

frontier

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Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency

WHILE MAOISTS NO LONGER MAKE NEWS, NON-MARXIST insurgencies, particularly in Kashmir and NE quite often hit the headlines. In the bloody encounter on September 12 in the Anantanag district, four security forces personnel, including the commanding officer of 19 Rashtriya Rifles, a Major, a DSP of J&K police and an Army soldier were killed in the gun battle. It is after 20 years of tranquillity that the Rajouri, Poonch and Reasi areas of Jammu were again trembled by gun-fire. Ten soldiers, including five Special Forces, were recently killed in the Rajouri and Poonch districts in two separate ambushes. And insurgency begets more violent counter-insurgency all the time. And this cycle of violence seems unending when it is the question of Kashmir. But real sufferers are ordinary people who have nothing to do with terrorism or counter-terrorism.

After the 12 September incident the Army has launched high-tech operations against Kashmiri militants in the dense Garole forest of south Kashmir's Kohernag that stretched to 120 hours, at the time of writing. The hunt for the 'terrorists' is continuing in full swing only to compound the miseries of ordinary people. Schools have been shut. Daily life has been disrupted severely. The security forces are said to be using drones to bomb the insurgents. Topography favours militants as they are taking shelter in natural caves instead of man-made bunkers. They call it jungle warfare. True, it's not a typically guerrilla warfare. In more ways than one it's a kind of positional warfare in which 'terrorists' are getting better, notwithstanding the superior fire power of the security forces. The Pakistan military is reportedly running 18 camps in PoK [Pakistan occupied Kashmir] and pressing drones to assist militants; after all it is their proxy war. Pakistani ruling elites, more precisely the military bureaucracy, won't call it a day so long as the Kashmiri youth would like to remain cannon fodders of the Pakistan army.

No insurgency can survive without mass support and rear. What was true for Vietnamese guerrillas in the 1970s is equally true for the Kashmiri militants today. A weak force can defeat a powerful professional army if combatants are ideologically motivated.

Without mass support internally no insurgency can make substantial inroad in any battle, positional or otherwise. That Kashmiri militants despite their belief in religious fanaticism have people's sympathy is a fact of life.

So long as they get support from masses that live in a perennial state of fear-psychosis because of the huge presence of army, the security establishment is likely to suffer more casualties as it happened recently in Rajouri. Increased counter-insurgency actions have just alienated the security forces further from ordinary people. This isolation is the main weapon of Pakistan, not the advanced drone they are using at the moment.

High-tech or low-tech operation, it always affects the man on the street. The parliamentary parties of Kashmir are essentially non-committal to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, lest they lose votes. They never mobilise masses against violence. Their tokenism in condemning the

army atrocities makes little difference in the real world of governance. Their sole aim is how to loot the exchequer through the ballot. The disappeared in Kashmir almost represent a Latin American scenario but they never took the issue seriously, allowing the religious fundamentalists to influence the wounded psyche which in turn helped the militants to spread their gun culture.

Having failed to curb militancy by force, Indian authorities are now pinning much hope on the on-going turmoil in Pakistan to regain lost ground in Jammu & Kashmir. Mass protests, somewhat spontaneous; against punishing electricity prices and the sky-rocketing cost of food, petrol, and other essential commodities have rocked Pakistan's major

urban centres for over a month. Pakistan's per capita energy consumption is the lowest in the world outside of Africa and yet they boast of nuclear weapons. The people need electricity, not nukes. The IMF-dictated austerity measures have hit the people of PoK very badly, triggering virtual mass upheavals against Islamabad. Many voices have been raised in favour of joining mainland Kashmir and cessation from Pakistan as they think they are Indian citizens by default. And this aspect of anti-Islamabad agitation, particularly in PoK, is being highlighted by the major Indian electronic media, hoping that one day PoK will merge with the valley without bloodshed! □

17-09-2023

COMMENT

Journalism and Journalists

THE PHENOMENON OF FAKE news—or for that matter paid news—is global. The advent of electronic media has aggravated the problem. To blame it on journalists for all the evils under the sun is meaningless. What matters is how the media house owners decide to run their papers or channels. The unholy nexus between a section of media and politicians is well-known. How they create image of some politicians during elections and try to influence public opinion is an open secret now. It happens in the advanced democracy and it happens in backward democracy like India. The people are left with no option but to read between the lines to get truth. The Indian Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc's media sub-group has decided not to participate in the news shows of 14 specific news anchors of as many prominent TV channels. This decision was announced following

the first meeting of the INDIA bloc's co-ordination committee. The reason is simple: they present biased news to sell Modi brand in every possible way. The disease is deep-rooted and it cannot be eradicated by boycotting them. After all money talks and talks loudly while reality is being suppressed deliberately.

No doubt, in today's rapidly evolving media landscape, the state of journalism has become a topic of concern. Many lament the perceived decline in journalistic quality, credibility, and integrity. While journalists undoubtedly play a critical role in upholding the principles of journalism, it is crucial to recognise that the responsibility for the state of journalism does not rest solely on their shoulders. The public, as consumers and participants in the media ecosystem, also bears a significant responsibility in shaping the future of journalism.

Journalists have traditionally been

the gatekeepers of information, tasked with investigating, reporting, and presenting news to the public. They carry the responsibility of seeking truth, ensuring accuracy, and upholding ethical standards. Journalists are the custodians of democracy, holding those in power accountable and shedding light on issues that impact society. However, it is undeniable that there have been numerous instances where journalists have fallen short of these ideals, succumbing to pressures, biases, or compromised integrity. These cases have undoubtedly contributed to the erosion of public trust in journalism. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that the actions of a few should not overshadow the dedication and professionalism displayed by many journalists who continue to strive for excellence.

The public, as consumers of news, holds immense power in shaping the media scenario. In the era of social media and citizen journalism, individuals have become active participants in news dissemination and consumption. However, with this newfound power comes a responsi-

bility to engage critically with the information presented. While it is true that misinformation and sensationalism can be perpetuated by some media outlets, it is essential for the public to exercise discernment and seek out reliable sources. By supporting credible journalism, subscribing to reputable news outlets, and sharing accurate information, the public can contribute to a healthier media environment.

Financial sustainability is another vital aspect of journalism. As the media world undergoes significant transformations, traditional revenue models have been disrupted. Advertising revenues have dwindled, lead-

ing to budget cuts, layoffs, and potential compromises in journalistic quality. To counteract this, the public can actively support quality journalism by subscribing to reputable news outlets, paying for digital content, or donating to nonprofit news organisations. By doing so, individuals contribute to the financial viability of journalism, ensuring that journalists have the resources and freedom to produce high-quality, independent reporting.

The decline of journalism cannot be solely attributed to journalists. Only through collective efforts can people navigate the challenges and build a future where journalism thrives as a

NOTICE

We are getting regular complaints from subscribers that they are not getting their copies by post. Postal dislocation is rampant. It is particularly endemic in greater Kolkata postal district. Local post offices don't really deliver in many cases because of acute shortage of staff. We request our subscribers to lodge complaints to the post offices of their localities and send their e-mail IDs, if any, so that we could also send our on-line version. —Fr

pillar of democracy and an essential force for positive change. □□□

[Contributed]

NOTE

Distress in the Sahel and Imperialism

Bharat Dogra writes:

THE SAHEL REGION IN Africa has experienced some of the worst distress in the world in recent times caused by violence, insecurity, hunger and deprivation. The recent crisis in Niger and the possibilities of its escalation have added to a situation that was already full of simmering tensions as seen in various countries of this region.

