

frontier

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Whither 'INDIA'?

THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP) IS BASICALLY A NORTH India party with its original social base among banias—the trading community. Now it is the sole selling agent of Indian big business collaborating in myriad ways with foreign corporates, replacing the grand old party—Congress. After humiliating defeat in the recently held assembly elections in three crucial states in the Hindi heartland Congress party's former president Rahul Gandhi reiterated his resolve to continue ideological struggle against BJP. But he remained vague about the ideology he was supposed to preach. In a sense BJP sets the agenda while Congress and other opposition parties just react. This time they hardly raised the issue of BJP's dubious design of polarising voters on religious and parochial lines. Instead they competed with BJP to offer freebies to the poor and marginalised as if they are benevolent Landlords-Zamindars of yester years. In truth Congress was not averse to the idea of soft Hindutva to get back its Hindu constituency but the middle roader failed to gain much by way of its delicate balancing act.

After the disappointing election results which many see as the dress rehearsal for the 2024 general election the fate of INDIA—Indian Developmental Inclusive Alliance—hangs in the balance as some regional members of INDIA look sceptical about Congress party's behaviour and they raise the Gandhi party's big brotherly attitudes towards them. The Congress refused to accommodate the Samajwadi Party [SP], a major partner in INDIA, in Madhya Pradesh assembly elections and paid the price heavily, notwithstanding a strong anti-incumbency factor.

INDIA is at worst a heterogeneous amalgam having no unified action programme against social and economic injustice. There have been no meetings of the INDIA bloc in a long time. The Congress just avoided any meeting hoping to have better bargaining power after the election results were out. But much to the dismay of their top leadership everything went wrong for the Congress. The only meeting so far of the Coordination Committee of the INDIA was held in New Delhi on September 13, where the leaders agreed upon holding joint meetings in poll-bound states, the first being in Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh. Ironically enough, the Bhopal meeting was not held after MP state leadership shot down the idea.

It is unlikely that they will learn any lesson from the set-back. No party wants to cede an inch of the fiefdom it manages. Congress party's plan is to

somehow maintain the unity culture in INDIA without losing the claim of primeministership in future. BJP now controls 12 state governments, facing virtually no effective opposition. Many think they could sail through easily in 2024 as the opposition unity is still a mirage despite what they routinely say about united fight against BJP and its mascot—Narendra Modi. Poster boy sells because of poor imitation by Congress party's Prime Ministerial face—Rahul Gandhi. The formation of INDIA doesn't mean regional sa-traps, particularly the casteist parties in the north, will oblige Congress by

giving it extra space to manoeuvre and play the role of a boss.

Poll experts are busy in focusing losses and gains in percentage points of vote sharing and factors that influenced the swing in favour of Modi. India's major media houses have been tirelessly portraying Modi as the saviour of falling Indian economy ever since his ascent to power in 2014. What is more they would like to project Modi as the only Indian politician who matters in global politics, particularly after the much publicised G20 exercises. TV channels even go to Pakistan

and ask Pakistanis, young and old, about Modi's success as an international statesman. Thus Modi's election campaign has a wider reach.

'INDIA' leaders just casually talk about unemployment, vanishing jobs, discrimination against the weaker sections, plight of migrants and all that without showing any inclination to organise masses in their millions on the burning issues affecting the lives and livelihoods of ordinary people. In the end all their aggrieved voices end up in demanding more doles from the Centre. □□□

05-12-2023

COMMENT

Oil Barons Run the Show

COP28 STARTED ON DECEMBER 1. That's this year's big international climate conference, the 28th in the series since 1995. Its president is Sultan Ahmed al-Jaber of the host country, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). He happens to be the head of ADNOC, UAE's state-owned oil company, as well as of a state-owned renewable energy company.

Having an oil executive head the climate talks was a controversial choice—but isn't it just dropping the pretence? Fossil fuel companies, agribusiness, chemical, and plastic companies, and other capitalists and capitalist organisations tied into the most climate-destructive activities—like producing and burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and intensive industrial farming—have always been lobbying these climate conferences, mostly behind the scenes, and have always had sway with the national governments that are the decision-makers at these events.

