

frontier

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Stop World War 3

ON OCTOBER 27TH AND 28TH ANTI-IMPERIALIST ORGANISATIONS and parties from around the world met in Rome for the peace conference under the banner 'Stop the Third World War for a true and a just peace'. The Conference growing out of opposition to NATO's reckless proxy war against Russia is an important step towards building a new internationalist anti-imperialist movement.

Despite the collapse of the USSR, NATO is yet to achieve its goal of absolute domination of the old Soviet bloc. NATO expanded to the east. Their plan is to crush all national sovereignty of the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Russia. Imperialism is haunted by the ghost of communism, and even after restoration of capitalism in Russia. War and the threat of war is what drives revolutionary movements to come into existence. It drove the Russian Revolution and the creation of the Third Communist International.

For all practical purposes World War 3 is in full swing. Triggered by the war in Ukraine in 2022, World War 3 is spreading to Taiwan and South Korea and through Palestine in 2023. Today, the probability of contagion in Eastern Europe and an outbreak of war in Eastern Asia is increasingly likely.

The war and bloodshed in Ukraine had not yet ended, when the war in Palestine started in the first week of November, and the indiscriminate bombing of Gaza continues. Certainly, the tragedy of killing Palestinians will not be the last war crime and human catastrophe. They won't allow people to live in peace. Today or tomorrow the flames of war will flare up in other regions of the world.

The root cause of all wars lies in imperialism. Imperialism is driving the world into a war crisis with "New Cold War" policy and war provocations in order to escape from the unprecedented political and economic crisis. Based on the "Grand Chessboard" strategy and NATO's eastward policy, imperialism has been plotting to make Russia a second Yugoslavia, using "Colour Revolutions" and Neo-Nazi storm-troopers. This is essentially no different from the strategy to break China though the mandarins in Beijing are building capitalism with 'Chinese characteristics. Additionally, the US president, the Japanese prime minister, and the South Korean president met at Camp David in the US at the end of August to form an "Asian version of NATO", and the war exercises against North Korea are being conducted daily in Korea with nuclear bombers and nuclear aircraft carriers. Today, if either the war in Taiwan or in South Korea breaks out, the other will also automatically break

out. In 1950, the Korean War broke out in the midst of the "Taiwanese War Crisis". When the US army dragged 16 countries into the Korean War, the Chinese army had no choice but to join. The recent North Korea-Russia summit in September and the China-Russia summit in October demonstrate that the strategic cooperative relationship between North Korea, China, and Russia is deepening and developing.

Through the First World War, an inter-imperialist war, the first socialist country emerged, and through the Second World War, an antifascist war, the socialist camp emerged on a global scale. The Third World War, an anti-imperialist war, can be the turning point to achieve global independence and peace. Palestinian people have already begun the strategic struggle to finish the occu-

pation and domination for 75 years since 1948 and the historic struggle to realise freedom and liberation from the river to the sea.

While the war in Ukraine is an anti-imperialist and antifascist war, a liberation war and preventive war, and the wars in Taiwan and South Korea are anti-imperialist wars, national-liberation wars, and reunification wars, the war in Palestine is an anti-imperialist war, anti-Zionist war, and a liberation war. The final victory is always on the side of justice. Even though the progress is achieved through contradictions and vicissitudes, the just liberation war must win.

The World Anti-imperialist Platform was constituted, holding the banner of anti-imperialism high and announcing the "Paris Declaration" at the international conference in Paris, France, in October 2022.

Having clarified its three major goals as anti-imperialist mass struggle, ideological warfare against opportunism, and consolidation of the international communist forces, the World Anti-imperialist Platform held international events and anti-imperialist struggles in Belgrade, Serbia last December, and in Caracas, Venezuela last March, and in Seoul, South Korea last May and has strived to achieve these goals.

"The People United will never be defeated!", will consistently struggle and progress without hesitation and wavering to change the period of the historic great-turn in which people now live into the new period of the great-upsurge, and to establish the new society where the working people become the master of the politics and the economy. □□

[Contributed]

COMMENT

Indians Replacing Palestinians?

THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT HAS pulled work permits for thousands of Palestinian construction workers in the wake of the Hamas terrorist attacks in October. Indian workers might be asked to fill this gap.

Amid the ongoing fighting in Gaza, Israel is reportedly looking to hire construction workers from India to replace Palestinians.

Palestinians comprise about 60-70 percent of total Israeli workforce. The figures are really staggering. A conservative estimate says 1.3 lakh Palestinians are engaged in Israel's booming construction industry but the attacks by the Hamas militants in October prompted the Israeli authorities to revoke their work permits.

According to media reports, the Israel Builders Association has since urged the government to take steps toward hiring up to 100,000 workers from India.

"Right now, we are negotiating with India. We are waiting for the decision of the Israeli government to approve that. And we hope to engage 50,000 to 100,000 workers from India to be able to run the whole sector and bring it back to normal," Haim Feiglin, vice president of the Israel Builders Association, was quoted as saying by Voice of America news.

The Israeli construction market was valued at \$71 billion (•65.37 billion) in 2022 and projected to grow at an average annual growth rate of more than 2% during the period 2024-2027, according to a Global Data report.

Some 20,000 Indians are believed to already be working in Israel, many as caregivers to the elderly.

Earlier, people from India, Nepal and Sri Lanka have been present as caregivers. Thai workers form a sub-

stantial segment in West Bank's farming sector. Their presence in the construction industry is relatively new and is an outcome of the cycle of violence,.

Without any domestic employment opportunities, Palestinians are heavily dependent on the Israeli labour market and influx of more foreigners, particularly Indians or reduction in the number of Palestinians in Israel will aggravate the precarious unemployment situation in Palestine.

The war between the Israeli army and Hamas could also threaten the security of guest workers.

Of late some Indian caregivers had been shifted to hotels in view of the ongoing conflict. The danger is nothing new but Indian workers have no plans to leave Israel because of dwindling job opportunities in their own country. In truth the presence of foreign guest workers has increased in recent years.

The reports of inviting workers to Israel have not gone down well with

India's trade unions. Workers' representatives say Indians would be in "serious risk" under such an arrangement.

While any details of the worker replacement scheme remain vague, 10 major trade unions have already called on the Indian government to refuse the request made by Israel's construction sector. But Israel found a natural ally in Modi and is quite likely that India would export labour because the Modis cannot provide jobs to the unemployed millions.

British human rights group Fair Square also urged the Indian government not to send its citizens to Israel to replace Palestinian workers who have been deported, saying it would be unjust and inhuman.

Instead of taking advantage of plight of Palestinians India should

devote its efforts to ensuring a ceasefire, not profiting from more violence.

India's Foreign Ministry has remained ambiguous in its comments on the reported scheme for Indian guest workers.