The problems of this region have been increasing steadily since the events of 2011-12 in a key neighbouring country Libya. Libya was the most prosperous and oil-rich country in the region ruled for several decades by the dictator Muammar Gaddafi who may not have provided any democracy to his country but certainly provided a long period of stability. He cared for his people well enough, as is evident from the fact that under his rule Libya could top the Human Development Index in Africa. The prosperity of Libya also provided several migrants from Sahel countries good opportunities for earnings.

The USA, UK and France collaborated to help rebels in Libya to create civil war conditions leading subsequently to the torture and killing of Gaddafi. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared with undisguised arrogance, "We came, we saw, he died."

The western armed intervention was sought to be justified by claiming that but for this a large number of civilians would have been massacred. The killing of Gaddafi was not followed by any new stability in Libya but instead by prolonged civil-war type conditions in which several rival forces fought each other and were used as their proxies by others.

During a much earlier phase there had been a lot of criticism that in the garb of humanitarian intervention, the US led western powers had in fact attempted and conducted a regime change, but this criticism largely from the Global South was ignored by the west at that time. In fact even leaders of certain human rights organisations

in the west had come out strongly in favour of this regime change which actually caused immense distress to local people.

At a time of climate change when protective actions are needed, disruption of government functions has led to increasing distress and even today, as this is being written, huge floods are devastating Libya with over 5000 feared killed, with thousands reported missing, and this loss of lives would have been much lesser if essential protective tasks had not been neglected.

Meanwhile, those from Sahel countries who were earning their livelihood in Libya as migrant workers had to return, adding to the burden in their villages already suffering from much deprivation. What is more, mercenary soldiers also returned with their arms, and in addition there was a big boom in illegal trafficking of weapons. All this led to increased violence and deprivation in Sahel countries.

This is in line with the history of the Sahel region in which the colonial rule of France in particular was responsible for a lot of the exploitation and deprivation of this region and its people. Even after this region

became formally free from colonial rule, powerful agribusiness companies continued to flourish in ways that increased the distress of people. Commercial export crops were extended to many areas neglecting

local food and livelihood needs. This led to highly unjust situations like vegetables and fruits being exported from this region in vast quantities while much of the Sahel region suffered from famine like conditions.

While the French have promised security and aid, these promises have not been fulfilled in any satisfactory way, leading to increasing discontent with French military presence in the Sahel region. □□□

DOCUMENT

“Final Speech” Salvador Allende (1973)

[After three previous unsuccessful electoral bids, Dr. Salvador Allende, a public health physician and leader of the Socialist Party, was elected President of Chile on September 4, 1970. Heading the Popular Unity electoral coalition of left-wing political parties, Allende initiated a series of reforms that included nationalising the country's copper mines and extending the land reform programme of his predecessor Eduardo Frei. The Chilean right wing and the Nixon administration immediately began a campaign to topple the Allende government. US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger initiated an “invisible blockade” that helped wreak havoc on the Chilean economy. Internal opposition to the socialist measures of the Allende government coalesced under the leadership of the military, and on September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet carried out a coup d'état. From the presidential palace, which was being bombarded by the Chilean air force, Allende made a last statement to the country before committing suicide, presumably to avoid the humiliation of being arrested by the military. In the aftermath of the coup d'état, thousands of Chileans were arrested and killed by the armed forces.]

September 11, 1973

My friends,

Surely this will be the last opportunity for me to address you. The Air Force has bombed the antennas of Radio Magallanes.

My words do not have bitterness but disappointment. May they be a moral punishment for those who have betrayed their oath: soldiers of Chile, titular commanders in chief, Admiral Merino, who has designated himself Commander of the Navy, and Mr Mendoza, the despicable general who only yesterday pledged his fidelity and loyalty to the Government, and who also has appointed himself Chief of the Carabineros [paramilitary police].

Given these facts, the only thing left for me is to say to workers: I am not going to resign! Placed in a historic transition, I will pay for loyalty to the people with my life. And I say to them that I am certain that the seeds which we have planted in the good conscience of thousands and thousands of Chileans will not be shriveled forever.

They have force and will be able to dominate us, but social processes

can be arrested by neither crime nor force. History is ours, and people make history.

Workers of my country: I want to thank you for the loyalty that you always had, the confidence that you deposited in a man who was only an interpreter of great yearnings for justice, who gave his word that he would respect the Constitution and the law and did just that. At this definitive moment, the last moment when I can address you, I wish you to take advantage of the lesson: foreign capital, imperialism, together with the reaction, created the climate in which the Armed Forces broke their tradition, the tradition taught by General Schneider and reaffirmed by Commander Araya, victims of the same social sector who today are hoping, with foreign assistance, to reconquer the power to continue defending their profits and their privileges.

I address you, above all, the modest woman of our land, the campesina who believed in us, the mother who knew our concern for children. I address professionals of

Chile, patriotic professionals who continued working against the sedition that was supported by professional associations, classist associations that also defended the advantages of capitalist society. I address the youth, those who sang and gave us their joy and their spirit of struggle. I address the man of Chile, the worker, the farmer, the intellectual, those who will be persecuted, because in our country fascism has been already present for many hours — in terrorist attacks, blowing up the bridges, cutting the railroad tracks, destroying the oil and gas pipelines, in the face of the silence of those who had the obligation to act. They were committed. History will judge them.

Surely Radio Magallanes will be silenced, and the calm metal instrument of my voice will no longer reach you. It does not matter. You will continue hearing it. I will always be next to you. At least my memory will be that of a man of dignity who was loyal to his country.

The people must defend themselves, but they must not sacrifice themselves. The people must not let themselves be destroyed or riddled with bullets, but they cannot be humiliated either.

Workers of my country, I have faith in Chile and its destiny. Other men will overcome this dark and bitter moment when treason seeks to prevail. Go forward knowing that, sooner rather than later, the great avenues will open again and free men will walk through them to construct a better society.

Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers!

These are my last words, and I am certain that my sacrifice will not be in vain. □□□

[Source: Modern Latin America]

INTERVIEW

Arundhati Roy on G20 and Minorities

[New Delhi had gone under a massive—and controversial—“beautification drive” for the much publicised G20 event, with many slums bulldozed and their occupants displaced.

Newly-painted lotus flower murals—the election symbol of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—appeared everywhere in the capital. Billboards with Modi’s face line reworked the roads. A stranger might think it was the BJP that was hosting this event, not the government of India.

Roy, 61, is a vocal critic of the Indian government’s treatment of minorities—mainly its 200 million Muslims—and other rights violations since Modi came to power in 2014.

Al Jazeera recently spoke with Arundhati Roy about the G20 Summit and the state of India’s minorities. Excerpts:]

Al Jazeera: What is your opinion of India, in the context of its treatment of minorities, hosting the G20 summit?

Arundhati Roy: Look, I don’t think anybody really cares about that because... the G20 is here, everybody is looking for an opportunity, a trade deal or a military equipment deal or a geopolitical strategic understanding. So it’s not as if any single one of the people who are coming here, the heads of state or anyone else doesn’t know exactly what’s going on in India. In countries like the US and the UK and France, the mainstream media has been so critical of what’s happening in India, but the governments have a different agenda altogether. So I don’t think one needs to be naive enough to believe that that is an issue at all for the people coming here.