COP means conference of the parties, and the parties are the governments that ratified the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) treaty. Decisions are made

by consensus, giving veto power to the major producers and users of coal, oil, and natural gas, like the U.S., China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. That is why fossil fuels were never even mentioned in the texts adopted by these conferences until 2021, and even then it was weasel-worded in the Glasgow Climate Pact from COP26 as calling for “accelerating efforts toward the phase-down of unabated coal power and phase-out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies”.

“[W]hat was missing from the Glasgow pact, the Paris Agreement, the Kyoto Protocol, and in fact everything from the UN climate process was a complete, rapid elimination of fossil fuel production and use, and the global construction of the infrastructure and other conditions needed to make that feasible without turning numerous countries into sacrifice zones”.

So really what is new about admitting openly that the oil companies (private and state-owned) run the show? Why should one be surprised to learn that internal communications of the organisers of the

climate conference were shared with ADNOC? How else was ADNOC supposed to make all the important decisions? It's no accident that UAE would use the climate meetings before and during the conference to make business deals for their oil company?

The reality is that the fossil fuel companies, and the capitalists who run them and benefit from them, and the governments and politicians that kowtow to them, are the enemy of humanity here. They are the ones who pushed the denial of climate change, who pushed delay after delay in combating it or even recognising it as a crisis, and who are even now obstructing action. With every passing year of minimal action, the built-in inertia toward catastrophe grows, and the magnitude of efforts required to turn around the situation grows. The suffering caused now and in the future by the climate crisis grows, and the sacrifices needed (which are, however, distorted and exaggerated by Big Oil and its ideologues) also grow.

There are two worlds of rulers and ruled in every country, and these forces are part of the class war against most people. The whole idea of “working with” these “experts” is essentially waving a flag of surren-

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der. The fact is that, despite the heating and destruction that is baked in from emissions already made, it is still not too late to make a huge difference, to pull away from total catastrophe.

Fossil fuel companies are the enemy of humanity. What is needed is to defeat them, not to beg them to do the right thing but to remove their power. □□□

03-12-2023
[Contributed]

NOTE

Babri Mosque: 31 Years Later

Shamsul Islam writes:

THE RSS-BJP GOVERNMENT of India led by a seasoned RSS whole-timer, Narendra Modi has miserably failed in providing basic amenities, employment, education, security and peace to 138 crore of Indians (out of which approximately 80% are Hindus) but on August 5, 2020, he had a joyous news to share with the people of the country. While laying the foundation of Ram Temple at Ayodhya on August 5, 2020, with the get-up of a prosperous Hindu sage, Prime Minister declared that wait of Hindus of the world for centuries was over as Lord Ram's birthplace was finally liberated from numerous attempts to destroy it. According to him India with his laying down the foundation of the Temple was writing a "glorious chapter" and declared that "Today, the Ram Janmabhoomi [birth-place] has become free from the centuries-old chain of destruction and resurrection".

According to Modi's narrative, borrowed from the RSS shakhas, Ayodhya represented a continuous war between Hindus and Muslims over the Ram Temple for almost last five centuries.

While boasting of victory over the adversary (Muslims) he did not bother to look at the epic work of poetry in Avadhi language penned by Goswami Tulsidas, namely, RAMCHARITMANAS. This was the work which mesmerised India with the story of Lord Ram and the latter

became house-hold deity of every Hindu home, specially, in North India. He penned his above mentioned work during 1575-76. According to the Hindutva version Ram birth-place temple was destroyed during 1538-1539. Thus RAMCHARITMANAS written almost 37 years after the so called destruction of Ram birth-place temple should have mentioned this destruction. But it did not.

Are Hindutva zealots trying to say that the greatest story-teller and worshipper of Ram and his Court (Darbar), Tulsidas did not speak truth in his historic work? Is not it an attempt to question the credibility of Goswami Tulsidas? Are the Hindutva zealots trying to say that Goswami Tulsidas kept mum on the issue of the destruction of a temple at Ram's birth-place due to some ulterior motives?

PM by claiming that the Ram Janmabhoomi [birth-place] "has become free from the centuries-old chain of destruction and resurrection" was openly contradicting the Supreme Court judgment on Ayodhya delivered on November 9, 2019 that Babri Mosque was not built after demolishing any temple, the appearance of idol of Ram Lalla on the intervening night of 22/23 December 1949 was illegal and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 was an "egregious violation of the rule of law". The same judgment under-

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lined the fact that "Muslims have been wrongly deprived of a mosque which had been constructed well over 450 years ago".