India has, reportedly been discussing a bilateral framework in the construction and caregiver sectors. The framework was signed during the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen to India in May, months before the Hamas attacks on Israel, and it foresees 42,000 Indians to work in Israel, including 38,000 construction labourers. It means Israel has long been trying to minimise its dependence on Palestinian workforce, hopefully to crush economic backbone of Hamas and other radical Islamists. □□□

NOTE

COP 28

Bharat Dogra writes:

COP 28 WILL BE HELD AT a time of increasing, perhaps overwhelming evidence that the targets set earlier to restrict global warming to 1.5 degree C above pre-industrial levels and to achieve reductions in GHG emissions are being badly missed and so the world is at present on course to see higher levels of global warming, accompanied by several other catastrophic and possibly irreversible changes, sooner than it was anticipated earlier. A primary aim of this year's COP 28 is to evaluate countries progress half-way to the 2030 deadlines. Reports show that world is not on track.

A more immediate question which several people are asking is whether COP 28 can contribute to giving new hope?

Well, on the basis of past record, unfortunately the more likely answer is to be in the negative.

One of the more selfless things COP 28 can still do is to admit not just its own failures, but also admit that the narrow paradigm within which it functions and the severe limitations of its processes and agenda make it unlikely that COPs by themselves can become the main vehicle for achieving significant success on this front.

The narrow vision of COPs, the COP processes have also been adversely impacted, perhaps one should say corrupted, by big business interests. If big fossil fuel interests are allowed to have a big influence on COP processes and agenda, this is like assuming that those who cause problems will find effective solutions for them ignoring their self-interests. In the food and farm sector as well as in some other crucial sectors, big corporate interests are trying to take the world in the opposite direction of what is

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needed. Unfortunately, such corporate interests are also increasingly influencing and even funding several UN agencies, further reducing their credibility and that of COPs as well.

In the middle of these failures and setbacks, can people still find some hope? Yes, but only as a part of much broader efforts to create a world based on justice, peace and environment protection.

Several serious environmental problems led by climate change (but certainly not confined to climate change) have combined together to create conditions which can disrupt the life-nurturing conditions of the planet. In addition there is also the very important threat of the never-ending wars and the relentless arms race. This makes it very difficult to secure the international peace, cooperation and mobilisation that are needed to protect life-nurturing conditions of planet. This threat is manifested in its most extreme form in the accumulation of various weapons of mass destruction (including over

12,000 nuclear weapons, the use of just 10% of which is enough to destroy the entire world).

When the risks and stakes involved are so high, the patchy, incremental and uncertain agendas put forward at COPs are unlikely to achieve the bigger, time-bound results that are needed.

Hence we need a much broader agenda in which integrated solutions for some of the biggest problems can be found together. Hence it makes much more sense to link up

efforts to resolve the environmental (including climate change) crisis with the efforts for peace and disarmament. In a no-wars world, it becomes much more possible to reduce militarisation and weapons-race (itself a big cause of GHG emissions) while also creating those conditions of international cooperation in which the various global efforts for checking climate change (including reformed COPs) and the wider environmental crisis have a much higher chance of success.

Massive support of people including farmers and workers for this agenda of peace and environment protection can be obtained by linking this agenda closely with justice concerns. Once people's livelihood interests and fulfilment of basic needs are linked closely with this agenda then their enthusiastic participation in afforestation, agro-ecology, green cities, soil and water-conservation etc. can be secured, and this can be the real game-changer. □□□

18-11-2023

A TRIBUTE

Remembering Subhas Ganguly

Dipak Piplai

AHUNDRED YEARS HAD passed after the arrival of Lenin”—this is how Subhasda had begun his article in 1970. This was taking place in the ninth-floor canteen of Ballygunge Science College, University of Calcutta. The Ballygunge Science College campus of CU was more like a “liberated-zone” [“muktanchal” in Bengali] in those turbulent days of '70s. The occasion was Lenin Birth Centenary. The article was taking its shape in a canteen-table; as the author was sitting on a chair. This article was not meant for publishing in the organ of Subhasda's political organisation, National Liberation and Democratic Front [NLDF]. The piece was written for the mouthpiece of another political organisation, Communist Revolutionary Organisation [CRO], named as “Bhitti”. In those days, under the banner of CPI(M-L), sporadic killing was taking place here and there against those who had been branded as “fine revisionists”, “middle-path traders”, or “representing theoretically the ideology of feudal lords”. In reality they were all communist revolutionaries breaking with the old revisionist party.

NLDF and CRO better known as Bhitti after the name of its organ, were actively practising revolutionary politics both in urban areas (among students and workers) as well as among the peasants in the rural areas. Their line of practice was completely against the “left” deviationist line of the CPI (M-L) and ran as a parallel line opposed to CPI (ML) in the urban and rural areas. Political activists of NLDF penned a number of important theoretical articles for the political journal of CRO—“Bhitti”. NLDF's organ, “Jatiyo Swadhinata O Ganatantrik Front”, [i.e. “National Liberation and Democratic Front”] was an irregular publication, mainly focusing on ideological debate in the communist revolutionary camp of the time. These two organisations jointly deputed whole-time political activists in the tribal areas of South Bengal so that tribal masses [or “bunos” as they are called in Bhadrakol parlance] can be mobilised for radical social change. NLDF under the leadership of Parimal Bhattacharyay and CRO under the leadership of Sudhir (Budhu) Chatterjee, used to fight jointly the erroneous line of the CPI

(M-L) and MCC (Maoist Communist Centre). As a result the hard-liners of CPI-ML and MCC began to treat NLDF and CRO cadres as their class enemies. In truth the Congress, the representative of landlords and rural gentry was all along doing the same thing.

As a part of their violent campaign against “bourgeois culture”, the CPI(M-L) leadership of south Calcutta planned to disrupt the cultural function organised by the Ballygunge Science College ‘Students Union’ to be held at Ballygunge Science College Auditorium, where Shambhu Bhattacharyay was to perform his “Runner” dance while Swapan Gupta was scheduled to present his Rabindrasangeet rendition. The day before the programme, some of CPI(ML) cadres did a “re-connaissance” operation in the college, and they secretly left behind a hand-made bomb, which was actually a tin-container packed with high explosives, tied by a metal wire, in the campus. Students of PGSF [Post-Graduate Students Federation] detected and defused it on time and averted an explosion. The crude bomb was later displayed in a wooden tray in the open in the canteen to expose CPI (ML)'s sectarian and antagonistic political line to students.

All these episodes are being re-

called here because Subhasda was the leader of PGSF in Ballygunge Science College campus. PGSF produced a number of efficient student leaders—Sunil Biswas, Sanat Bhattacharyay and then came Subhas Ganguly.

Subhasda was one of the most important contributors on theoretical issues in the journal “Jatiyo Swadhinata O Ganatantrik Front”. NLDF and CRO were two different political organisations having different understandings on certain ideological questions but despite differences they all along maintained cordial relations.

In the later years of his life, Subhasda’s thought had gone through a tumultuous turn. Accepting anything without a question was not his way. If one resorts to “blind faith”, everything would appear to the person as quite “normal”. His real internal dynamo was his honesty and deep quest. As a result, Subhasda kept on changing his gear throughout his life. What remained intact was his unquestionable honesty, broad-heartedness and deep quest for learning.

