without any proper consultation or not satisfied with putting (used) battle tanks in University campuses to instil a feeling of patriotism etc., or sending its cheerleaders to campuses to discipline still dissenting voices, educational campuses are still vibrating.

The idea of resistance to evil or whatever is wrong has not died down.

Students, teachers and other intellectuals who still believe in values and principles of Constitution are making it happen.

This definitely is a good sign. □□

REVIEW ARTICLE

Fried Fish and Flying 'Cheels'

Farooque Chowdhury

FANTASIES ARE FANTASIES. But, Credible Fantasies aren't fantasies. These move around and act within a reality.

The characters in the *Credible Fantasies by T Vijayendra are real, from real life. Its perspective and settings are real, a reality. The pushes and pulls pictured in the Credible Fantasies are of existing reality.

The 79-page book's "central idea [...] is to imagine a future for [the] young [...] with 'Green Jobs' [...] that helps in restoring ecology and creating equity among humans." T Vijayendra, Viju, to his friends irrespective of age, admits: "It", the green jobs that helps restore ecology and create equity among humans, "is a very difficult proposition under the present circumstances".

*CREDIBLE FANTASIES

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Therefore, Viju refers the incidents he has depicted in the book as "fantasies". He tells the inescapable fact: "Present circumstances".

The circumstance is full with dominance by markets—its forces, motive power, and modus operandi. There's the politics of markets. This politics takes form of politics with investment, politics with research and

development, politics with taxation and tax holidays, politics with employment, politics with the commons, politics with defacing and destruction of environment and ecology, politics with life, lives of innumerable. The mainstream mostly avoids these issues, as these are connected to class power, and to be specific, power of the exploiting classes that dominate the entire setting with billions of people, and exploit labour and nature.

Thus, in Viju's "fantasies", characters like Yajat, Rohit, Malini, Sadiq, Soujanya, Priyanka, Suresh, Dhiraj, Mala, Hanif, Sant Salunkhe Maharaj or Beej [seed] Baba, Deepthi, Navin, Nora, Trupthi capable of cycling 50 kilometres a day and visit nearby towns and villages, Madhulica, Kussuma, Jose, Katiyal, Virendra, Sucharita, and some more reside while Viju weaves his "fantasies" around school, part time work, small earning by students, workshop on

bicycle, the World Environment Day, the 200th Birth Anniversary of Bicycle, World Bicycle Day resolution, second-hand bicycle, “vulture”, IIT Hyderabad, Permaculture Demonstration Farm, seeds promotion, chicken kaabaab [mostly spelled Kebab], dhaabaa [mostly spelled dhaba] that serves fried fish fresh from nearby waterway, a small organic farm, a good lady’s Namaste and her lightening move of hand, an arrogant member of upper class experiencing humiliation—an important lesson for lifetime, a “Call Girl of Andheri” who calls flying Cheels, (Small Indian Kite, former Pariah Kite, milvus migrans), an approach to befriend life and nature, and to fully construct the “fantasies”, some more.

Viju, born in 1943 in Mysore, grew up in Indore, studied in IIT, Kharagpur to get a B. Tech in Electronics in 1966, was drawn into the red-rebellious days of the late-1960s while working in the Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, Kolkata, has not given up his activism, after participating in those rebellious days and passing time in prison. All the time he was involved with some sort of political-social activism. It does not astonish that environment and ecology turn to him as a socio-political issue, and he keeps involved by organising members of the young

generation, and conveying message to them—the social force with a huge creativity and energy, but suffering from the burden imposed on them by the markets of environment destruction. One of his efforts is educating the Left-wing cadres; and as part of that effort, he writes in *Frontier*, the famous socialist weekly from Kolkata, and in *Counter-currents*, the widely read e-journal from Kerala, India, having the motto Educate, Organise, Agitate.

Homes of Viju’s eight “fantasies”, written between February 2017 and March 2023, include school, bicycle maintenance workshop, Bicycle Health Check-up Camp, Cycle Hospital, Bicycle Bandhu Programme of Hyderabad, Kayakalp—a programme to restore old bicycles and gift those to the needy members of the working class, dead dog burial ground, Bilgram Reserve Forest, the Chinnaprabha River, a system of you-eat-what-you-want-and-pay-what-you-can-afford, friendship with fishermen, tappers and forest people, naturopathy, yoga classes, Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Conservation Education Centre of the Bombay Natural History Society, the Bewda Hill, which is a hill top hidden by green trees and shrubs, and similar places.

The stories tagged as “fantasies”, are about his “young friends”. “In some stories”, Viju uses “real names and locations [...]”. But readers should keep in mind that this is fiction, no matter how credible the situations sound.”

Although “fiction”, but can’t cross limits of reality, as reality always defines a limit. For example, in Shahjahan’s Delhi, it was impossible to imagine leeching of toxic agents from heaps of industrial wastes in the imperial capital city. Even, at that time, it was impossible to imagine washing down of chemicals from farms to waterways in the farm com-

munities in the northern Americas, or pollution of ground water from atomic wastes, or, heaps of medical wastes in Kolkata when Hastings, the robber, was expanding the city. Here’s the limit of Idealism, as a method, as a philosophy, as an approach—how much words it borrows from progressive literature and uses to hide its face that doesn’t take away Idealism’s crippling condition.