It is a different matter that despite all these findings the highest court of justice of India allowed construction of Ram Temple at the site of Babri Mosque. The more shameless was allowing Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a pocket organisation of RSS which demolished the Mosque on December 6, 1992 to build the Temple!

The demolition of Babri Mosque and building of a grand Ram Temple at Ayodhya has been justified by the Hindutva flag-bearers claiming that justice was being done to the wrongs of history. However, the Indian past looked through the Hindu-Muslim binary has its serious limitations. One major problem is that despite India being a five-thousand-year-old civilisation but it is only the period of approximately 700-800 years in which people with the Muslim names ruled/attacked India is under scrutiny. □□□

 THEY REMOVED THE MOUNTAIN

Back from the Silkyara Tunnel

Atanu Chakravarty

HUMAN LABOUR MATTERS; it cannot be replaced. The Guardian commented, "In the end it was a triumph of human labour over machinery as the specialist rat-hole mining experts managed to manually breakthrough the final 12 metres of rubble using only hand drills and pulleys".

At the end of the traumatic ordeal, these 14 men are the real unsung heroes, the faceless & nameless workers, the forgotten citizens of the country, the unorganised workers, engaged in the most life-threatening job with a paltry sum of wages, sans all other social security benefits.

When the India Today interviewer asked Munna Quereshi, the first rat-hole miner who burrowed, removed the last obstacle, reached and greeted the trapped workers inside the collapsed tunnel and initiated the rescue operation, what message he wants to disseminate to the nation. With tears in his eyes, choked voice and emotionally moved, continuously wiping his tears during the entire interview, he appealed to the Prime Minister that all the workers in this country are highly ill-paid, the owners, the contractors don't pay their legitimate due wages on time, they are often deceived by the contractors and agents. He passionately asked the Prime Minister to enhance their wages, to look into their trials and tribulations. When asked, why they have opted for such a hazardous job, they said 'hunger, when pangs of hunger force their children to cry, the choice between life and death vanishes'. They have no other option; they work only to satisfy the basic needs of their families.

When the interviewer asked, how

he will narrate the entire experience to his children, he promptly said, he won't. He doesn't want to depict this harrowing tale to those tender hearts, nor does he want his children to choose this hazardous profession.

Incidentally, many of these miners are from riot-torn north east Delhi.

The lesson of Joshimath has not been learnt. Or to say precisely, the powers in the corridors have refused to learn the lessons from the Joshimath tragedy.

An idea was mooted to transform Uttarakhand into Urja Pradesh (India's energy hub) by constructing a chain of hydel power plants, blended with religiosity and linking the four key Hindu pilgrimage centres in the Himalayas --- Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri --- with all weather faster road and rail connectivity. Coupled with the road connectivity project there is also a 372 km- long Char Dham Railway project with an estimated cost of Rs 72,000 crore, and it included construction of dozens of tunnels.

Geologists consider the Himalayas as fragile and relatively young mountain range stretched along a seismically active zone. Ashim Sattar, a renowned glaciologist, formerly at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, said, civil construction projects there demand not just Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), but what he called 'multi-hazard assessment'. A landslide susceptibility Study by scientists from Roorkee and the University of Potsdam, Germany, along the 250 km highway from Rishikesh to Joshimath near Badrinath during September and

October 2022 had noted 309 landslides or about one landslide every km!

But the tourist lobby prevailed over the safety norms.

Silkyara-Barkot tunnel was a part of the Char Dham project, which was cleared by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018. Though the timeline for completion was 2022, it is now on extension. The National Highway & Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd, a fully owned company of the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways awarded the tunnel construction contract to the Vishakhapatnam-headquartered group Navayuga Engineering Co Ltd which had no previous experience to encounter an emergency like the Silkyara tunnel collapse situation. All the approximate 800 migrant workers engaged for this project were not registered by the State Labour Department. Nor did they enjoy any form of insurance by the employer. The workers were forced to work even on November 12, National Holiday for Diwali, the fateful day. This company was responsible for the death of 20 labourers in August this year in an accident in Nagpur-Mumbai Samridhi expressway and a case of culpable homicide has been registered against the company. Registrar of Companies officials carried a site inspection at Banjara and Jubilee Hills and found 47 companies belonging to the Navayuga group at the same address. This group has more than one hundred firms, retired IAS/IPS officers, are occupying prized position in their boards.