Al Jazeera: Do you see the G20 being held in India as an opportunity for leaders to call the Indian government out for its treatment of minorities?

Roy: It won’t. None of them will. I have no such expectation. But I think what’s interesting is that if you were in Delhi, as I am now, if you look at the publicity, if you look at the banners, if you look at all the preparations that are being made for the G20, you would be forgiven for imag-

ining that it wasn’t the government of India that is hosting the G20, but the BJP. Every single banner has a huge lotus on it, which is the symbol of a political party. Modi’s BJP.

What has happened in India and it’s so dangerous, so blatant, is that the country, the nation, the government and its institutions have all been conflated with the ruling party—a political party. And that ruling party has been conflated with Modi, the individual. In fact, there is hardly any ruling party now, there’s just a ruler. So it’s as if Modi is hosting the G20. All of us are locked in. We can’t go out. The poor have been purged from the city. The slums have been screened off. The roads are barricaded, the traffic is shut down. It’s as quiet as death. It is as if he’s so ashamed of all of us, of what the city is really like. It’s been purged and locked down for this event.

Al Jazeera: It sounds like you’re saying it’s a vanity event for Modi.

Roy: Of course it’s a vanity event. He’ll pirouette and it’s just before the elections. So it will feed into his campaign. All these Western leaders who speak about democracy—I mean, you can forgive someone like Trump because he doesn’t believe in de-

mocracy—but Biden, Macron, all these people who talk about democracy, they know exactly what’s going on here. They know that Muslims have been massacred, that Muslims who protest have their homes bulldozed, which means all the public institutions—courts, magistrates, the press—collude in that. They know that Muslims in certain towns have X marks on their doors and are being asked to leave. They know that Muslims have been ghettoised. And that now people who are accused of actually lynching, murdering Muslims are leading so-called religious processions through these ghettos. They know that vigilantes are out there with swords, calling for annihilation, calling for the mass rape of Muslim women. They know all this, but that doesn’t matter because as always with certain Western countries, it’s like “democracy for us” and, you know, “dictatorship or whatever else it is for our non-white friends”. It doesn’t matter.

Al Jazeera: On that, and this is a completely hypothetical situation, but let’s say you are invited to give a speech at the G20. You’re opening up the G20 summit. What would you say?

Roy: I would say that it would be foolhardy for you to think that a process in which a country of 1.4 billion people that used to be a flawed democracy—and is now falling into a kind of, well, I can only use the word fascism—is not going to affect the rest of the world, you’re extremely wrong. What I say wouldn’t be a cry for help. It would be to say, “Look around at what you are, what you are actually helping to create.” There

was a moment in time in 2002 after the anti-Muslim Gujarat massacre—in which intelligence reports by countries like the UK actually held Modi responsible for what they called ethnic cleansing. Modi was banned from travelling to the US, but all of that is forgotten now. But he's the same man. And every time somebody allows him this kind of oxygen and this kind of space to pirouette and claim that only he could have brought these powerful people to India, that message magnified a thousand-fold by our servile new channels, it feeds into a kind of collective national insecurity, sense of inferiority and false vanity. It's blown up into something else that's extremely dangerous and that people should understand is not going to just be a problem for India.

We have a situation where we are talking about one nation, one language, one election. But actually we are in a situation where you have one dictator, one corporation.

Al Jazeera: During a recent speech in the southern Kerala state, you said India is entering a new chapter. What did you mean by that?

Roy: What I meant was that, you know, in the last few years, we have actually spoken about the rise of the BJP, of Modi, of the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP's ideological mentor]—the mothership of the cult of Hindu Supremacy—of which Modi has been a lifetime member. We have, some of us, critiqued it politically, structurally. But now we are in a different situation altogether. Although we do have elections, I wouldn't call us a democracy anymore. But because we have elections,

this message of Hindu supremacy has to be beamed out to 1.4 billion people in order to create a reliable constituency. So election season becomes extremely dangerous for minorities.

What I meant by "We've reached a different phase now" is that it's no longer just the leadership that we must fear, but a section of this indoctrinated population that has made the streets dangerous for minorities. The violence is no longer limited to government-orchestrated pogroms. We are witnessing incident after incident of banal evil, as Hannah Arendt might have put it. The world saw the video of an ordinary little classroom in north India where the teacher, the principal of the school, gets a seven-year-old Muslim boy to stand up and has all the other Hindu children come up and slap him.

We have a civil war unfolding in Manipur where the state government is partisan, the centre is complicit, the security forces do not have a chain of command. It's beginning to resemble what happened in the Balkans. We saw the horrifying sight of women being paraded naked and gang-raped. We learned that it was the Manipur police who handed the women over to the mob.

We have, as I said before, people accused of murder, of lynching, of burning alive young Muslim men, now leading religious processions. We have a situation where the prime minister speaks on Independence Day about women's rights, but at that very moment, his government signs a pardon for the 14 men who gang-raped Bilkis Bano and killed 14 members of a

family. And they are now respected members of society. These are men who had been convicted to life imprisonment by the highest court in the land.

So we have a situation now where the constitution has been more or less set aside. If they win the election next year, in 2026, there's going to be what we call "delimitation", which is a kind of gerrymandering where the number of seats and geography of constituencies will be changed and the Hindi speaking belt where the BJP is the strongest, will get more seats, which will basically change the balance of power. The south will definitely be very, very uneasy with this and that too has the power of or the potential of Balkanisation.

Al Jazeera: If you were to summarise in just a few sentences, what is the state of India today?

Roy: The state of India is very precarious, very contested. We have a situation in which the constitution has been effectively set aside. We have a situation in which the BJP is now one of the richest political parties in the world. And all the election machinery is more or less compromised. And yet—not just because of the violence against minorities, which of course causes a kind of majoritarianism and may not cause them to lose elections—but because of unemployment and because we live in one of the most unequal societies in the world, we have an opposition that is building up. This government is seeking to crush it because it does not believe that there should be an opposition. □□□

[Source: Al Jazeera]

ASHAS KEEP PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE GOING

ASHA Workers of Bihar Win

By a Correspondent

AUGUST 12TH, 2023 marked a historic victory for striking ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists) in Bihar with the state government agreeing to increase the monthly wage by Rs 1,500 per month and providing the payment as 'honorarium', instead of 'reward' (paritoshik). The 31-day long indefinite strike of around 1 lakh ASHA workers and ASHA facilitators across Bihar had begun on July 12th, 2023 under the joint banner of ASHA Samyukta Sangharsh Manch, with Bihar Rajya ASHA Karyakarta Sangh-Gope-Group (AICCTU), and ASHA and ASHA Facilitators Union at the forefront.

Shashi Yadav, general secretary of Bihar Rajya ASHA Karyakarta Sangh-Gope-Group explained that the strike by ASHAs had been the largest women workers movement in recent history of Bihar with tens of thousands of ASHA workers uniting for this massive movement.

The strike continued for 31 days in almost all Primary Health Centres (PHC), Community Health Centres (CHCs) and Referral Hospitals across all districts in Bihar. PHCs became rallying spots for ASHAs and ASHA facilitators. Despite the strike, ASHA workers ensured that emergency work as well as cases of childbirth were not adversely affected.