The creator of these “fantasies” stands on a reality—a reality that takes into account the existing condition, that includes young minds looking for new avenues, looking forward to be organised, educated, mobilised, imbued with spirit to work for humanity and for this planet. It’s not Idealism, the philosophy that bases itself on individual’s salvation, not on collective interest.

Viju writes:

‘We are facing the very extinction of life on earth unless we take corrective measures right away.

But what can we do? Actually we are also part of the problem. No matter how frugal we are, we still are consumers of products that destroy the environment. What is worse, most of the jobs we do are part of the system that is destroying our environment.

What we need to do is to change our life including our jobs towards green alternatives. The ultimate goal at an individual level is not only to reduce one’s carbon footprint, but also to earn one’s livelihood exclusively from Green Jobs. We define Green Jobs as those which involve in ‘Restoring Ecology through Rebuilding Communities’ on the basis of Equity and Sustainability’.

So, he writes these stories to “explore the possibilities of green jobs”.

Green Jobs within capitalist economy is difficult to create and find. But, that doesn’t mean, it’s impossible, totally impossible. There’re niches, narrow spaces with

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possibilities of widening, pores that can hold a few possibilities. These spaces are to be explored and utilised. No doubt, these spaces will experience onslaughts of capitalist system that, by its nature grabs, conquers, encroaches everything, that, by its nature, demolishes everything that appears having tinniest possibility of an alternative to the dominating system-capitalism/exploitative system.

It's a contradiction in the reality; and the contradiction is to be handled by those working to explore and organise green jobs, green jobs for a huge labour. It's a need for radical change in production and distribution systems. This turns the task a struggle. The struggle's form changes with time, expansion of the initiatives, gathering of forces in the initiatives.

Bicycle takes a major part of the "fantasies" that Viju has weaved. It's symbolic. It's also real. Other than eco-friendly-no consumption of hydrocarbon, one of the tools leaving behind least carbon-foot print-bicycle increases mobility of that segment of society that earns less, that consumes less. As a flexible mode of transport, bicycle occupies least possible space, and doesn't produce noise pollution, and it can be used for many types of work other than movement. In cities today, bicycles have appeared as a movement to defy capitalist mode of transport-individualised, hydrocarbon guzzling private cars that pollute a lot, from air to other surroundings, occupy a lot, and a tool for hydrocarbon, rubber, steel lobbies bent on reaping profit at the cost of community and environment. Paribeshpatra, an environment weekly from Dhaka, Bangladesh, covered the issue of private car in December 1999 ("Motor gaareer jhakkee", "Troubles with private car", vol. 3, no. 4). Source of the Paribeshpatra photo-feature was Down To Earth from Center for

Science and Environment, New Delhi, India.

The style of narration by Viju in the "fantasies" is like telling gossip: Simple, easy, short; but sharp, and deep in meaning. It seems his target audience is young learners, concerned with well-being of humanity. His "fantasies" are practice-centric-anyone concerned with the planet earth can begin these practices within her/his capacity, within her/his locality/community, with friends, in the family, in school/educational institution.

It's Viju's example-instead of making some high sounds that ultimately turns hollow, he practises, and shows the way of practice in a specific area, with a specific issue, with friends, in a small way that can gradually spread to wider areas.

Viju, the founder-member of Peak Oil India and Ecologise not only professes this-wider use of bicycle; he practices it, as he writes: "In 2017 he spent a year celebrating the Bicentenary of the Bicycle. Vijayendra has been a 'dedicated' cyclist all his life, meaning, he neither took a driving license nor did he ever drive a fossil fuel-based vehicle." "For the last thirteen years, he has been active in the field of 'Peak Oil' and Transition Town movement", and spends time with organic farms in several places in India.

Credible Fantasies pulls readers to settings, rural or urban, where people are plain, simple-living, friendly, easy-going, cooperative, not engaged in rat-race. Rather, they are engaged with conserving or greening of environment, and have a friendly, non-hostile relation with ecology. Flying cheels respond to their call, and they listen to birds' songs and befriend cheels. The author's "fantasies", actually examples, are ways of mobilising people, mainly the young. His book is a learning material for young environment activists.

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RGW ACT, 2023

Big Problems, Small Wins

Sabina Dewan

RAJASTHAN'S NEW LAW TO extend certain welfare entitlements to platform-based gig workers has been making waves in recent months. Heralded as the first of its kind in India, the legislation was passed by the state assembly in July 2023 and also holds platforms accountable for contributing to this goal.

The Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023 takes its cue from the Code on Social Security, 2020 that proposed a similar approach. The union labour ministry and other states are considering similar measures.

Many are excited about the passing of this well-intentioned bill. After all, most want to see gig workers—the app-based delivery personnel, on-demand drivers, personal care providers, and others—who have become such visible symbols of growing economic desperation, improve their conditions of work. The bill answers a moral and political call.

Yet, despite good intentions, much in this legislation is built on weak foundations, which will make it difficult to implement. This could potentially leave many gig workers

in the same state of precarity they are in now.

What is more, the visible struggles of gig workers opened the door to a national conversation about much needed reform of India's social protection architecture that would extend access to a large and growing contingent of self-employed workers in informal employment. Instead of tackling the hard questions to step-by-step, build a universal system that covers a growing share of workers, we are settling for the same fragmented approach that has, so far, left millions without coverage.