A mandatory provision for an escape passage was included while sanctioning the Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel project by CCEA which was totally flouted. All the norms were brazenly violated at every stage

of construction. On December 21, 2018, seven workers literally perished in a landslide at Rudraprayag - Gaurikund stretch of an under construction road. In July 2020, three children in Kheda village of Narendranagar block of Tehri were crushed to death while they were sleeping when the retaining wall of the highway collapsed on their house. On 20 July, 2022, two labourers lost their lives and six others sustained critical injuries when an under construction bridge collapsed in Rudraprayag district. The list is quite long.

The central government never heeded to the warnings issued by the experts, environmentalists, courts. To grab the approval of the apex court, the government clothed the project with national security attire, increased mobility of defence forces in support of Char Dham project. To avoid environmental compliance for projects exceeding 100 km, the close to 900 km Char Dham project has been presented as a cluster of 53 separate projects. The Supreme Court (SC) flagged green signal only on

conditions of mandatory compliance with necessary environmental safeguards.

This paradigm of 'development' has only invited unmitigated disaster, death and destruction wrecking havoc in this Himalayan state. Eminent environmentalist Ravi Chopra, who was at the helm of expert panel that examined the Char Dham project, resigned to register his protest against the criminal apathy to heed the environmental issue.

The tunnel collapsed on Deepavali, the day of festival of light, extinguishing all the hopes, smiles, of all the families of 41 migrant construction workers' families, immersing them into the deep waters of unbearable uncertainty. It was a test of resolve, courage and perseverance for over 400 hours the entire country waited with fingers crossed.

At last, the light was illuminated at the end of the tunnel by those workers whose hitherto all the rights achieved through long protracted struggle, are now in jeopardy. The four labour codes have hammered

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death nail on all the existing labour rights.

Symbolically, the light was lit at the other end of the dark tunnel by those undaunted, faceless workers, on 28 November, the day when millions of workers, and peasants were protesting against the notorious labour codes, against snatching of all the democratic rights only to appease the crony corporates of the country. □□□

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STORIES FROM THE MARGINAL LAND

Days and Nights of 'Kalitala'

Sumedha Dey

THE RIVER NEXT TO MY rented room in one of those run-down lodges of the Sundarbans ran violently as I started to write down my daily notes to keep me reminded of day-to-day activities in my later years. I noticed that a full moon day seemed to make the river appear to be the most ferocious. It is referred to as "Kurekhali Nodi" by the locals. The year 2022, upon which this article is based, had a late monsoon season. To be more specific, pretty late. The months of June and July were dry. The island did not receive its allot-

ted amount of rainfall until October 2022. Electric supply is cut off during the rain. In this region of Indian map, there is no chance of having electricity while it rains. However, as they have only had the good fortune to benefit from power for the past ten years, the locals in the area aren't very bothered by this. Days go by when it rains a lot, and there is little chance that the power will be restored any time soon. For nearly six months, I was situated in a village in the 'Hingaljan' block of North 24- Parganas, West Bengal. The settlement is located on the

very porous Indo-Bangladesh border of the Sundarbans, which allows for illegal infiltration, human trafficking, gold smuggling, illegal trade in animals, the spread of counterfeit currency, and the trade in drugs.

I relocated there for a specific reason. I was sitting back home looking for a job and ended up getting one in the Sundarbans. My primary duty at an NGO school was to instruct local kids in the subject of "English." I went to this risky place with two bags—one with as many books as I could fit into it, the other with my clothes—but more than anything else, this seclusion from the rest of the world was what my soul was desperately seeking. I was suffocated in the city and with the lifestyle which made me take the

utmost risk to accept the job offer on two days' notice literally. I packed my bags and reached Sundarbans, usually famous throughout the world for mangroves and for being home to endangered Royal-Bengal tigers.