"The major victory for the movement was that government had agreed to pay an 'honorarium' rather than a 'reward' to ASHA workers. The payment of their work as reward (paritoshik) was derogatory and it demeans the labour done by ASHAs; honorarium recognised ASHAs as workers," said Shashi Yadav.

ASHAs, who are frontline health workers and are the backbone of country's rural health and vast immunisation programmes, have been playing a vital role in ensuring proper access to healthcare and fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. But in Bihar and across the country, they have been forced to work for a pittance, where there have been instances of ASHAs walking several kilometres on inhospitable roads in villages to meet their targets.

"Though the increase of Rs 1500/- is less than what the unions had demanded, everybody considers this as the first victory in the battle for rights of ASHA workers," she added. ASHAs and ASHA Facilitators will now receive a fixed amount of Rs 2,500 per month from the State and Rs 2,000 per month as central government contribution, along with other performance-based incentives.

It was also agreed in the negotiations that a recommendation based on the demands to increase the incentive rates under the scheme will be sent to the central government by the Bihar state government. The incentive amounts being given for various types of works for ASHAs under the scheme have remained stagnant for decades and need to be urgently revised and increased by at least 300% in view of the skyrocketing inflation.

The payments due since the pandemic period will also be paid by the government. The other demands of a nine-point charter will be resolved through bipartite discussions with the state government. Furthermore, the cases lodged against ASHA workers during the strike will also be withdrawn.

The CITU and ASHA Facilitators' leader Vishwanath Singh termed this gain a victory, but the struggle will continue as the government has not agreed to pay Rs 10,000 as honorarium, which was the demand. ASHA leader Sudha Suman said that another important demand of pension and retirement benefits is being taken by the government for consideration.

Rambali Prasad, Honorary President of Employees' Federation (Gope) and Ranvijay Kumar, State Secretary, AICCTU noted that the demand put forward by ASHA workers had been part of the Mahagathbandhan manifesto during the assembly election in 2020. Despite several rounds of failed negotiations and bureaucratic hurdles, the determination and courage of ASHAs have finally led to a victory in this struggle.

As the strike entered its fourth week, on August 3rd, tens of thousands of ASHA workers and ASHA facilitators gathered at Patna's Gardanibagh with their demands. The massive 'Mahajutan' (huge gathering) painted the streets of Gardanibagh in pink (uniform of ASHAs) with the place reverberating with the calls for dignity, respect and rights.

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Their negotiations with the government in two rounds earlier had yielded no result, and faced threats of retrenchment, filing of criminal cases against striking leaders. Deputy CM Tejaswi Yadav, who heads the health portfolio, had agreed to change the monthly payment from paritoshik to an honorarium and raise the amount, but the promise was not kept in spite of the repeated reminders and memorandums.

It was unfortunate that despite the long struggle and deteriorating health condition of ASHA workers, there was no move by the state government to solve the issue. An ASHA worker from Siwan, Saraswati Devi, died while sitting on protest.

“The protest gathering of ASHA workers marked a striking moment in this battle,” explained Kunal, Bihar State Secretary of CPIML Liberation. Faced with an increasing resistance by ASHA workers and halt of rural health services, the government finally agreed to reach an agreement with ASHA workers.

The unions condemned the attitude of the state government who ignored and threatened manoeuvres and asked the government to honour its agreement with ASHA unions made in January 2019 and to implement the government's own promises made during the budget session in the Bihar Assembly and start negotiations immediately with the ASHAs on their nine major demands.

The gathering also witnessing a massive wave of solidarity with several leaders of left parties and civil society, including Mahboob Alam, Satyadev Ram, Gopal Ravidas, Rambali Singh Yadav, Amarjit Kushwaha of CPIML and Ajay Kumar and Satyendra Yadav of CPIM addressed this rally along with AIPWA general secretary Mina Tiwari, Saroj Chaube, joining to stand with the striking ASHA workers.

More than one million ASHA

workers form the most important link in India's health infrastructure. They perform many tasks like ante-natal and postnatal care for women, facilitate institutional child birth, make home visits for the new-born and postpartum mother, and they also work on malaria and diarrhoea control, distribute ORS, monitor growth of children, immunisation of children, helps in birth control and family planning, and lot of other such essential work. The government calls them 'community activists'. However, they are not just activists, but frontline workers. They attend meetings and camps at block and district level regularly, maintain village-level health registers, prepare lists of children to be immunised, for antenatal care beneficiaries and eligible couples. It is their job to reach out to adolescent girls and organise monthly meetings pertaining to menstrual hygiene, and also to take part in various health related programmes, including tuberculosis control, leprosy eradication, vector borne disease control, and to motivate households to construct toilets and use clean piped water.

The government calls 'community intervention' the work of ASHAs which is supposed to be a 'mission' (NHM, NRHM and NUHM) and not a proper job, but they have to perform more than 60 different kinds of work like a regular employee, however their remuneration is based on small incentives. Their working hours range anywhere between 4 to 8 hours on an everyday basis, occasionally even more, and during the pandemic, they had to work day and night without any safety equipment. Moreover, since the payments are incentive based, which is a new form of piece-rate work; it forces them to work more to ensure sufficient earning for minimum sustenance. Interestingly, they are not considered workers but are eligible

for the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan Dhan Yojana, an insurance scheme for the unorganised sector workers. This exposes the hypocrisy in the treatment meted out to the ASHA workers.

ASHA workers make the core of NHM strategy for providing access to healthcare at the doorstep as 'honorary volunteers' without any salary. The incentives being given to them come under the head 'community intervention', while the regular employees of NHM get a salary under the head of 'Human Resources'. This characterisation as volunteers or activists devalue women's work and signals government's unwillingness to invest in a regular cadre for public health services in rural India (Shruti Ambast, CBGA, 2021).

Even though ASHAs across the country do the same type of work, payments made to them vary from state to state. For some routine and recurring activities they were getting Rs 1,000 incentive till 2018 by the Centre. This was raised to Rs 2,000. Since NHM is jointly funded by the Centre and the State in a ratio of 60:40, state governments have added their share of incentives which varies to a great extent. In Bihar, this incentive stood at Rs 1,000 a month till this successful strike took place. As per a Rajya Sabha question answered on March 22nd, 2022, in UP this is Rs 750 per month for a specified 5 core activists. Andhra Pradesh provides Rs 10,000 per month by topping up the remaining amount to the total incentives earned by ASHAs, whereas Telangana provides the balance amount to match the total incentives at Rs. 6,000 per month. Delhi gives Rs3,000 per month for 12 core activists in addition to the incentives earned for other non-core activities. Gujarat gives 50% top up over and above the earned incentives, while in Chhattisgarh this is 75% top up. In

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Uttarakhand this is Rs 1,000 per month and an additional Rs 5,000 per year!

Bihar ASHAs will now get Rs 2,500 per month as state's share against the designated core activities, along with the Centre's Rs 2,000 and incentives for many non-routine and non-recurring jobs. With all kinds of incentives combined, the ASHA workers get monthly payment which usually is much less than the prescribed minimum wage in respective states. The minimum wage for skilled

workers in Bihar is Rs 12,766 per month, and money received by most of the ASHAs usually doesn't cross the halfway mark of this amount. Shashi Yadav said that total payments earned depend on the location and the number of jobs assigned. Out of the 90,000 ASHAs in the state, nearly 85% get a monthly income of around Rs 6,000 which is less than half of the minimum wage. This is after a full day's work on a daily basis.