In the sixties of the last century, Subhas Ganguly was admitted in the Statistics Department of Presidency College as a “rustic rural” student. English was not among his best points; yet the same person, after the turn of 21st century translated 100 songs of Tagore into English, which was endorsed by the poet Sankho Ghosh, and was subsequently published by the publisher, “Papyrus” as a book. In the sixties of the last century students saw Subhas as a foot soldier of hunger strike movement of the Eden Hindu Hostel of the then Presidency College; he was an active participant of the revolutionary movement of seventies, went to jail as a “Naxal”—the same Subhas kept himself away from the direct political activities in

his later years. What he said, in his later years, about his idols of the youth, Marx and Engels may provide some food for thought: “my respect about them has increased with time, but my reverence had diminished”.

For a long time, Subhasda had shunned himself away from politics. Yet, when the leaders of the movement of Kanoria Jute Mill were on a hunger strike in front of the gate of the Mill, this writer saw Subhasda, and “Surenda” (recently deceased Ratikanta Hazra, a long-standing friend of Frontier), a whole-time political activist of “Bhitti”, reached there. Why was he there at all though he was not in active politics? When the Nandigram peasant resistance commenced in 2007, Subhasda was among the first few persons who visited the place, well ahead of those self-professed human rights crusaders who went there to seek political fortunes. What propelled him to go there? From the political viewpoint, his “static stance”, never influenced his active brain, his “cerebral activeness” was unbelievable.

Years after years, nights after nights, without a break, with untiring effort he continued his never-ending quest for study. This had resulted in changing his biological clock, his circadian rhythm. All night, staying awake—all day when he was not catching up with his missed out sleeping needs. What was not in his reading list—books on statistics, mathematics, Marxism, human civilisation, philosophy, Human Rights issues, educational system, psychology, quantum mechanics and what not!

A lot of people might be irked, even angry and be quite disturbed by his viewpoint about Marxism and iconic stalwarts of the international communist movement. But it is yet to be seen somebody putting forward arguments countering his sharp and well-presented thought.

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He was one of the founders of the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights [APDR]. With a lot of enthusiasm of the veteran revolutionary, late Sushil Bandyopadhyay (better known as “Dadu”, the grandpa), a bunch of few youngsters, men and women (Subhas Ganguly, Sanjay Mitra, Bharati Chatterjee, Dilip Chowdhury) literally gave the organisation a concrete shape. The role of Sanjay Mitra and Subhasda was prime. In the seventies, APDR had produced the historical document, “Bharatiya Ganatontrer Swarup” (“The Real Face of Indian Democracy”). It was authored by Subhas Ganguly. The contributions made by four individuals in creating an unparalleled artistic cover design of this book must be mentioned, and they were Bharati Chatterjee, Dilip Chowdhury, Shankar Chatterjee and Hiron (Mitra). In the days of Internal Emergency in India, the printing press where the book was printed had suffered a police-raid; the police seized the “appendices” of the book along with a substantial portion of the printed pages and composed material in lead type-fonts; the owner of the press was arrested; and many other odd events had become the part of the legend of the relevant

history of this book. Another phase of an absconder's life began for Subhasda soon after. The parts of the book, which were printed before the police-raid, had been in the safe custody of now deceased Amitda--Professor Amitava Basu of Indian Statistical Institute. The hazard-free printing of books in today's scenario was impossible to conceive in those days! There was a huge loan that had been incurred for this printing enterprise, a whopping sum of Rs 8,000; if one compares this amount with the price of gold these days, it would have been equivalent to ten lakh Rupees. The first Joint-Secretary and one of the principal founders of APDR, Sanjayda (Mitra) later on, took recourse to giving private tuition to a number of students and finally repaid the entire loan-amount single-handedly.

At one point of time, the sensational "Archana Guha Case" was going on against the tyrant police officer, Runu Guha Niyogi in Calcutta High Court. Subhasda wrote a brilliant article covering nearly all aspects of this case in Frontier Weekly. PUCL of Delhi felicitated Subhasda with "Best Human Rights Journalism Award" on an all-India basis and awarded him Rs 20,000 as the award money. After returning from

Delhi, accepting the award, Subhasda donated a sum of Rs 18,000 to "Frontier" Weekly and a sum of Rs 2000 to Saumen Guha (the brother of Archana Guha) extending his cooperation. In one of the historical cases against police atrocity, Subhasda played an important role as one of the legal adviser to the tortured and aggrieved party. Subhasda had performed the entire statistical analysis part of the doctoral thesis of an internationally reputed scientist. The luring of fame—to become famous, to become a leader and seek monetary gains—is something Subhasda cared least throughout his life.

Here is one incident! This writer was down to bed then as a result of police torture resulting in a serious illness. It was in the year 1973. As they say, the condition was that of a proverbial case of "once a police touches you, bear the brunt 36 times over". At that time Subhasda was absconding. One day he and Dilip Chowdhury, who was ousted from his home as the muscle-men of Congress party threatened him, together they came to visit this author. Those two persons, themselves have no or very little means to survive, asked me, "hey, do you need some money?" Maybe that's how a true camaraderie begins!

In his long experience with people, those whom Subhasda considered to be "Pathologically Honest", with them he was quite free, frank and comfortable with. In their company, he never kept himself locked up in his cocoon. He used to visit their home, even went for outing with them; he attended their invitation with jovial mood, took foods with a smiling face. He felt quite at ease with them.

Today many students of Subhasda are comfortably placed as scientists in the country and abroad—from MIT to many other places; they simply cry with pain as well as in reverence to the person.

It could be just a few days back before the doomsday. Cancer was taking its toll coupled with two dosages of chemotherapy. One day evening, this writer received a phone call from him, with a terribly feeble tone he said, "D-i-p-u, m-y c-o-n-d-i-t-i-o-n is r-e-a-l-l-y B-A-D". His voice was barely audible. This was the last conversation that this contributor had with him, finishing a 56 years' long journey with a man who will be remembered by his friends and foes alike. It would be difficult to have another "Subhasda". Such persons are direly needed for today's society. □

[Translated from original Bengali by Subhasis Mukherjee]

JHARKHAND SCENARIO

Workers out of NREGA

Siraj Dutta

[In a poor state where NREGA can be a form of security for casual workers, reduced funding and the centre's insistence on the use of inappropriate technologies, and an insensitive state bureaucracy have instead made workers wary of the programme.]

More than half of the rural households of Jharkhand depend on manual casual labour as their main source of livelihood. In times of distress, an even larger number of households take up casual labour. In the dearth of adequate and assured local employment, a large proportion of the working-age popula-

tion migrates to the towns and cities in the state and to other states.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) also known as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is a lifeline for many workers in Jharkhand because they are able to get some employ-

ment under the programme. NREGA was the only significant source of rural work during a large part of the pandemic.

The importance of NREGA in addressing rural distress and poverty has been extensively studied and documented. Since NREGA began in 2006, several important community and individual assets have been created under the programme in Jharkhand, such as rural roads, irrigation wells, ponds and mango orchards.

Successive state governments in Jharkhand have... failed to utilise the immense potential of NREGA in

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providing assured wage employment and creating productive assets.