My day would start early unlike what it usually is in the city. I would spend the whole day in a mud built school with the local kids, teaching them and later cycle back to my quarter in the afternoon. The rest of the afternoon passed away in resting and as the dusk pulled in, I would sit alone on the lean bench like structure made with the pillars of light post, beside the river with a cup of coffee and watch the local folks rowing back home, listening to the radio for weather reports while the women would drive the domestic animals like goats, ducks, hens, cows back to their shelters. There isn't another place or another environment which heals me more than the scenic beauty of the village called 'Kalitala'. Post sundown, there's enough fear of the big cats crawling in the village so I would get inside my room and lock myself up from inside. The rest of the night would pass by listening to my offline-saved playlist and watch huge sized rats tip toeing in through different holes in the room and running away with my chapatis most of the night. As the network was weak, there was not much scope to listen to music online. On one such night, while listening to the same old music saved in my playlist, I thought to myself if I could do something to make the world know about the serene land I am getting an opportunity to live in, and the idea of writing hit me right away. Anybody who has read till here must have understood that this piece of writing is more like a personal account of my stay in a region primarily and majorly resided by the subalterns as well as the migrated citizens from the other part of the border thus making the

place indifferent from the rest of Bengal. The life and lifestyle of the local people of this obscure village named 'Kalitala' under Kalitala Gram Panchayat, is not easy to understand, more because there is constant movement, in and out of this village, sometimes within the country while on other occasions cross border movements which in return makes it difficult to stick to a certain kind of culture specific to this area however through this write up, I intend to try my best to draw a picture of the gray clouds that surrounds the sunny side of the region on recent times but I also want to remain clear that I am no less than an outsider to the culture and my perspective is not the absolute representation of the concerns I am going to write about.

As per my observation, the village called 'Kalitala' is mostly resided by fishermen and farmer families who either row or swim through the rivers to reach the dense forest of the Sundarbans frequently to collect forest products and catch fish and crabs. There are very few families that have members in other job profiles. Given the culture I was born and brought up in, this place and its lifestyle seem extraordinarily strange and it bothered me how unaware I am of a culture that is very much a part of the same state I am part of. It is my opinion though that this particular village along the Indo-Bangladesh border lags far behind concerning development. Owning a smart-phone is the only kind of showcased status of development for most of the people of this region which to me seems more of a curse than a boon! Though I believe cultural relativism holds community as a basic social unit which appropriates an individual's rights while universalism fails to reflect the real concerns of subalterns which creates a huge gap

in the process of overall development of a society however, I cannot deny, practising the idea of accepting cultural relativism amongst our countrymen seems like a challenge as a result of the colonial hangover. Trying to accomplish our own needs is what we are taught generally. This whole practice is damaging. We often hear people talk about substantial living however, if we consider the real-life scenario, that statement is majorly a hoax!

Anyway, given the geographical location of Kalitala village, it is not hard to understand that the level of migration, both across the border as well as within the country is a natural scene here which makes women of this locality vulnerable beyond explanation. They are prone to various women-centric violence and the vilest part is, given their low rate of literacy, they fail to understand the consequences. Most girls in the age group of 14-16 years elope with their romantic interest (who could be of any age group) in longing of settling down in a better atmosphere in the cities. They as generational pattern, grow up with the shallow idea that once they find a romantic partner, they would not have to perform all the household work they are expected to perform in their parental home and can relax for most of the day. I closely observed for months how the girls as well as women of this locality are easily flattered by the idea of fashion and other material things which makes it easy for any man or woman connected with the trafficking trade to lure them and send them to cities, different states, or other countries for illegal purposes. Besides, the ones who are reported to settle down in the locality after marrying at an early age show a tendency to run away with other men after a few years leaving their child/children from the first marriage with the in-laws.

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As there is not much opportunity here to generate income apart from fishing or collecting forest products or farming their lands- the local people, irrespective of their gender, migrate to other states in hope of earning a better wage daily. While there are ample examples of women running away with other men, there are also numerous cases of record where the women who stay back with their children at home while their men are away for work get involved in affairs with other men of the locality or even outsiders who have come here for professional purposes. From what I observed, it seemed to me that marriage is no barrier to push anyone choose monogamy if that is not what their choice is. However, on an individual level, it becomes traumatising for some to accept this custom. I assume they are monogamous in nature. The local Panchayat passes anodyne verdicts to such cases stating that since the woman who ran away with other man/men did not file a divorce, it is in the onus of the legal husband to take her back and continue living under the same roof as husband and wife not caring of her past behaviours. Whatever the effect, the whole pattern of women practising their choice so openly interested me and it is what started digging deep and patterns I observed is what I am trying to document.