An additional pandemic allow-

ance of Rs 1,000 per month was added during the COVID-19 period after countrywide agitations and strikes by ASHA workers. But this was not implemented and more than one third ASHAs are still struggling to receive the promised amount. In Bihar too this remained on paper, despite repeated requests and agitations. Now, the state government has agreed to pay the due amount to all. □□□

[Courtesy: Liberation,
Central Organ of CPI-ML]

REVIEW ARTICLE

'The Present as History 2021'

Somenath Guha

THE PRESENT AS HISTORY 2021: Ongoing Open-Ended Critique', is a book by Bernard D'Mello and Subhas Aikat. It examines the current global political and economic situation through a Marxist lens. The book argues that capitalism is in a state of crisis, and that this crisis is leading to a number of interconnected problems, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and rising inequality.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, "The Crisis of Capitalism", provides an overview of the history of capitalism and its current state of crisis. The second part, "The Spectre of Climate Change", discusses the impact of climate change on the world economy and society. The third part, "The Future of Socialism", argues that socialism is the only way to overcome the crisis of capitalism and create a more just and sustainable society.

The Present as History 2021 is a thought-provoking book that provides a critical analysis of the current global situation. The book is likely to be of interest to those who are concerned about the future of capitalism and the environment.

*THE PRESENT AS HISTORY 2021: ONGOING OPEN- ENDED CRITIQUE

Edited and with an introduction by
Bernard D'Mello & Subhas Aikat
CORNERSTONE PUBLICATIONS
November 2021, PRICE: RS 300

The book does a good job of explaining the interconnectedness of the current global crises. It shows how climate change, inequality, and the COVID-19 pandemic are all symptoms of the same underlying problem: capitalism.

The book's analysis of capitalism is insightful and well-argued. It shows how capitalism is inherently exploitative and unsustainable.

The book's discussion of socialism is brief, but it provides a good overview of the basic principles of socialism.

The book's conclusion is optimistic. It argues that socialism is the only way to overcome the crisis of capitalism and create a more just and sustainable society.

The book is written from a Marxist perspective; so one may not agree with all the observations offered by the authors. The authors put forward a rather classical view of Marxist society in the texts. For

one thing in theory a lot can be assumed which gets washed off during the practice. The book is a good text to understand the present interpretation of socialism which in turn points out the solution to the capitalistic exploitation. But it remains inconclusive.

The authors provide a quick guide through the Marxist domain, covering up analysed and critiqued versions of theories of historical materialism, Marx's model of dialectics, and the Marxist approach to sustenance of environment, alongside referencing the modern world and the problems arising from capitalist measures. The book focuses on the extent to which the capitalists may go to monopolise their respective markets.

The book does propagate that the future of the human race lies in socialism but does not make it clear how it can happen. It is a good read overall to understand and have a basic idea of how the two counter-acting philosophies work. The book may seem one sided for a neutral reader.

However, the problems faced while reviewing the texts focusing on a socialist society have not been appropriately answered. Such as, how to stop the society from becoming a completely totalitarian society, being inefficient in resource allocation, unstable and prone to dictatorship.

It raises the right questions, highlights the problems but does not provide a capable solution to the burning question of capitalist exploitation. Therefore, the book is a history of a problematic present. A reader will be shown the true reality of today's society in its carnal form.

The book opens with Samir Amin's 'The communist manifesto 170 years later', which notes that the Manifesto was written at a time of great upheaval, when the capitalist system was in its early stages of development. The Manifesto's analysis of capitalism was therefore focused on the contradictions that were inherent in the system, such as the exploitation of the working class and the tendency for the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few.

Amin argues that these contradictions have only become more pronounced in the 170 years since the Manifesto was published. The globalisation of the economy has led to a new phase of capitalist development, in which the exploitation of the working class is no longer limited to a single country or region. The rise of the global South has also challenged the dominance of the capitalist West.

The next chapter, Marx's open-ended critique by John Bellamy Foster has presented itself in a manner which is too deterministic. It just argues that Marx's theory of history predicts capitalism will inevitably collapse but this prediction is not supported by the evidence.

The next three chapters go on to emphasise on the adverse effects of COVID-19 on the world. On how it has eviscerated the livelihoods of billions across the globe but somehow the capitalists have managed to remain afloat. Not just that, most conglomerates have grown five-folds in lieu of the pandemic. These chapters back-track the events leading the crisis and analyse the present condition based on public data. The main focus remains on the subjects like how the capitalists have exploited the mortal weaknesses of the masses and manipulated them into submitting to them. On how the crisis had begun as a result of the capitalist aggression into new markets in turn violating environmental concerns. Covid has resulted in failure of entire economies across the globe, yet a miniscule portion of the society grew more than ever in the period.

The book also focuses on the differences between Marx's philosophy and his peers. The difference in opinion regarding the practicality of communism and whether capitalism can be reformed and restructured into a better fitting mode of a society has been discussed.

Then the book moves on to Lenin's interpretation of Marx and the degraded society of US. The book presents a wide perspective on various agendas like women employment and aggression against the indigenous tribes.

Capitalism is a virus which has spread in every dimension of the human society and has kept doing whatever it takes to grow. Survival has never been an issue for it since the very human nature of never-ending desire fuels it up. Unknowingly people fall into its algorithm and cannot get out since it is bigger than the society itself. Capitalism feeds on simple things as a fragile ego and humane idiosyncrasies. The book provides a clear insight into how capitalism has affected and changed the human race into a self-hating entity and has kept the society believing in its differences.

□□□

FOREST DWELLERS HAVE LOST THEIR FORESTS

Janajati—Heading Towards Extinction?

Sukanta Sarkar

JANAJATI. THEY ARE DESCRIBED variously as adivasis or indigenous people. The Bharatiya Janata Party would like call them Vanabasi though they are no longer in 'Van' [forest]. Many sociologists think the term adivasi is not accurate. They opine that the word Janajati is more appropriate carrying the correct meaning. However, Adivasis or Janajatis whatever they are called are mainly forest dwellers. The forest is their world. The forest is

their life. The forest is their god. This Jungle-dependent people have been living in the forest for thousands of years. Although they satiated their hunger by hunting animals and the fruits from the forest, they did not harm the forest; rather, they have been protecting the forest for thousands of years. It is not wrong to say that they are the natural appendages of the forest like the plants, animals and birds of the forest. Like plants, animals and birds, these people are

also good at living in forests. They are part of the nature.

It is their innate nature to cut forest trees and build houses with tree wood and leaf canopy as well as nurture the seedlings born in the forest. It is not possible to say exactly when the people came out of the cave and settled in the forest, but it is easy to say when the people of this Janajati started to be chased out of the forest. Ever since the so-called 'civilised' people began to understand the financial importance of forests, the plan or conspiracy to uproot the people of Janajati from the forest started. At first these outsiders entered the forest to hunt and

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cut trees. The Janajatis or the forest dwellers did not take kindly to it. Initially they tried to resist these outsiders. But, the arrows of the Janajati succumbed to the sharp weapons of civilised men and later to the guns. So far, however, there has not been much uprooting of people from the forest. After that, the civilised people went on the path of forest clearing to increase the cultivated land, and little by little, the people of the Janajati started to be uprooted from their traditional habitat. After a few hundreds of years, people discovered that the soil where forest resources are standing, in many places, there is a huge quantity of various kinds of mineral deposits beneath the soil. So the destruction of forest started in earnest to exploit the earth. Thousands of Janajati people started to be uprooted from the forest. In this way the state took possession of the forest. Soon the state took away the forest completely from the Janajati. The owner of the forest is now the state and by law, the original people of the land of the forest for thousands of years have been banned from entering the forest.