However, the commitment of the union government to NREGA has been on the decline for more than a decade. The downslide started under the United Progressive Alliance-2 (UPA-2) government and has worsened under the Narendra Modi-led government. Barring the pandemic years, NREGA has been grossly underfunded under the Modi government. Successive state governments in Jharkhand have also failed to utilise the immense potential of NREGA in providing wage employment and creating productive assets. Lack of timely and adequate employment, delays in wage payments and corruption have plagued the programme in the state since its inception.

The union government's apathy in the last decade and continuing patchy implementation by the state has made Jharkhand's workers skeptical about the benefits of NREGA. It is not uncommon to see workers across the state stay away from NREGA as, "Na kaam milta hai aur na samay par paisa" (Neither do we get work nor timely wages).

Contrary to the spirit of the NREGA Act, continuous underfunding by the union government has diluted the demand driven nature of the programme, i.e. workers cannot get assured employment on demand. Nationally, since 2015-16, almost every year has begun with significant arrears in wage payments. In the last five years, about a fifth of the annual budget has been used just to clear the arrears across the country.

In Jharkhand, the underfunding reflects in the poor scale of work in Jharkhand. Since 2014-15, only about 30 percent of the total registered rural households have got work in a year, and that too only for an average of just 40-45 day.

The rural distress caused by the ill-conceived lockdown and then the pressure by groups advocating for the rights of NREGA workers forced the union government during the pandemic to increase the NREGA budget for 2020-21 by 40%. This almost doubled the scale of work in Jharkhand compared to the previous five years. The total number of households that got at least some work also doubled as compared to the previous year.

According to field evidence and local news reports, wages payments had stopped in the state in July-August this year and there has also been a delay in the release of funds by the Centre.

However, the union government's focus on NREGA during the pandemic was short-lived. The national allocation was curtailed after 2020-21. As a result, the total employment in Jharkhand dipped in 2021-23.

In the current financial year, the national NREGA budget of Rs 60,000 crore is a third less than last year's allocation. It is the lowest allocation ever for the programme, when measured as a proportion of the country's Gross Domestic Product. It is no surprise that almost 95% of the total budget for the current financial year was spent by September. As a result, wages of Jharkhand's workers have stopped being paid in the middle of 2023-24, as the ministry's NREGA data shows. The wage pendency is 100 percent. According to field evidence and local news reports, wages payments had stopped in the state in July-August this year and there has also been a delay in the release of funds by the centre.

According to news reports, the Rural Development Ministry has requested an additional allocation of Rs 23,000 crore for the NREGA programme across the country for this financial year. However, it takes

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months for the additional funds to be allocated and until the additional funds are sanctioned, wage payments stop and frontline functionaries are discouraged from providing employment under the programme.

The NREGA funds and wage payment process were centralised in 2016. Now, once the fund transfer orders (FTOs) are electronically approved by the local administration, the wages, based on the FTOs, are to be credited by the union government to the workers' account from the central NREGA account. Between 2019-20 and 2022-23 (data of earlier years is not available), barely half of total wage transactions for Jharkhand were approved on time by the union government. The delay increases in the last quarter of each financial year when the shortage of funds becomes most acute. Ground reports suggest that a large proportion of wage transactions remain pending for several weeks. The exact proportion and extent of delay are difficult to assess as the union government, going against the spirit and mandate of the act, does not make this information public.

The centralisation has also made it difficult for the states to redress payment grievances. Jharkhand, unlike in the pre-centralisation years, is now unable to utilise its own revolving fund to tide over delays in release of funds by the union government.

The uncertainties in getting ad-

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equate work and timely wages has led to a reduction in the proportion of the total NREGA employment accessed by the Scheduled Tribes, who constitute 27 per cent of the state's total population.

For over a decade now, NREGA workers across the country, including in Jharkhand, have been suffering from the stagnation of the wage rate that is determined by the union government. Jharkhand's current NREGA daily wage rate of Rs 228 is a third less than the state's minimum wage. This is a significant disincentive for workers to seek NREGA work. Since 2021, the Jharkhand government has been adding Rs 27 to the wage rate from its own funds, but the wage rate is still considerably less than the state's minimum wage.

The sharp increase in the share of NREGA works on private lands (as compared to community lands) since 2016-17 may also be responsible for this fall in employment. The proportion of schemes on private lands, as compared to those on community lands, almost doubled from 38 per cent in 2015-16 to 72 per cent next year (because of the union and state governments' focus on increasing individual schemes). Since then, almost 80 percent of all ongoing schemes every year comprise individual works. There is anecdotal evidence of greater access by non-Adivasi households to individual schemes than by Adivasi households. The change in Jharkhand in the demographic composition of the total registered job cards (cards in manual and electronic forms issued to households registered in the programme) also indicates this. The proportion of job cards by members of ST households in the total registered households fell from 38 per cent in 2015-16 to 28 per cent in 2022-23. Ground evidence also indicates an increase in

corruption by registering fake attendance of non-Adivasi households.

The wage payment system has become excessively digitised and complicated over the years. It has undermined workers' ability to get timely work and wages in Jharkhand. The most recent examples are the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS) and the Aadhaar payment bridge system (APBS).

The union government made NMMS-based attendance mandatory from January 2023. Geotagged and time-stamped photographs of workers and online attendance are to be taken twice a day at the worksite through a phone-based app. The stated objective of NMMS is to check for fake attendance. This is based on an absurd premise that local officials will verify photographs of hundreds of workers taken at worksites with the attendance on muster rolls and the photographs on their job cards or through physical inspection of worksites.

While the NMMS fails in its stated objective of checking fake attendance, it has become another hurdle faced by Jharkhand's workers in getting timely work and wages. Lack of access to smart phones by the worksite supervisors, especially of women supervisors, is a hindrance. Even after finishing their work, workers have to be present at the worksite until their photograph is taken. Poor internet connectivity and other technical glitches directly affect the capture of attendance. There are several reports of workers losing their wages after the local administration marked them as absent because of technical issues with the NMMS app.

Another roadblock for Jharkhand's workers is the Aadhaar-based Payment System (ABPS). Under the APBS, a worker's wages are to be credited to the bank account that was last linked with their Aadhaar (in non-APBS payments,

the wages are sent directly to the bank account of the worker). For the APBS to work, the Aadhaar of the worker must be correctly seeded with their job card and their functional bank account and the Aadhaar, and account details are to be electronically mapped by the respective bank at the National Payment Corporation of India (through which the payment transaction is done). The rural development ministry claims that the APBS leads to faster payments and reduction in corruption.

There are several reports of workers losing their wages after the local administration marked them as absent because of technical issues with the NMMS app.

There is widespread evidence that the delays and uncertainty in receiving timely wages increased in Jharkhand after the introduction of the APBS. Transfer of wages of workers to incorrect bank accounts mapped with their Aadhaar without their knowledge is common. Another persistent issue is of wage payment getting rejected due to technical reasons, i.e. money is not credited to the worker's account even though it was transferred by the union government. Workers have to run pillar to post to understand where their payment is stuck. Frontline functionaries are of-

ten themselves clueless about it and are unable to rectify the issue.