The visible struggles of gig workers opened the door to a national conversation about much needed reform of India's social protection architecture that would extend access to a large and growing contingent of self-employed workers in informal employment...

There are five key concerns with the act.

First, it subscribes to a tried and tested model of a welfare board, which is both flawed and inefficient.

Second, the board is charged with registering platforms and aggregators in the state. The platforms and aggregators are required to share their database of workers with the board. But many platforms and aggregators that engage workers in the state will be outside the jurisdiction of this legislation, ultimately affecting both the resources and the reach of the board.

Third, the act speaks to the needs of location-based gig workers, rather than geographically untethered web-based workers, many of whom are women. This is at a time when many have highlighted the opportu-

nities that home-based gig work presents for improving the female labour force participation rate in the country. The invisibility of women in data, policy, and regulation is a continuing problem, which is also manifest in this legislation and its current scope.

Fourth, platforms and aggregators are supposed to provide updates on increases or decreases in the number of gig workers registered with them on a monthly basis. But the flexible and fast-paced nature of the tech-based gig economy means that changes will need to be recorded much more frequently than the act suggests.

Finally, there is much that still remains ambiguous, which will have to be carefully thought through and spelt out to have any chance of effective implementation on the ground. After all, the devil is always in the details.

The Rajasthan act sets up a Platform-based Gig Workers Welfare Board that levies on platforms a cess between 1% and 2% of every transaction. There are penalties if a platform fails to comply. This general operating model of welfare boards is a familiar one but their performance has been mixed at best.

Worker welfare boards and associated funds, central and state, are a widely used sector-specific mechanism for providing access to social protection to informal workers where the traditional employer-employee relationship is unclear. The fund is usually based on a cess, or tax, on the production or output in specified industries.

For instance, the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Cess Act, passed in 1996, mandates that all states form a welfare board that collects 1% of the construction cost from employers and developers. The amount raised is transferred to a dedicated fund which registers

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construction workers and brings them under the cover of existing welfare schemes.

Proving one's eligibility, accessing entitlements, or filing claims entails completing cumbersome paperwork and application processes, which often excludes the most vulnerable who do not have the necessary documentation.

Many such welfare boards are sitting on large sums of unused funds. State governments and union territories cumulatively collected Rs 78,521 crore as cess, of which less than half—Rs. 35,399 crore—was spent, according to the labour ministry's annual report for 2022-23. Moreover, proving one's eligibility, accessing entitlements, or filing claims entails completing cumbersome paperwork and application processes, which often excludes the most vulnerable who do not have the necessary documentation.

Welfare boards are what people know how to do. But they are not what work the best. Given the complexities of the gig economy, the challenges of effective execution are magnified.

As a first step, the gig workers' board must register platforms or aggregators that operate in the state. The platform or aggregator will then provide the board the data on all the platform-based gig workers they engage. Any changes in the numbers of gig workers must be updated within one month of such a change.

This poses the second challenge. Platforms and aggregators that are not registered in Rajasthan can recruit workers in the state, but cannot be required to pay the cess or share data on workers. These workers will be excluded, unless there is an option to self-register. But if workers self-register without the platform being held responsible for paying the cess and sharing transaction data, the board will end up with

more workers subscribing for entitlements than collections. If the number of platforms or aggregators registered with the board is limited, the levy would need to change to ensure that the board can meet its statutory obligations to provide welfare and other entitlements.

This stands to be yet another example of a piece of legislation that ... perpetuates the common practice of first crafting the policy or law and worrying about its impact on women later, if at all.

Third, some of the largest platforms that serve as intermediaries for micro-tasking and freelancing services are registered abroad. They will neither pay the cess nor register their workers. What is worse is that many of those who do this online work that is untethered to a location, often from home, are women.

This stands to be yet another example of a piece of legislation that is willing to overlook a significant contingent of working women. It perpetuates the common practice of first crafting the policy or law and worrying about its impact on women later, if at all.

Moreover, for better or worse, policymakers see this form of home-based gig work as a way to boost the female labour force participation rate, but the proposed legislation and general discourse to extend workers' access to entitlements is largely centered on location-based workers and not on those working from home.

Fourth, flexibility is one of the key drivers of the gig economy. This means that workers can be on one or more platforms and that a platform can keep workers or lock them out based on ratings, temporarily or for the long term. This continuous churn means that platforms will need to constantly report changes to the board.

This will not only impose a sig-

nificant administrative burden on the platform, but also on the board to manage the constant flow of information and calibrate the provision of entitlements accordingly, in real time. The cess that the act talks about is on transactions. It mentions nothing about collecting transaction-based data from platforms other than how many workers are registered.

Besides these challenges, there is much that is still ambiguous.

Will the board just collect registration data from platforms and aggregators, or also transaction data? What is the plan to protect this data and strike a balance between transparency and what is kept private to protect the worker and the platform or aggregator? Is there anything that will prevent the platform from shifting the cost of the cess to the consumer? Will the cess be on the value of the total transaction, or after the platform makes its deductions? What entitlements and rights will the board set out to deliver?

Will the general and specific schemes be determined on the basis of the needs of different types of gig workers ... or will they be based on the problems of the most visible workers with the loudest voices?