Where will the people of Janajati go? They lost their normal livelihood. In the eyes of the state, they started living illegally in the forest and on the land adjacent to the forest. People of Janajati cannot think of separating their lives from the forest. What will they eat when they come out of the forest? Their food is not in the list of so-called civilised people's food items. Their ancestors never farmed. Farming tradition is not in their blood and culture. On top of that, they have no land for living and farming! Yet, the state said, 'The land is mine. The forest is mine. You cannot enter the forest for hunting or for taking fruits, honey'. But who will teach these forest dwellers farming and

where will they cultivate? The state did not make any clear arrangements for it. A small part of these people started working as agricultural labourers on other people's land due to the urge of stomach. Later, a small part of them did some farming work on their own. But the vast majority of these people have not been able to achieve it even today. Even today these people eke out a living by clandestinely sneaking into the jungle. However, that life is not the life they are used to or want, it is lifeless, rhythmless, just living for the sake of living.

This is the condition of most of the Janajati people of this country. Before independence, the British rulers identified many of these ethnic groups as 'crime-prone' and dubbed them criminal tribes. Later, after the independence of the country, the notorious Act was withdrawn and some tribes were denotified. But in many cases, there was no significant change in the views of the administrative officers of the independent India. Although several cheeky assurances have been mentioned in the government policy document, in reality it has not been reflected in the lives of the majority of the Janajati people of the country. There was no government initiative to implement it. The government schemes of imparting technical training to these people in various livelihoods including farming remains on paper. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 vests the 'Bon Sangsad' with the final decision on forest matters. Bon Sangsad is supposed to be run by forest dwellers, but in actual practice, it is not seen anywhere. Recently, the central government amended that law and took away this right of the forest dwellers.

In this situation, some voluntary and social organisations have been able to involve the people of various Janajati communities in agriculture

in some places, from providing training in farming to local irrigation with seeds. Yes, the number is definitely not worth mentioning that way. However, Janajati people who have received training are producing well. But, where are they growing? They don't even have a single parcel of land to call their own. Some people of the tribe are cultivating in the degraded land left by the forest department. Yes, 'illegally'. They have no ownership in these lands. The forest department also does not see the matter well. The forest department has also evicted these first generation Janajati cultivators from the land in many areas. As a result, the Janajati people who are evicted from the forest are not getting the opportunity to cultivate.

This correspondent went to Purulia and saw this situation on the ground. There, several Shabar families have forcefully cultivated the forest department land. The crop has grown. So, the other Shabar Tola's Shabars are also encouraged. But, none of them could help farming. Because they don't have their own land. Courting the Panchayat to Block Office at the local level did not yield much result. In other places of Purulia or Bankura, Paschim Medinipur or Jhargram, the condition of the people is similar. Therefore, after losing their land i.e., jungle to the state, many teenagers and young men of the jungle are moving to other states as migrant workers to be engaged in informal sector.

The people who once used to hunt in the forest are now skilled in growing crops but are deprived of cultivation due to lack of land. The state took the land from the people and could not give them land back for cultivation. There is no initiative to return forest land to forest dwellers. If so, how will these citizens of this country survive? What will their children eat? Then it's about educa-

tion! There are heaps of statistics of development programmes for these people, which various scholars of the state proudly present to the public when asked. But, in reality it will not be wrong to compare the actual

distance with the distance of the moon from the earth.

The people of the Janajati who have been living in those mountains and forests for thousands of years are being uprooted. Protests are

negligible. On the contrary, today, it is heard that not only by land, but also by air, attacks are being made to uproot the Janajati people, so that the mineral resources can be extracted from the forest floor. □□□

“TO HELL AND BACK...”

A Poignant Account on Pandemic

Joydip Ghosal

TO HELL AND BACK, HUMANS OF Covid' by Barkha Dutt, published by Juggernaut Books is a gripping book on India's pandemic story, challenges and overwhelming tragedies. In this book she graphically narrated the pandemic episode through the accounts of the hapless lots whom she portrays in her coverage. She appeared as a chronicler of human stories during pandemic which wreaked havoc upon the lives of common people. This book did not merely highlight statistics. Rather it attempted to peel off the layers to unearth the catastrophic tragedies that were clear pointer towards institutional apathy and gross mismanagement. Though the author agreed that grief was a kind of sledgehammer which hollowed out the heart no matter whether you are a clerk or CEO it was the poor who had to bear the brunt. The way those who lived at the lower rung of economic access and margins of power experienced the catastrophe of pandemic is incomparable with the travails of well-off.

When she visited Kundli village in the district of Sonapat in Haryana she observed that women queued up at the main water lines to fill their bottles and buckets. It was estimated that women across India spend 150 million workdays carrying and fetching water. Industrial wastages had caused corrosion into underground soil. Contamination had also spread far and wide. The water was unusable and undrinkable. For drinking water they had to spend ten rupees per jug. When nationwide lockdown was en-

forced on 24 March 2020 economic activity had come to an abrupt halt. People living on subsistence wages found shelling out cash for water too much difficult and tougher. The author stressed upon the overarching learning that she got from the pandemic that the virus was anything but great equaliser. In a stratified society it exacerbated the existing inequalities and pawned new social orders coupled with new cleavages. There was assumption that the calamity had created a level playing field. It flattened out the ground for marginalised and filthy rich. But the author pointed out that there was no evidence to corroborate this grossly miscalculated assumption.

This book stressed that death did not eradicate that unbridgeable gap. It opened all the multiple layers of discrimination. In the Chilla Khadar village on the banks of Yamuna river people made a living by selling clusters of green shoots of Diclipetra to the wholesale mandis who used these shoots to tie clumps of okra, beans. They also caught fish for contractors who had licenses from Delhi government. For their labour they would get daily wages. But with the onset of lockdown both jobs had dried up. She spent time outside a community toilet in Dharavi to discover the slogans of hand-washing and hygiene had lost its meaning in an area where 8, 50,000 numbers of people used 8000 common toilets. She brought to the fore the stark fact that law enforcing officials often enforced theoretical elitism of public service advertisement in letter

and spirit. But what value did it have in Dharavi where “anywhere between five and eight people lived cheek by jowl in confined, unventilated and tiny closed places?” She interspersed her writing with bitter truths. Two hundred thousand Indians die every year from drinking unsafe water. 38 million people suffer from illness due to waterborne diseases every year. Where 98 million households in India live in one room and 78 million live in two room houses.

She was unequivocal when she said that this pandemic had uncovered all the fissures in social structures. Healthcare, education. Journalism was no exception. One feels the honesty of her conviction when she discussed the modern trend in journalism which according to her made the journalists unimaginative, lazy and stale devoid of empathy. It caused disconnection with the audience.