Contrary to the claims of the ministry, a recent study by Libtech India of 3.13 crore wage transactions in 2021-22 across 10 states, including Jharkhand, shows that there is no significant difference in the time taken to processes payments between the APBS and non-APBS systems. Despite the evidence of no gain in the APBS, the union government made it mandatory for wage payments from February 2023. Since then, protests by workers and peoples' organisations have forced the ministry to repeatedly extend the deadline for making the APBS mandatory.

However, in practice, the APBS is mandatory in Jharkhand. The frontline functionaries are under pressure from the administration to convert all registered households to APBS. As a result, many workers who are not APBS-enabled are not being given work, to meet the target of making all workers APBS enabled. In addition to this, the ministry has tweaked the NREGA implementation software to make sure that the wages of a set of workers on a muster roll cannot be processed anymore if there is even one worker among them who is not APBS-enabled. In West Singhbhum

district, several workers were marked absent though they had completed the project work, only because some of them were not APBS-enabled.

As mentioned earlier, corruption in the implementation of NREGA is a major issue in Jharkhand. An audit of ongoing schemes by the state's social audit unit in October 2021 found only 25 per cent of the total workers registered in the muster roll present at the worksite. A nexus of contractors, frontline functionaries and, at times, the local elected representatives is usually involved in siphoning off funds. It is becoming increasingly common for this nexus to get muster rolls issued in the names of people who do not work and then give them a weekly cut to withdraw the wages from their bank accounts.

NREGA is dying a forced death in Jharkhand as workers are growing disenchanted with the programme. The word guarantee in the act has lost its meaning for the workers. The situation in nearby state West Bengal is equally bad. The Centre has withheld huge NREGA funds on the grounds of corruption, forcing the ruling dispensation to launch protest marches and dharnas in New Delhi. □□□

[Siraj Dutta is an activist based in Jharkhand. Source: 'The India Forum']

CHEAP LABOUR AND LOW WAGE

Plight of Migrant Workers of Bengal

Atanu Chakravarty

IN A TRAGIC INCIDENT, 23 Migrant workers from West Bengal lost their lives in a bridge collapse in Mizoram on 23 August 2023. All these workers from Malda district were engaged in constructing a bridge at Sairang area, near Aizawl, when it collapsed. Within a few days, on 27 August, there was a violent explosion in a fire cracker factory in Duttapukur, which was operating il-

legally for years together in a densely populated locality enjoying total impunity from local administration and ruling political leaders of North 24 Parganas. Nine workers, including few women, died on the spot. Six of the deceased were migrant workers from Murshidabad district and others were local people.

Recently, an entire family of four migrant workers from Sankosh Tea

Garden of Kumargram, Alipurduwar district, lost their lives in an accident in Bengaluru. This family, like many others, migrated to other states not for more decent jobs but for higher wages as wages in tea gardens in Bengal are abysmally low. They worked in a poultry farm at Bengaluru.

Even the tragic train accidents at Balasore a few months ago had exposed the plight and predicament of migrant workers of West Bengal with maximum number of deaths of migrants from Sunderbans, South 24 Parganas. The list is endless.

Recently, the Trinamul Congress government launched a programme called 'Duare Sarkar' ((Government at your Doorstep). Registration of migrant workers was one of its primary objectives. Within a short span, the Secretary of Home Department informed that 12.15 lakh migrant workers had registered. He stated that the registration process would continue till the end of September.

The West Bengal Government announced a slew of measures, including financial assistance, a call centre and offices to assist around an estimated 38 lakh people (unofficial estimate) working in other states. The Govt has constituted West Bengal Migrant Workers' Welfare Board. A portal has been launched for the registration of migrant workers.

Under the welfare scheme, a migrant worker who has met with an accident and become physically challenged will get cash assistance from Rs 50,000 to Rs 1 lakh. In case of natural death, his / her family will receive a compensation of Rs 50,000 and in case of death due to accidents the compensation will be Rs 2 lakh and if the family intends to bring his mortal remains to their native place, they will get Rs 25,000 towards transportation cost, and in case the last rites are performed at the place of their work, Rs 3,000

will be provided to the relatives. In reality, the welfare board is an euphemism, and benefits will be provided only after accidental death or injury, and the entire concept of welfarism had been reduced to compensation for tragic accidents and not a lifetime and lifelong benefit!

During the Duare Sarkar programme, the state government offered compensation to the wife of a deceased migrant worker. She promptly refused and told the government official, "We don't need money, we want employment." She echoed the aspiration of countless migrant workers of West Bengal.

A report in the Telegraph newspaper has quoted a senior government official in Kolkata put the total figure of migrant workers from Bengal at around 38 lakh! Another 5 lakh are working abroad, mainly in Gulf countries.

The last census report of 2011 had mentioned 5.8 lakh migrant workers from Bengal left the state in search of better fortune. The number has leaped with every passing year and has reached to an unimaginable proportion. Various reports have revealed that people from not only poorer districts but even economically advanced districts are migrating to other states in huge numbers. Employment crisis is not the sole reason for this huge migration. Very low wages in different industries, be it in Jute - Tea or other unorganised industry which are forcing the rural - semi urban population to migrate in search of lowest level of unorganised jobs in other states.

Handbook of Statistics on Indian States, 2020-21, an RBI publication, has revealed that the daily wage of rural workers in Bengal is below the national average and worst among major states in the country. Stalling 100 days of work guaranteed under MGNREGA in Bengal is

not the only reason for rural distress. Even when Bengal was a top performer in MGNREGA, people were reeling under acute poverty, according to a NABARD report --- Farmers' Welfare: An Analysis Across States Of India. Average monthly income of Farmers' families in Bengal is Rs 7,573 only. This places Bengal among the states with lower average income from farming. Only six other states, namely, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Tripura and UP have a lower average income in the category. Women workers from tea plantation areas are opting to migrate to other states/regions such as Nagpur, Rajasthan and Surat in search of contractual family work.

The Chief Minister of Bengal went on a 12-day tour to Spain and UAE to woo industrialists for investment in the state. During her meeting with the industrial houses at Barcelona, Mamata Banerjee underscored three advantages of Bengal that are favourable for international capital. Among the top two, one is highly skilled, knowledgeable and cheap workforce and the second is complete prohibition of strike. She stated that Deocha Pachami will be the biggest coal mine in Asia, and a source of uninterrupted cheap power supply for the industry. The CM of the state, thus, assured the international capital of her government's position of keeping the wages at low level, and was unashamedly appealing the corporates. When the entire world is moving towards reducing carbon emission from fossil fuel, the W B government is brazenly making such a proposal.

The government's statement of "the advantage of cheap workforce" has further opened up all the doors for unmitigated migration of young rural workforce to other states and is the very source of huge suffering that has befallen upon rural Bengal. □□□

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TANVIR'S NAYA THEATRE

Reviving Chattisgarhi 'Nacha' Tradition

Sameera Iyengar

IN LATE 1974, EARLY 1975, A new kind of theatre took India by storm. Naya Theatre, helmed by Habib Tanvir and Moneeka Misra Tanvir and comprised of professional Nacha performers, gave audiences across India Charandas Chor, a gleeful play that told the story of a thief who did not lie. It was a fast-paced play that flowed across locations—a village street to a village maidan to a temple to a granary to the treasury to the queens court—without any change of sets, without any break in the action.