The throngs of on-demand drivers waiting for their next ride; the drivers weaving in and out of traffic to make deliveries within a prescribed time; the young in-home beauty workers hauling massage tables in and out of auto-rickshaws are visible symbols that have drawn national (and global) attention to the poor working conditions of gig workers. They race against time, fight traffic, struggle with inclement weather, and are subject to unfair rating systems and other hurdles.

These conditions include inconsistent income; an ambiguous employment status that leaves gig workers without entitlements or labour

protections; nefarious rating systems; algorithmic control and bias; and a lack of access to collective bargaining and redressal mechanisms. To what extent will this legislation address these concerns?

Will the general and specific schemes be determined on the basis of the needs of different types of gig workers—for instance, home-based workers—or will they be based on the problems of the most visible workers with the loudest voices?

The legislation sets up a grievance redressal mechanism, which is a commendable step, but much more detail is needed on the process of redressal and possibilities for escalation.

For all these gaps, the act does some things well. For instance, it takes a step towards attempting to get platforms and aggregators to share their data. It also sets up a redressal mechanism for gig workers. The very proposal of this legislation and its passing is an admission of the government's obligation to gig workers and its attempt to hold platforms and aggregators accountable.

However, more progressive legislation from around the world designates gig workers as employees so that they automatically fall within the purview of existing labour regulations and social protection.

In these aspects, the act holds

up precious virtues. But virtues must translate into effective action, and ultimately outcomes. Many have celebrated the passing of this legislation, though the real win lies not in its passing but in its effective implementation. On implementation, one needs to rethink the approach.

Whether gig workers will actually get what they deserve was relegated to being another question for another time. □□□

[Courtesy: The India Forum]

[Sabina Dewan is president and executive director of the JustJobs Network, a senior visiting fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, and a non-resident fellow at the Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire.]

WHO IS YEVGENY PRIGOZHIN?

End of Wagner's Rebellion against Putin

[The former jail convict and ally of Vladimir Putin became an increasingly vocal critic of the Kremlin's defence chiefs during the war in Ukraine]

Ellen Knickmeyer

Joe Sommerlad

Jane Dalton

ONCE A BUSINESSMAN with a catering empire, Yevgeny Prigozhin manoeuvred himself into a position so powerful that as Russia's war in Ukraine progressed, he could openly question his ally's strategy.

The owner of the Kremlin-allied Wagner Group, the mercenary force that has fought some of the Russian military's toughest battles in Ukraine—most notably the drawn-out pursuit of Bakhmut—this summer the 62-year-old stepped into his most dangerous role yet: preaching open rebellion against his country's military leadership.

Now, two months after the attempted uprising, Mr Prigozhin is feared dead in a plane crash in Russia. On 23 August it was reported a private plane had crashed near Moscow, killing 10 people on board. While it has not been con-

firmed that he was on board, Mr Prigozhin was on the passenger list for the flight.

Prigozhin has repeatedly condemned Russia's regular army leaders

Two months ago, the Wagner chief finally escalated what had been months of scathing criticism of Russia's conduct of the war, calling for an armed uprising to oust Russia's defence minister. His men occupied Rostov-on-Don and marched on Moscow, shooting down a number of military helicopters, killing their pilots as they advanced. Russian security services reacted immediately, opening a criminal investigation and demanding Mr Prigozhin's arrest.

In a sign of how seriously the Kremlin took the threat posed, riot police and the National Guard scrambled to tighten security at key facilities in the Russian capital, in-

cluding government agencies and transport infrastructure, Tass reported. Mr Putin branded the rebellion an act of treachery.

Mr Prigozhin—a one-time felon, hot-dog vendor and long-time associate of Vladimir Putin—urged Russian civilians to join his “march to justice”. The situation remained extremely volatile throughout the following Saturday before peace talks, seemingly mediated by Belarussian president Alexander Lukashenko, brought the standoff to a peaceful conclusion. The Kremlin said that to avert bloodshed, Mr Prigozhin and some of his fighters would leave for Belarus and a criminal case against him for armed mutiny would be dropped.

Mr Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov revealed that a three-hour meeting had taken place five days after the mutiny, on 29 June with 35 people, including Wagner unit commanders, who reiterated their loyalty to their leader.

But confusion has surrounded the implementation of the deal, and it was not clear whether the mercenary leader ever made it to Minsk. Before long, the rebellion leader was seen back in his homeland, appear-

ing at the Trezzini Palace Hotel in St Petersburg, apparently on the sidelines of the Russia-Africa Summit.

On 5 July, state television said an investigation against him was still being pursued, and broadcast footage showing cash, passports, weapons and other items it said were seized in a raid on one of his properties. This week, he appeared in a video that he suggested was shot in Africa, where Wagner has operations in several countries.

Mr Prigozhin and Mr Putin go way back, both having been born in Leningrad, now known as St Petersburg. Yevgeny Prigozhin entered the world on 1 June 1961.

During the final years of the Soviet Union, Mr Prigozhin served nine years in prison for crimes including robbery and fraud.

After his release in 1990, he launched a career as a caterer in his home town, owning a hot-dog stand and then a string of upmarket restaurants that attracted Mr Putin's interest. In his first term in office, the Russian leader took then-French president Jacques Chirac to dine at one of them.