The unprecedented images of summer of 2021 haunted the countrymen. Stacked up bodies on the banks of river Ganga in Uttar Pradesh horrified the nation. Undertakers in Madhya Pradesh were in utter quagmire because they ran out of woods. Bodies washed ashore in prime minister's constituency. Author touched upon the heart wrenching aspects to make readers ponder whether since partition pandemic was the biggest human tragedy. During the second wave of partition political parties across spectrum were complicit with their participation in election. In her poignant writing style the author reminded people how Chief Justice Sanjib Banerje at the Madras High Court 'tore at the institution'. During the first wave a vitriolic, poison filled anti-Muslim rhetoric was whipped up against Muslims

related to Tablighi Jamat. The author did not mince words when she sharply pointed out that the condemnation of Haridwar event was perfunctory. The erstwhile chief minister of Uttarakhand Tirath Singh Rawat did not find similarities between Jamaat and Kumbh.

Ranveer worked as food delivery agent in Delhi. He hailed from Morena with a distance of 310 km. He walked to reach home. When he had to travel still 80 km to reach home he phoned his sister to complain about

uneasiness. As this was the time of lockdown his family had to procure pass. But by the time they reached him he already breathed his last. This was just a small spec in that large sea of greater humanitarian crisis. In Siddhartnagar in Uttar Pradesh Preeti lost her parents Lallan Ram and Mena Kumari, both teachers, to the virus. In the middle of the pandemic they both were posted on election duties. They were not allowed any exemption. 15 years old school girl Jyoti made her father sit on a bicycle

and rode 1500 km from Delhi to Darbhanga. Her father was a rickshaw driver and she was recuperating from knee surgery.

Barkha Dutt travelled 14 states during that time. This book is all about the people she met on the road covering pandemic for her digital media platform Mojo Story and documenting the common people's resilience, camaraderie while fighting the scourge of corona virus. In this book she has tried to humanise the massive human tragedy of present time. □

HOLLYWOOD STRIKE

Extras will be Replaced by AI

Bobby Allyn

WHILE WORKING AS A background actor on the Disney+ series Wanda Vision, Alexandria Rubalcaba says she and other background actors had their faces and bodies scanned to create their digital replicas.

After four weeks of working as a background actor on the Disney+ series Wanda Vision during the pandemic, Alexandria Rubalcaba was told by the production crew to report to a tractor trailer.

Dozens of other background actors were wrangled to the same site, where, one by one, they were told to step in front of a series of cameras on metal rigs behind glass.

"Have your hands out. Have your hands in. Look this way. Look that way. Let us see your scared face. Let us see your surprised face," Rubalcaba, 47, recalls of the instructions she was given.

Rubalcaba said the actors had their faces and bodies scanned for about 15 minutes each. Then their digital replicas were created.

But here's the rub: She was never told how or if this digital avatar of her would ever be used on screen. If it's used, she might never know. No matter what happens with it, she'll never see any payment for it.

Disney did not return a request for

comment.

Rubalcaba, who makes the SAG-AFTRA union rate of \$187 a day as a background actor, said she did not give permission for her digital replica to ever be used in the background of any scenes.

"What if I don't want to be on Mario Vision, or Sarah Vision?" she said, rattling off made-up future productions. "I fear that AI is eventually going to weed out background actors. They won't have any use for us anymore."

The potential for artificial intelligence to replace background actors is one of the central tensions in the ongoing SAG-AFTRA strike with studios, the biggest labour dispute in Hollywood since the 1960s.

Background actors are not part of what's known as the "principal cast," meaning they do not have speaking parts and primarily serve to create realistic atmosphere by filling out a scene.

A union negotiator has claimed studios have offered to give background actors one day's pay after being scanned and that the actor's digital likeness could then be re-used "for the rest of eternity."

The studios have strongly taken issue with this characterisation, claiming a background actor's digital rep-

lica would only be used on projects the performer was hired for, not indefinite future productions.

Either way, the practice of body-scanning background actors appears to be becoming more common. Five background actors said they were caught off guard in recent months by having to undergo body scans by studios, feeling like they didn't have much of a choice, because if they pushed back, they feared the risk of retaliation. Most of the actors were required to sign non-disclosure agreements.

"You don't know what's going to get back to casting. You don't know if they're going to call up casting and say, 'Oh this person is being difficult,' and not hire them again because that's how the system works," said Rebecca Safier, a background actor in Los Angeles who recently had her body scanned on set. "It's getting into this gray area of, 'what are they going to use it for in the future?'"

Hollywood has long relied on high-tech tinkering to enhance films in post production. The producers of Games of Thrones and Lord of the Rings have fashioned large battle armies by relying on computer software that creates hordes of synthetic fighters.

And now that tech giants are in the movie-making business, they are doing it, too. For instance, Apple filled a stadium with what looked like 26,000 people by using digital doubles of just 20 background actors.

This method, known as "crowd tilting" is not new. For years, studios have

used it to shoot large group scenes.

But now with the technology taking strides forward with the advent of generative AI — which can create new conversations, images and videos by synthesising an immense corpus of data with souped up hardware capable of harnessing an incredible amount of computing power — it is not only crowd scenes that are being digitally created.

There is AI-powered film editing tools that let film-makers move an actor's performance from one scene to another or replace dialogue. Other AI tools can make an actor's lips move as if they are speaking in an overdubbed language. Disney has an AI tool that can convincingly make an actor look younger or older in seconds.

One of most controversial uses of AI in Hollywood is digital cloning. Voices, faces and entire bodies can now be digitally re-created in ways that appear stunningly realistic.

Background actors in Hollywood say they worry they will be first in the industry made obsolete by AI.

Andrew Susskind, an associate professor at Drexel University's film and TV department who spent 30 years as a producer and director, said the widespread use of digital extras could impact budgets in significant ways.

"Imagine ballroom scenes, party scenes, any scenes that need tons of extras," Susskind said. "Imagine the amounts of money they would be saving. Not paying \$180 a day. Plus meals. Plus costuming."

Because there presently are no rules of the road for how studios use AI, Susskind said it makes sense that actors and writers have made AI a

central sticking point in the Hollywood strikes.

"The actors, extras and the writers are right to see this moment as their best chance to set up what the rules should be in the use of AI," he said. "And the people in the background, who tend to have no real power and are treated badly, should be standing up for themselves here."

Katrina Sherwood, who works as a stand-in, body-double and background actress in Los Angeles, said she is distressed that AI will one day force her into another industry altogether.

"Our likeness is really the only thing that we actually own, so, for background, that would be an existential threat," she said.

About 84,200 of SAG-AFTRA's 160,000 active members have performed background work at some point in their career. Last year, more than 30,000 SAG members did at least one gig as a background actor.

SAG-AFTRA is not resisting AI altogether.

Union officials have said that a digital replica of an actor could allow for an actor to be at two shoots at once, or take on a project they would not have done otherwise. But union officials say they will only support a contract that ensures adequate compensation to actors for their likeness being used.

The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, the trade group representing studios and producers, said they will offer "fair compensation" if an actor's digital replica is used. They say they will only use such AI creations after receiving permission from the actor.

Yet both sides are at odds over the meaning of consent. Studios are proposing that they will ask for background actors' permission once — after they are hired. Union officials say any use of an actor's digital replica should be bargained separately each time the digital likeness is used.

Dom Lubsey, an actor who does primarily background work, says he doesn't often hear people speaking up for background actors. Unlike principal actors, extras do not have much say over how their performances are reused.

"I don't often hear people speaking up for background [actors], or if they're being abused, if they're not being treated properly, or if they should be paid more," he said. "You just don't hear that."