The scenes were suggested by the way the actor's moved or stayed still in relation to each other, by the way they portrayed characters, and by the way the stage was lit in different scenes. The actors moved like quicksilver across the space, establishing situations and moving the story forward with an enviable lightness of touch and ease of presence.

They sang, they danced, they had the audience enthralled with their exuberance, they had them delighted with their impeccable comic timing. Then, suddenly, the play turned—the queen ordered Charandas's death. Silence. The audience who had been having a rollicking time till then came crashing down to earth, unable to comprehend this turn of events. The actors who kept them in splits throughout performed the death and its aftermath perfectly, never holding a moment too long, never overplaying the situation.

There was no drama, no dramatic outpouring of grief. Just a dignified procession of Satnamis, transforming the platform of Charandas' death into their chowk

with their white flag, paying tribute to Charandas as an upholder of truth. Satnamis are Dalits who follow Guru Ghasidas, originally a dacoit, who established their dharma of truth. "Satya hi ishwar hai, ishwar hi satya hai"—truth is god—is the last refrain that rang in the audiences' ears as the play came to a close.

Audiences in India had never seen anything like this before. Urban and small-town audiences, generally cut off from rural performance practices, had not experienced the performative brilliance and playful abandon that the Nacha performers of Naya Theatre brought to the stage. Nacha is a performance form popular across Chhattisgarh, a form of comedy that integrates music, dance and drama into a theatrical performance. It boasts a keen and discerning audience.

Across India, rural performance forms have no fourth wall—a term that refers to an invisible wall between audiences and performers which allows actors to behave as if no one else is present. Popular rural forms have key characters constantly turn to the audience and talk to them—they build an active relationship with their audiences, sometimes laughing with them, sometimes laughing at them, improvising on the spot.

Rural forms are also commercial enterprises—they need to earn enough money from the audiences to stay alive. They have to keep the audience hooked through all night performances, and the Nacha form of that time did it through slick and alert physical comedy and plenty of humour. Last but not least, most rural forms tend to have excellent

music and singing that runs through the performance—here too, musicians play live on stage, and there is often banter and playfulness between the musicians and performers. The Naya Theatre actors therefore excelled in performance, were ingenious in their improvisation and had the skills to utterly charm their audiences.

Naya Theatre was not, however, bringing Nacha on stage. It was creating an entirely new kind of theatre, born out of a creative dialogue between Habib Tanvir and the Nacha performers who joined him, supported creatively and logistically by Moneeka Misra Tanvir who was a theatre director in her own right. Habibsab was a Hindustani poet who had worked with the Indian People's Theatre Association through its heyday around Indian independence.

He had gone on to train in theatre in the UK—first the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art which he rejected and then the Old Vic which had a lasting effect on his theatre thinking. He had then gone on to tour Europe, earning his way through writing and performance collaborations. In 1958, four years after his return from Europe, he went to watch an all-night Nacha performance and fell in love with what the performers brought to the stage. Habibsab recalled:

"They presented three or four skits. There was Madan Lal, Thakur Ram, Shiv Dayal, Bhulwa Ram, Jagmohan... and what comedians these fellows were! I was fascinated.

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DHYANBINDU

COLLEGE SQUARE

I went up to them and said, would you like to come to Delhi and join me in a production? They were happy to do so”.

These performers were soon joined by Lalu Ram, whom Habibsab termed “one of the best singers in Chhattisgarh”, and then Fida Bai and Mala Bai. Fida Bai played the female lead in Naya Theatre productions till she could no longer perform, and brought to the varied roles a remarkable sensitivity and brilliance, marking her as one of the most outstanding performers this country has ever seen.

Habib Tanvir, in keeping with post-independence times, was seeking a new Indian theatre, one that reflected India’s lived culture, and one that could reach all Indians. In the Nacha performers, he found the partners he desired, and for 13 years, they experimented together, trying to create theatre that worked with the abandon of Nacha but followed the theatre practice that Habibsab had learned in the West. They kept failing, unable to make it click. Under Habib Tanvir’s direction, the actors were simply unable to deliver the same brilliant fluidity that was the hallmark of their Nacha performances.

Eventually Habibsab came to realise that his approach was the problem. He was constricting the actors with his western blocking techniques, and stopping the natural flow of their body and verbal language by asking them to work in Hindustani—a language alien to them. Blocking in theatre is letting the actors know where to move to on stage, where to stand. It is essentially the choreographing of the actors’ movements on stage through the play.

So Habib Tanvir did something remarkable. He entirely changed his way of working. What happened next is best described in his own words:

“It took me time to realise two

basic approaches to working with these folk actors—mother tongue and freedom of movement.

I began to use Chhattisgarhi and I improvised, allowing them the freedom, and then came pouncing down upon them to crystallise the movement—‘there you stay!’ And they began to learn.

I started asking them to improvise along with me and they opened up. Then I grew with them, learning new lessons in theatre”.

This shift marked the turning point for Naya Theatre. They created a performance piece called Gaon ka Naam Sasural Mor Naam Damaad, which resonated with audiences across villages, towns and cities. Then came Charandas Chor, which won hearts in India and went on to take the Edinburgh Fringe by storm in 1982. This was followed by plays like Bahadur Kalarin (exploring incest) and Mitti ki Gadi (Sudraka’s Mrichchakatika).

It quickly became apparent that Naya Theatre could provide unforgettable theatre experiences across the spectrum from comedy to tragedy. Their canvas was vast and unlimited—no story was beyond reach.

Their productions drew freely from existing Nacha performances (Ponga Pandit, Gaon ka Naam Sasural) as well as from folk legends and stories (Charandas Chor, Bahadur Kalarin, Hirma ki Amar Kahani). They commented on socio-political issues ranging from development (Sadak) to the Bhopal gas tragedy (Zahreeli Hawa).

They created Chhattisgarhi versions of Indian and Western classics, including Mitti ki Gadi (Sudraka), Mudrarakshas (Vishakhadatta), Kamdev ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka Sapna (Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream—minus the characters of the court, due to the British collaboration falling through) Lala

Shoharat Rai (Moliere’s La Bourgeois Gentilhomme), Raj Rakt (Tagore), Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya (Wajahat), Shajapur ki Shantibai (Brecht’s The Good Person of Szechwan) and Dekh Rahein Hain Nain (inspired by a description of Stefan Zweig’s Eyes of the Undying Brother).

Through a mixture of intelligent improvisation facilitated by Habib Tanvir, masterful playwriting, captivating music and song rooted in Chhattisgarhi culture, and the uninhibited performances of the Nacha actors, Naya Theatre offered audiences play after play that captured imaginations and hearts. Stories of substance and depth, of socio-political import, of enquiries into the human condition, were offered up with a captivating lightness of touch and exuberance of spirit. This was theatre that lifted people up even as it asked people to engage deeply. Audiences across India and indeed, the world, were enchanted.