"Vladimir Putin saw how I built a business out of a kiosk, he saw that I don't mind serving to the esteemed guests because they were my guests," Mr Prigozhin recalled in an interview in 2011.

His businesses expanded significantly, into catering. Leveraging political connections, Mr Prigozhin was awarded major state contracts, and in 2010, Mr Putin helped open his factory built on generous loans from a state bank.

In Moscow alone, school meals contracts for his company Concord were worth millions of pounds. He also organised catering for Kremlin events for several years—earning him the nickname "Putin's chef", although more recently he joked that "Putin's butcher" would be more

appropriate. Concord has also provided catering and utility services to the Russian military.

In 2017, opposition figure and corruption fighter Alexei Navalny accused Mr Prigozhin's companies of breaking antitrust laws by bidding for around £300m in defence ministry contracts.

Mr Prigozhin reportedly has a net worth of \$1 billion.

In 2014, he founded Wagner, a Kremlin-allied private military company whose mercenary fighters have come to play a central role in Mr Putin's projection of Russian influence in trouble spots around the world, including Syria, Libya and the Central African Republic. The United States has sanctioned it and accused it of atrocities, which Mr Prigozhin has denied.

Wagner fighters allegedly provide security for national leaders or warlords in exchange for lucrative payments, often including a share of gold or other natural resources. US officials say Russia may also be using Wagner's work in Africa to support its war in Ukraine.

In Ukraine, Mr Prigozhin's mercenaries have become a major force in the war, fighting as counterparts to the Russian army in battles against Ukrainian forces.

By May this year, Wagner forces and Russian soldiers appeared to have largely won the city, a victory with strategically slight importance for Russia, despite the cost in lives. The US estimates that nearly half of the 20,000 Russian troops killed in Ukraine since December were Wagner fighters in Bakhmut.

Mr Prigozhin's soldiers-for-hire included thousands of inmates recruited from Russian prisons.

As his forces fought and died en masse in Ukraine, Mr Prigozhin increasingly raged against the Russian military's top brass. He used social media to trumpet Wagner's successes

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and accuse the army of incompetence and even treason.

In a video released by his team in May, Mr Prigozhin stood next to rows of bodies he said were those of Wagner fighters. He accused Russia's regular military of incompetence and of starving his troops of the weapons and ammunition they needed to fight.

"These are someone's fathers and someone's sons," Mr Prigozhin said. "The scum that doesn't give us ammunition will eat their guts in hell."

The former convict and Kremlin caterer has acknowledged that he founded and financed the Internet Research Agency, a company that Washington says is a "troll farm" that meddled in the 2016 US presidential election. In November 2022 Mr Prigozhin said he had interfered in US elections and would do so again.

He and a dozen other Russian nationals and three Russian companies were charged with operating a covert social media campaign aimed at fomenting discord ahead of Donald Trump's victory. They were

indicted as part of special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian election interference.

The US Treasury Department has since sanctioned Mr Prigozhin and associates repeatedly in connection with both his alleged election interference and his leadership of Wagner.

After the 2018 indictment, the RIA Novosti news agency quoted Mr Prigozhin as saying, in a clearly sarcastic remark: "Americans are very impressionable people; they see what they want to see. I treat them with

great respect. I'm not at all upset that I'm on this list. If they want to see the devil, let them see him."

The Biden White House called him "a known bad actor" and State Department spokesperson Ned Price said Mr Prigozhin's "bold confession, if anything, appears to be just a manifestation of the impunity that crooks and cronies enjoy under President Putin and the Kremlin".

As Mr Prigozhin grew more outspoken against the way Russia's conventional military had conducted

the fighting in Ukraine, he continued to play a seemingly indispensable role for the Russian offensive and appeared to suffer no retaliation from Mr Putin for his criticism of Moscow's generals.

Media reports at times suggested Mr Prigozhin's influence over Mr Putin was growing and that he was hoping to be rewarded with a prominent political post, although some analysts felt this assessment of his ambitions was overstated. □□□

[Source: *The Independent*]

PLIGHT OF PANDITS

The Kashmir Files Unreported

Deepa Gahlot

WHEN THE KASHMIR Files was screened at the International Film Festival of India last year, the jury chairman, Israeli film-maker Nadav Lapid had called it 'vulgar propaganda' and sparked a controversy. By then, it had already become a blockbuster at the box office, and hardly mattered to the director, Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri. He just got more mileage.

The new docu-series, *The Kashmir Files Unreported* seems to be an answer to that and other criticism questioning the motives and methods behind making the film.

Over seven episodes, Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri (director) and his wife Pallavi Joshi (producer) interview many people, some recount the horrors they suffered and witnessed, as militants killed, looted, raped and terrorised Kashmiri Pandits and Sikhs—both minorities in Kashmir—and compelled them to flee.

They also interview academics, journalists and military men to give a detailed backdrop of the ongoing conflict in Kashmir that predates the 1990s forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from their homes.

It is understood that the attempts

to separate Kashmir from India is for geo-political gain, because of its strategic location, sharing borders with three countries.

The slip ups during the agreements signed with princely States to join India after Independence, the capturing of Kashmiri territory by Pakistan-funded tribal warriors and calling it Pakistan Occupied Kashmir is a thorn in the side of any party with the political will to tackle the complicated issue.

In Kashmir, where there are demands of azaadi by some locals, India is referred to as foreign and the region as India occupied Kashmir.