He said it is something he thinks about every time his face and body has been scanned on set. The first time it happened was on the set of a popular racing movie, in 2019. Mostly recently, he was scanned for a television programme about basketball.

"They wanted me to do cheering. I had to make angry faces. They asked for a war-cry faces. I did it all," he said.

After that, he felt a little rattled. He stepped out of the semi-truck trailer where a large cylinder outfitted with hundreds of small cameras had just scanned his various gestures as a game audience member. Perhaps the cost of doing business in Hollywood in the AI era, although is it also a step closer to his professional extinction, he wondered?

"My first thought leaving the trailer was, 'Oh this might just be the future,'" Lubsey said. "We might just lose our jobs". □□□

LETTERS

Women's Reservation

The Modi government would like us to believe that it is so committed to the cause of women's reservation that it called a special Parliament session to pass the bill. But the pretension of urgency gets exposed when the imple-

mentation of the bill is made contingent on the completion of census and consequent delimitation. What stops us from implementing it immediately?

The Modi government is the only government in the history of India which has failed to conduct the decadal census. In spite of Covid, se-

riously Covid-affected countries like China, UK and US have conducted census operations while India under Modi has failed. Women's reservation is meant to address and correct the acute underrepresentation of women in the legislative arena. We do not have to wait for another census and delimitation to assess and address the problem.

The bill that deserved the most serious legislative treatment seems to have been drafted in haste and presented in a manner that only trivialises the functioning of parliamentary democracy. The idea of deferred implementation only reminds us of Gandhi's famous remark on the Cripps Mission offer of Dominion Status: 'a post-dated cheque drawn on a falling bank'. A bill that the women's movement has been fighting for decades with sustained support from a broad spectrum of progressive political forces cannot be reduced to yet another electoral gimmick.

Dipankar Bhattacharya,
General Secretary, CPIML
Liberation
New Delhi,
19 September, 2023

CJP for Assam

Behind every (human) rights violation is a name, a person, a human being whose life gets violently ruptured when the basic right to live with dignity is snatched away. Denial of citizenship takes peculiar forms in Assam, resulting in harsh, everyday consequences. Whether you are labeled a 'D' Voter (Doubtful Voter) without evidence or served a "Declared Foreigner" notice, your life becomes ensnared in a complex legal system, leading to the denial of fundamental rights such as access to education, banking, and welfare programs. This situation can occur anywhere within any of Assam's 33 districts, affecting individuals regardless of their gender, caste, religion, or ethnicity, be it a woman from the Scheduled Castes, a Muslim, a Bengali Hindu, or a Rajbanshi, or even a man.

In the heart of Assam, CJP's tireless team persists in their mission to assist those in need. Recently, District Voluntary Motivator Habibur Bepari and community volunteer Rahul Roy visited Dhubri district, uncovering the distressing story of Sumoti Das, much like they do every week.

CJP's team Assam kept going strong amidst floods, broken roads, a

barrage of 'foreigner' notices to hapless citizens whose citizenship was put to question. Continuing our pursuit for justice and equal rights for all, our relentless team in Assam ensured that each and every 'targeted citizens' who come to us, receive unwavering support, in courts and beyond. From unconditionally supporting previously released inmates of detention camps, 'suspected foreigners' and 'D-voters' to fighting hate, bigotry and injustice within the state, we soldier on through each and every obstacle.

To provide para-legal and legal assistance, ensuring effective representation in courts, including the Foreigners Tribunals, CJP's Team Assam tirelessly dedicates itself, reaching out to over 75 families each week and securing legal relief for more than 100 individuals annually. This work demands unwavering commitment and is physically demanding. It necessitates a unique blend of sensitivity, determination, bravery, and resilience, all qualities exemplified by our dedicated team. Hailing from various districts in the state, our team is both diverse and energetic, effectively covering at least 24 districts.

HELP US HELP ASSAM

Citizens for Justice
and Peace [CJP]

Kidnapping and Arrest

Shri Prafulla Samantara, a prominent environmentalist, writer and socialist thinker of Odisha, was kidnapped from a hotel in Rayagada town on August 29 and then released. Despite all the newspapers and electronic-media clearly indicated that the abductors were the state police themselves, it was neither being investigated by the state government nor it was ascertained that the state government's police department was not really behind the kidnapping.

In the meantime, 23 villagers have been arrested for opposing the bauxite mining operation of Vedanta-Maitri Company at Sijimali in Kashipur Block of Rayagada district. The

NOTICE

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Autumn Number will be out in the 2nd week of October. This year our contributors include—

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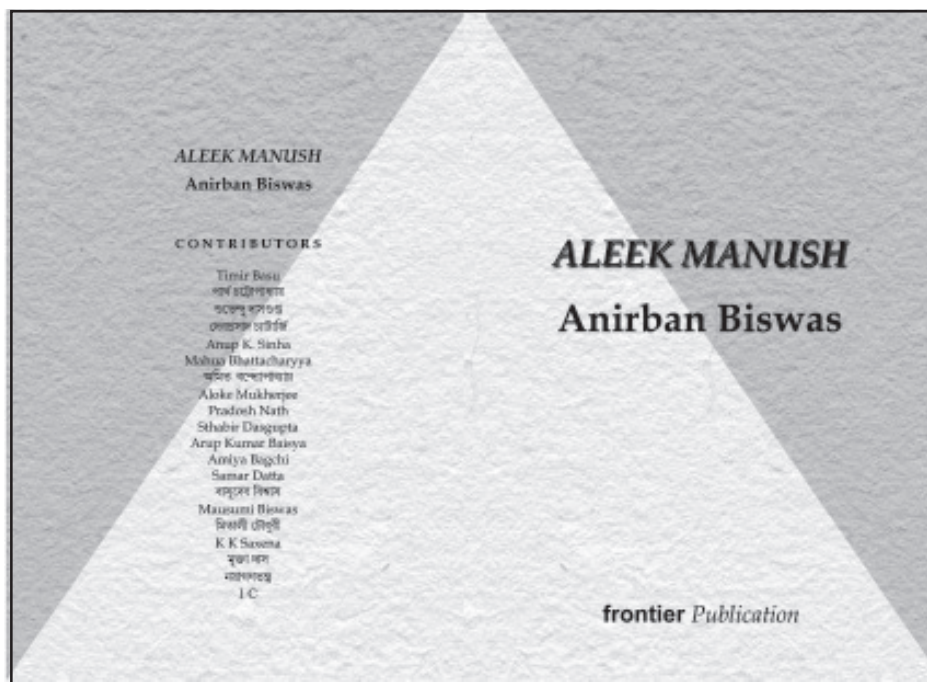
people, those who have been arrested are mainly Dalits and Adivasis. It has been reported in all the media that on August 29, Shri Prafulla Samantara went to Rayagada Jail, met the arrested villagers of Sijimali in the jail and called for a press conference in this regard. Suddenly he was kidnapped from that place.

Many writers, playwrights, filmmakers, political activists and individuals, like Prafulla Babu, who have been strongly opposing the land grabbing and environmental degradation caused by the corporate houses have also been opposing the state government's disastrous developmental policy. Kidnappings of Shri Prafulla Samantara and the likes are an attack on the dissent. The repressive attitude of the state government has put many writers and social activists under pressure. There is no doubt that the so called developmental policy of the government will destroy people's lives, livelihoods, forests, and environment.

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