Naya Theatre toured for 50 long years under the leadership of Habib Tanvir, crisscrossing the country and visiting the world as a professional touring company. Generations of Nacha performers formed the core of the company, joined by other rural and urban performers to form the extended company as and when required. Naya Theatre’s audiences spanned villages as well as semi-urban and urban areas. □□□

[Sameera Iyengar is a theatre person, creative producer, and facilitator of engagements with culture that are fun, engrossing, and take us on paths of exploration, learning and knowledge. She is also constantly searching for ways to enable theatre to thrive in India. This piece was conceived and commissioned by Bhasha Centre, to mark the centenary of Habib Tanvir’s birth anniversary on September 1, 2023. For more on Naya Theatre’s past and present, please visit www.nayatheatre.com

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A CASE OF GENOCIDE

Why isn't the World Listening?

Raz Segal

ON OCTOBER 13TH, ISRAEL ordered the besieged population in the northern half of the Gaza Strip to evacuate to the south, warning that it would soon intensify its attack on the Strip's upper half. The order has left more than a million people, half of whom are children, frantically attempting to flee amid continuing airstrikes, in a walled enclave where no destination is safe. As Palestinian journalist Ruwaida Kamal Amer wrote from Gaza, "refugees from the north are already arriving in Khan Younis, where the missiles never stop and we're running out of food, water, and power". The UN has warned that the flight of people from the northern part of Gaza to the south will create "devastating humanitarian consequences" and will "transform what is already a tragedy into a calamitous situation". Over the last week, Israel's violence against Gaza has killed more than 1,800 Palestinians, injured thousands, and displaced more than 400,000 within the strip. And yet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised that what people have seen is "only the beginning".

Israel's campaign to displace Gazans—and potentially expel them altogether into Egypt—is yet another chapter in the Nakba, in which an estimated 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes during the 1948 war that led to the creation of the State of Israel. But the assault on Gaza can also be understood in other terms: as a textbook case of genocide unfolding in front of all eyes. This writer says this as a scholar of genocide, who has spent many years writing about Israeli mass

violence against Palestinians. Now, following Hamas's attack on October 7 and the mass murder of more than 1,000 Israeli civilians, the worst of the worst is happening.

Under international law, the crime of genocide is defined by "the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such," as noted in the December 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. In its murderous attack on Gaza, Israel has loudly proclaimed this intent. Israeli Minister of Defence Yoav Gallant declared it in no uncertain terms on October 9th: "We are imposing a complete siege on Gaza. No electricity, no food, no water, no fuel. Everything is closed. We are fighting human animals, and we will act accordingly." Leaders in the West reinforced this racist rhetoric by describing Hamas's mass murder of Israeli civilians—a war crime under international law that rightly provoked horror and shock in Israel and around the world—as "an act of sheer evil," in the words of US President Joe Biden, or as a move that reflected an "ancient evil," in the terminology of President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen. This dehumanising language is clearly calculated to justify the wide scale destruction of Palestinian lives; the assertion of "evil," in its absolutism, elides distinctions between Hamas militants and Gazan civilians, and occludes the broader context of colonisation and occupation.

The UN Genocide Convention lists five acts that fall under its definition. Israel is currently perpetrating three of these in Gaza: "1.

Killing members of the group. 2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group. 3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." The Israeli Air Force, by its own account, has so far dropped more than 6,000 bombs on Gaza, which is one of the most densely populated areas in the world—almost as many bombs as the US dropped on all of Afghanistan during record-breaking years of its war there. Human Rights Watch has confirmed that the weapons used included phosphorous bombs, which set fire to bodies and buildings, creating flames that aren't extinguished on contact with water. This demonstrates clearly what Gallant means by "act accordingly": not targeting individual Hamas militants, as Israel claims, but unleashing deadly violence against Palestinians in Gaza "as such," in the language of the UN Genocide Convention. Israel has also intensified its 16-year siege of Gaza—the longest in modern history, in clear violation of international humanitarian law—to a "complete siege," in Gallant's words. This turn of phrase that explicitly indexes a plan to bring the siege to its final destination of systematic destruction of Palestinians and Palestinian society in Gaza, by killing them, starving them, cutting off their water supplies, and bombing their hospitals.

It's not only Israel's leaders who are using such language. An interviewee on the pro-Netanyahu Channel 14 called for Israel to "turn Gaza to Dresden." Channel 12, Israel's most-watched news station, published a report about left-leaning Israelis calling to "dance on what used to be Gaza." Meanwhile, genocidal verbs—calls to "erase" and "flatten" Gaza—have become omnipresent on Israeli social media. In

Tel Aviv, a banner reading “Zero Gazans” was seen hanging from a bridge.

Indeed, Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza is quite explicit, open, and unashamed. Perpetrators of genocide usually do not express their intentions so clearly, though there are exceptions. In the early 20th century, for example, German colo-

onial occupiers perpetrated a genocide in response to an uprising by the Indigenous Herero and Nama populations in southwest Africa. In 1904, General Lothar von Trotha, the German military commander, issued an “extermination order,” justified by the rationale of a “race war.” By 1908, the German authorities had murdered 10,000 Nama,

and had achieved their stated goal of “destroying the Herero,” killing 65,000 Herero, 80% of the population. Gallant’s orders on October 9th were no less explicit. Israel’s goal is to destroy the Palestinians of Gaza. And those of us watching around the world are derelict in our responsibility to prevent them from doing so. □□□

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

The Gaza Strip: A Brief History

*Jackson Graham
Angus Holland
Matt Wade*

ATINY SCRAP OF LAND wedged between Israel, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea, the Gaza Strip has been a military and political flashpoint for much of its history.

In the past 100 years, the ancient city of Gaza and its surrounds have been ruled by the Ottoman Empire, Britain, Egypt and Israel. Home to 2 million Palestinians, many of them refugees, it’s one of the world’s most densely populated areas.

It is now self-governed by the Islamist militant group, Hamas — designated a terrorist organisation by several countries — which has launched a brutal attack on Israel in recent days.

How did today’s Gaza Strip come into being? And why has it been controversial?

The town of Gaza dates back to ancient times, controlled for a period by the Romans. Gaza’s port was once a busy trading hub, but the history of the modern enclave called the Gaza Strip dates back to 1947.

That was when the United Nations approved a plan to partition the region, then occupied by the British and known as Mandatory

Palestine (because the British had been granted a mandate by the League of Nations to administer it), into separate Jewish and Arab states, after World War II and the Holocaust.

Palestinian Arabs were allotted the town of Gaza and surrounding areas, along with a larger territory surrounding Jerusalem, part of which forms the West Bank today. The following year, when Britain ceded control of the region, the newly formed state of Israel accepted the UN’s boundaries but the Arabs did not.

On May 15, 1948, the day after Britain’s official departure, war broke out between Israel and Arab countries including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. The town of Gaza became strategically important to Egyptian forces as they moved north after their assault bogged down nearby, says Dr Ran Porat, an analyst on Israel and Middle Eastern Affairs at Monash University. “The Egyptian army had orders to conquer Israel through the coastline,” he says, but stopped north of Gaza, facing Israeli resistance. That left the Egyptian forces controlling a strip of land 40 kilometres long and between six and eight kilometres wide.