It was, according to the interviewees in the series, the blunders made by Jawaharal Nehru and Sheikh Abdullah, the intervention by the United Nations and even the CIA, that stoked the flames of unrest in Kashmir, which gradually built up and exploded into a violent separatist movement.

It is stated over and over again that what the Pandits suffered was genocide, sought to be watered down by using words like 'migration' and 'exodus', when they obviously left under threats of violence.

It is pointless to quibble over semantics.

As one of the experts points out, the Rwanda and Rohingya genocide is talked about, but the Kashmiri Pandits are forgotten.

A tragedy remains a tragedy whatever label it is given, and it does not become less or more significant by the number of people killed and dispossessed.

It is also unarguably true that justice must be done and reparations made but it is a monumental task to apprehend the perpetrators, so at least the process of healing should commence and continue.

The Kashmiri Pandits know that they may never get closure or be able to return to their homes that, in many cases, have been stripped of anything of value and torched. (One of the men interviewed talks about how there are gangs who enter homes that have been emptied of valuables to steal copper wires, plumbing supplies and window and door frames.)

There have been books and thousands of media reports about the situation in Kashmir; those who want to find out, could get enough material.

Agnihotri's team had access to archival footage, copies of important documents, and, of course, clips of *The Kashmir Files*, to emphasise many points.

Agnihotri is right when he says that acceptance is important for other political or legal measures to be taken.

He also grandly claims that after The Kashmir Files came out, the world was made aware of the issue, and action was taken to arrest some terrorist leaders.

It is apparently quite safe for tourists to go to Kashmir now.

It does make one wonder how and why Agnihotri became the spokesperson for the Pandits, and the reason is not just altruistic.

Like the film, the series also evokes sadness and anger but since the latter takes a serious tone, mixing emotionally-fraught memories of the victims with facts presented by experts, it is a more in-depth piece of work, though, obviously one-sided, since the 'other'

side is difficult to present. The separatists could give reasons for their demand of independence, but never justify the violence.

The suffering of the Kashmiri Pandits should also not be allowed to fade from public memory, but there need to be more voices speaking up, ideally from the community itself. □

[Source: Rediff.com]

DALITS KEPT AS CLEANERS

The 'Toilet Man' of India

Vidya Bhushan Rawat

[The founder of Sulabh International, Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, passed away in a hospital in Delhi a few days back. Pathak was 80 and was known as the 'toilet man' of India. He is said to have brought 'revolution' to the toilet system in India by introducing the concept of 'paid toilet' system.]

HOWEVER, THE FACT IS, Sulabh International, which claimed to have 'eradicated' untouchability, actually became the biggest beneficiary of the hypocrisy of a society which refuses to pay honourably to a community which is enslaved. Community people continue to work as manual scavengers. They suffer humiliation, socially, economically and culturally. They have been reduced to symbolism of all varieties of people right from Pathak to Narendra Modi.

While Sulabh's pay-and-use toilet model has been a hugely successful business model that gave both Pathak and his organisation millions of rupees, unfortunately it could not become a model to emancipate the plight of the manual scavengers, which he claimed had inspired him to do this work.

Pathak said in an interview about what made him do this work:

"When I was young, one of the many rules I had to follow was about not touching certain people. One day, out of curiosity, I touched a lady scavenger. My grandmother saw me and was so scandalised at the 'sin' I committed that she fed

me cow-dung, sand, and Ganges water to purify my soul. Years later, I saw a young boy left to die in the rain after being gored by a bull. Nobody took him to the hospital because he was 'untouchable'.

"Those incidents made me challenge our system that rewards an honest day's work—cleaning latrines—with scorn and humiliation. I joined the Bihar Gandhi Birth Centenary Celebration Committee in 1968 because I wanted what Gandhi himself wanted—to bring back the rights and dignity of the 'untouchables.' One problem he had, though, was that no technology could yet replace the bucket latrines, which required scavengers for cleaning. That's why I developed the Sulabh toilet, biogas digester, and other technologies."

For long, Pathak and Sulabh used Gandhiji's thought of 'Harijan' for 'eradicating' manual scavenging. One rarely found him talking about Dr BR Ambedkar for the emancipation of Dalits. His initiatives were important if used as a method to emancipate the Dalits, but unfortunately it became a tool for gaining wider publicity and brought huge profit to his organisation.

In the early 1990s, Sulabh International gained ground in Delhi as it started a centre at Palam Dabari Road. The toilet museum there is really good and gives one the history of the toilets world over. Pathak's initial plan was to use the issue of manual scavengers and their liberation as the target to reach the power groups in Delhi. He knew well that it is easier to access the power politics of Delhi using Gandhiji's name.

In Delhi, Pathak made Dr Mulk Raj Anand, the famous author of 'Untouchables', as patron. Dr Anand was an internationally known personality and passionate about the eradication of manual scavenging. Pathak's idea was that once the latrine system is revolutionised through the flush toilet system, the manual scavenging would go. He and his team used the symbols of the novel 'Untouchables'.

It was translated into Hindi and many street plays were organised in Delhi. On October 2, much publicised work was done in Delhi in which some of the top 'intellectuals' and bureaucrats were asked to adopt a family of manual scavengers on the Gandhi Jayanti Day. If anything none of the dignitaries ever invited any person from the manual scavenging community to their home.

This so-called adoption of the families of manual scavengers at Pathak's programme on October 2 was a hogwash. The fact is that he was using different methods to get

access to power and gain legitimacy to his corporatisation process.

He knew: legitimacy would only come when he would claim that he was not doing business but 'social reform', though anyone can vouch how many Dalits were heading his funds, projects and even the Sulabh Shauchalayas in the prime locations of the cities. His media team was powerful, well-connected and the Gandhi Jayanti day would be used as the day of emancipation of manual scavengers.

Slowly, reaching the power structure and getting bigger contracts from the government to build and maintain Sulabh Shauchalayas in the prime location of the cities became his sole agenda. The toilet system was commercialised. Pathak and his team knew well that people needed a public utility system near railway and bus stations etc., and the government wanted to get rid of maintaining them. Hence Sulabh came in as a big rescue.

Just imagine the Old Delhi Railway Station, where a public toilet system gives you access at Rs 5 or Rs 10 for using it. In a day if 5,000 people use it, the amount of money from just one place would be huge. Slowly, Sulabh became almighty, powerful. It has already attracted senior civil servants, who are now part of its structure.

Sulabhs were started in Bihar, but now they are all over the country. It is pure monopoly of a system. Of course, there were places where Sulabh was blacklisted in Delhi, but then it had powerful access to the government and its ministers, hence nothing happened to them. Sulabh

would give awards to powerful personalities, including prime ministers. Chandrashekhar, Narsimha Rao, Manmohan Singh and Modi became his ardent fans. Of course, he was not comfortable with VP Singh.

Normally, Pathak rarely acknowledged Ambedkar, as he knew that Ambedkar's vision for the emancipation of the Dalits is not based on charity of the dominant castes or savarnas but on Dalit rights. After the 1990s, VP Singh's Mandal mantra made a huge dent on the social monopoly of the caste elite that compelled even Pathak to speak about Ambedkar, though reluctantly.

In an interview he said, in India, untouchables require social acceptance. He aligned his work with the guidelines given by Ambedkar to understand whether untouchability has been eradicated or not. "When everybody will go to a temple to worship, when everybody will take bath in the same pond, everyone will draw water from the same well, and everybody will dine together. I fulfilled all these in two towns one of which is Alwar (Rajasthan)", he claimed.

Sulabh has a huge data base of the country, but one is not sure whether Pathak ever heard of Safai Karmchari Andolan led by Bezwada Wilson, who has been campaigning against untouchability and honourable rehabilitation of the safai karmcharis. He never spoke on the crisis of untouchability and its source, whether they were victims of the Brahmanical order.

In the last five years alone, over 347 people died cleaning the septic tanks or sewage lines. Pathak and his Sulabh never raised any concern about this. This is because Pathak was not just a simple contractor of the sanitation work but one who claimed that his idea to start Sulabh was the emancipation of the untouchables, particularly those from

the manual scavenging communities. No emancipatory model can succeed without taking into account Dalit rights.

No doubt, the Sulabh model can become a powerful tool to eradicate manual scavenging and rehabilitate manual scavenging communities if the public toilets at prime locations of the cities are handed over to those who are engaged in manual scavenging. Let them enjoy the profit of these toilets.

Unfortunately, while the cleaners and workers of the toilets have mostly been unorganised workers of the manual scavenging communities, the managerial positions have always been dominated by the Brahmins from Bihar.

Would Sulabh which claims to work for the emancipation of Dalits provide proportional representation to Dalits in all its decision making bodies? If not, then it is fine to continue with its business model and acquire all the public toilets of the country. The monopoly of one organisation will never be a public good.

Pathak will be remembered as the pioneer of commercialising the public toilet system and making people aware of hygiene related to toilets, but he cannot be termed as the emancipator of the manual scavenging communities simply because his movement deviated more and more towards commercial gains, where community and individuals are merely symbols to be utilised during public events.

He was a successful entrepreneur who used a social evil of discrimination faced by manual scavengers to promote his own agenda of corporatisation of the public toilet system in India, which helped governments in abdicating its responsibility, but could not stop manual scavenging and the discrimination faced by the community. □□□

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DHYANBINDU

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LETTERS

Hopefully Waiting

As we enter the sixth year of our incarceration the predominant feeling over the last five years is that of waiting. From waiting for default bail in the seventh month of our imprisonment, most of us are still waiting. In jail, we sit there waiting for court dates, waiting for mulakaat, waiting for the newspaper, waiting for bail and for the jail God called Memo. In jail, our sense of time itself gets warped. When a lawyer tells a prisoner that she will get bail in one or two days, it may actually mean one or two years. 24 hours of clock time could mean 24 months in judicial time.

So, what keeps us going through these five years? Apart from our own thoughts, beliefs, and ideals and each other's company it was the courage and suffering of ordinary people with frugal means struggling for freedom, who had been confined within these stone walls for an even longer period; that gave us patience. Outside, it was the tremendous support we received at the national and international level, from the smallest protest to the massive farmers movement that we found overwhelming. The continuous efforts of our devoted, efficient legal team and having brilliant legal luminaries appearing for us gave us tremendous hope. Family and friends coming from distant places to meet us in court, standing in long queues in the hot sun or pouring rain for a 15 minute conversation with a glass panel separating us, families going through all the travails and disappointments along with us have also been very endearing.