When Egypt and Israel agreed to cease hostilities and drew up an armistice agreement on February 24, 1949, the territory’s boundaries were formally drawn up into the region that people know today as the Gaza Strip, with the city of Gaza towards its northern border.

The first Arab-Israeli War displaced between 700,000 and 800,000 Palestinians, many of whom ended up in the Gaza Strip. “This is how the Gaza Strip, basically, was created,” says Dr Anas Iqtait, a lecturer at ANU’s Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies. “The war of 1948 resulted in pushing the Palestinians to these borders.”

Today, there are eight official refugee camps within Gaza accommodating more than 600,000 people. Some of the camps were set up to house Palestinians fleeing the first Arab-Israeli war. About 81 per cent of the population lives in poverty and the unemployment rate is nearly half, says the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, which provides services for refugees in Gaza. About 1 million people rely on daily food aid.

Gaza remained under Egyptian military rule until the Suez Crisis of 1956 when, once again, its geography proved significant. That was when Egypt, under president Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalised the Suez Canal Company, giving it the power to control the passage of vessels through the region.

In response, Israel, alongside

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paratroopers from France and Britain, attempted to wrest control of the canal back from Egypt, with the Gaza Strip a key target in its efforts to encircle Egyptian forces and to prevent subsequent retaliatory strikes.

“Nationalisation of the canal was very alarming to the European powers,” says the University of Melbourne’s Dr Simon Frankel Pratt. “So a kind of agreement or pact emerged between Great Britain, France and Israel. The United States disapproved significantly of this plan and prevented it coming to full fruition, but it did lead to a war.”

Israel subsequently occupied the Gaza Strip for several months before relinquishing it to Egypt, who remained in charge for the next decade.

By 1967, Israel, surrounded by hostile Arab states that potentially threatened its existence, had acquired a large and well-trained army. After a series of minor skirmishes with its neighbours, who appeared to be mobilising for full-scale war, on the morning of June 5, Israel struck first.

Within hours, it had wiped out most of the Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian air forces, leaving their ground troops vulnerable. Over the next five days, Israeli forces captured the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria and the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, with Arab casualties and equipment losses vastly outnumbering those of Israel. A ceasefire was agreed on June 10.

The Six Day War left more than 1 million Arab refugees under Israeli rule, strengthening support for the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. “Palestinians were becoming more and more aware they were going to have to do more of their liberating themselves, that they couldn’t rely on the Arab states,” says Ian

Parmeter, research scholar at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at ANU.

The region remained unstable: significant conflicts include the Yom Kippur war of 1973, when Egypt and Syria surprised Israeli forces, and the populist uprisings known as the intifadas of 1987 and 2000, when Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza staged a series of protests and riots against Israeli rule. “It was soon after the start of the First Intifada in 1987 that Hamas was formed in Gaza,” says Parmeter. “Hamas was an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ... and was formed in Gaza because there were strong connections at that stage between Gaza and Egypt.”

In the 1990s, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and Israel struck agreements in Washington, DC, and Egypt called the Oslo Accords, outlining a peace process that recognised Palestinians’ right to self-determination.

The PLO formally agreed to give up resistance through violent means as a method for establishing a Palestinian state or for liberation. The accords led in 1994 to the creation of the Palestinian National Authority.

Palestinian National Authority president Yasser Arafat died in 2004, a political figure whom historians now consider came closest to uniting the Palestinian cause. In 2005, Israel withdrew its military and settlers from the Gaza Strip for security and political reasons amid little prospect of wider peace negotiations. “It was labelled the ‘hornet’s nest’,” says Porat. “A hotbed of extremist ideologies because of poverty and a fundamentalist point of view.” Gaza remained dependent on Israel for its water, electricity and telecommunications, and Israel also controlled its air and maritime spaces.

In 2006, the militant

organisation, Hamas, defeated Fatah in a democratic election after a campaign that argued the Oslo Accords had failed. However, Hamas regarded some opponents as a continuing threat. “As a result, [Hamas] launched a pre-emptive campaign in the Gaza Strip in order to eliminate the Palestinian security forces who, according to Hamas, were disloyal to the government,” Iqtait says. “It resulted in the complete takeover of the Gaza Strip, both politically and in terms of security.”

Hamas and other militant groups have continued to clash with Israel in the years since, with sporadic rocket attacks emerging as a threat to Israeli citizens within range of the Gaza Strip. In 2021, militants fired more than 4000 projectiles into Israel over 11 days, killing 10 Israeli civilians and injuring more than 300 others. Retaliatory Israeli air strikes killed more than 200 Palestinian civilians.

The rocket threat led Israel to invest heavily in its “Iron Dome” defence system. It has also increasingly fortified the physical cordon around the Gaza Strip, including building underground barricades to prevent militants tunnelling underneath, which was nonetheless breached in the latest attacks. □□□

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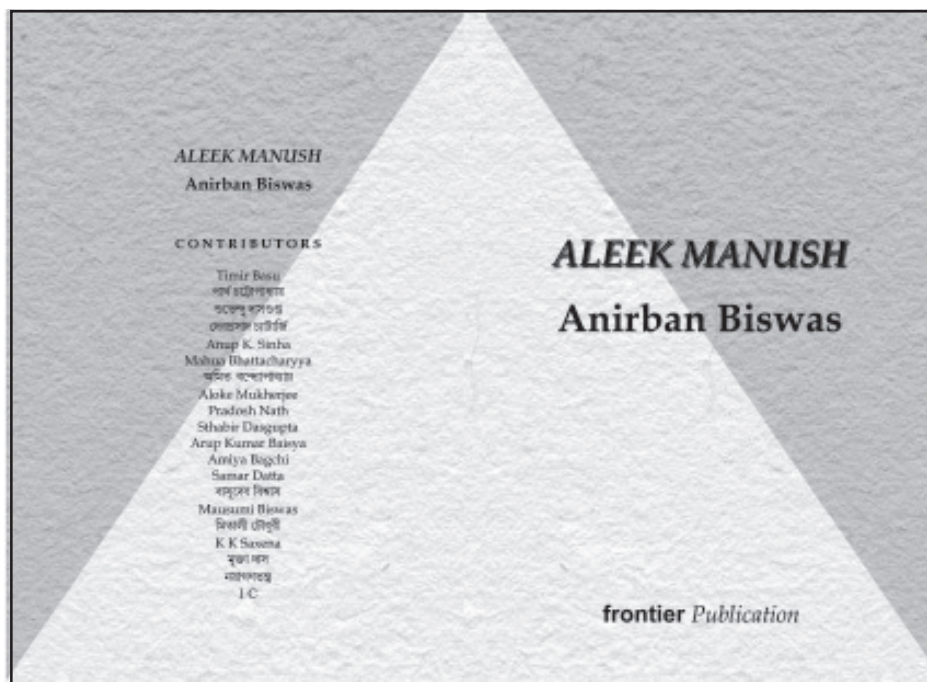
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