In this warped sense of time, everything that I left behind in June 2018 floats before my eyes like the vivid present. But I know that by the time I come out the world will be a very different place. While AI is penetrating into all walks of life we write with pens and paper, stick postal stamps on envelopes. We live in the Stone Age without knives, scissors or needles. We read about the Russia- Ukraine war, climate change disasters, people's agitations in France, India gearing up for elections and still, we of the Bhima Koregaon Elgar Parishad case keep waiting, hopefully waiting.

Shoma Sen, Nagpur Central Jail

In the Name of Ravidas

That the minority community is not going to oblige the Modi brigade in Madhya Pradesh assembly elections is a hard reality. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) knows

it. After 'Ayodhya' they are resorting to communal polarisation in respect of Gayanvapi mosque in Varanasi. People are not fools. So the party in power has decided to woo the Dalits, more precisely a section of Dalits, to create a new vote bank. As Madhya Pradesh Assembly Elections 2023 are round the corner Prime Minister Narendra Modi will lay the foundation stone of one hundred-crore temple dedicated to social reformer Sant Ravidas in the Sagar district where he will also address a public meeting. Notably, this will be PM Modi's second visit in just over a month to poll-bound Madhya Pradesh.

The BJP is expecting up to 2 lakh people to attend the PM's rally and the foundation laying ceremony for the temple dedicated to Sant Ravidas, who enjoys a nationwide following, among Dalits.

The two programmes will also mark the culmination of the ruling party's ongoing 'Samrasta (harmony) Yatras', an attempt to reach out to Dalits ahead of the assembly elections.

"Five such yatras started from different parts of the state on July 25. The participants are bringing a handful of soil from 53,000 villages and water from 315 water bodies, including sacred rivers. The yatra reached Sagar on August 11 evening." A recreation of Ram shila drama.

Madhya Pradesh has 35 assembly seats, of the total 230, reserved for Scheduled Castes, and of these, the BJP won 18 in the last elections, while the Congress bagged 17. The saffron party is making attempts to strengthen its base among Dalits by way of erecting a temple in the name of Sant Ravidas.

A Reader

Criminal Justice System in India

In the name of denouncing the colonial criminal laws in the country, the present Union government on 12 August introduced and subsequently sent the three new bills to the Parliamentary standing committee, while changing the erstwhile legal provisions named as Indian Penal Code, 1860; Criminal Procedure Code, 1973 and Indian Evidence Act, 1872 to Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita; Bharatiya Nagarik Surakshya Sanhita and Bharatiya Sakshya Bill.

Section 150 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 shows that the word 'sedition' has been removed but the spirit of the

sedition law is very much existent in the new section. At any moment of time when the governance has the ultimate authority to determine an act/ observation/opinion/ association as anti-national or against the integrity of the nation as ample opportunity to use this draconian legal provision against any dissent.

Section 150 of the new Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita Bill details the codes while discussing the acts, which are endangering the sovereignty, unity, and integrity of India.

The uttered position is not different to the original position in Indian Penal Code under section 124A in letter and spirit.

By using the words 'subversive activity' which is not only vague but to restrict the democratic activities denouncing the government's policies and actions. This is a direct attack on the fundamental constitutional rights of the citizen of India. The dissenting voice and the human rights defenders are at stake.

The new criminal bills also introduce new offences with stricter punishment. Section 111 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita incorporates new crime as the 'Terrorist act' under general penal law. For dealing with terrorist activities there are special laws like UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967) but here the features of UAPA are very much existing in the new penal provisions presented by the government. To define terrorist acts it explicitly refers under section 111 (1) (iv), "to provoke or influence by intimidation the Government or its organisation, in such a manner so as to cause or likely to cause death or injury to any public functionary or any person or an act of detaining any person and threatening to kill or injure such person in order to compel the Government to do or abstain from doing any act, or destabilize or destroy the political, economic, or social structures of the country, or create a public emergency or undermine public safety." It can be misused by the government authorities to take vengeance against the opposition, human rights workers and dissent voice who will try to raise their opinion against the government.

**Kirity Roy, Secretary
Banglar Manabdhikar
Suraksha Mancha**

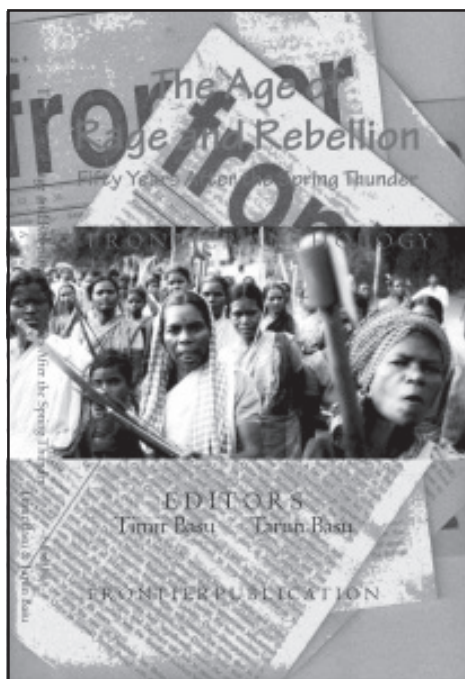
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