Though this might sound liberating in the history of sexuality and the whole idea of monogamy came into existence only during and after the renaissance however in my opinion, as per the observed condition of the studied region, a woman practising polygamy post-marriage certainly takes a toll on the mental health of the husband and is very damaging to the next generation (children) while placed as an example. Given the fact, the interaction of gender with other power structures such as patri-

archy is still awaiting far more exploration, I will refrain from drawing a generalised conclusion and put my limited thoughts to work, but as I am also getting an opportunity to interact with the children whose parent/parents are involved in such practices, I can confirm that the children here suffer from major psychological problems like abandonment issues and trust issues when their mother runs away leaving them alone while the husbands along with other men in the families and amongst friend circle are developing commitment phobias(the idea was drawn from counselling session). This is not it, they face massive harassment in society and fall prey to mockery in their peer group which in turn makes the school-going children quit school at an early age and get engaged in alcohol consumption or betting games which is increasing due to the availability of smartphones. There are boys aged as young as nine years who are spotted in the locality in an intoxicated state.

Not many days ago, the woman who cook food for me narrated an incident where a local boy approached her to allow five young girls aged between fifteen years to twenty-five years and a young boy of around sixteen years, to wait at her home which is near the river, for half -an- hour. Given their innocent faces she allowed them to wait at her place but to her dismay, the boy never returned until 2 a.m. Bearing in mind grave situations, she underwent looking for the identity proofs of the girls and the boys and from inquiring about them she found out they were all citizens of Bangladesh who got trafficked the night before via the river and were on the verge of getting sold to clients. She added she did send all of them back to Bangladesh using her local connections however that still does not

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solve the problem in my understanding. It indicates that the locals are quite aware of these incidents and they have well-knitted connections to get involved in the trade if they chose to make money. Since India shares a riverine border with Bangladesh on this side of the map, cross border trafficking is a casual crime here and this happens under the supervision of powerful local people using the local folks to perform the illegal works in return for money. Not just trafficking, the locals have also made me aware of unimaginable violations caused to women by the river pirates who dwell in the depth of dense jungle and loots the fishermen's boats from time to time. Apart from bashing and thrashing the men until they fall half dead, these pirates sexually violate the women who accompany their men. It might sound like the plot of a thriller movie, however during my stay, I have heard of two incidents of the pirate attack in the same locality where I was situated.

Initially, it seemed to me that this place is a perfect example of matriarchy, however as days passed, from self-inquiry and self-introspection, I could slowly find out the in-depth explanation of the gender-based issues prevailing in this area. The girls here are admitted to schools

but due to their tendency of running away (to escape the drudgery of doing all household chores besides maintaining educational pressure), most of them get married before eighteen years of age and the matter is not strongly supervised by the respective government officials because if it was looked after, the practice would not be continued to date. In reality, the literacy rate of women remains low though there are many schemes invented by the state government to bring the females to school. The patriarchal violence (not necessarily practised by male only), treating women as goods and not humans remain intact in this society which could also be a reason for the women to run away with other men, risking their, as well as their children, lives in the loop making the next generation commitment-phobic as well as vulnerable and insecure from their traumatic experiences. Additionally, I think a man who is a husband and a father, when elopes with another woman has the same impact on the family members, particularly on his wife and child (ren), but because the practice is so widespread in our society, the pain felt by the wife and the children in such cases is downplayed.

If a child's mental health is to be considered, actions like eloping of either parent surely hold a similar effect of adversity on the child's mind; however our society imposes all the responsibility on a woman's shoulder and tries to enable a man to live a considerably stress-free life. The dream of living in an egalitarian society seems like an unachievable goal, therefore! That a woman migrant labour eloping with another man makes news in this area however a man doing the same act of infidelity gets the benefit of doubt. The older women from this region randomly ask younger women if they

could give birth to a son yet. In case one did not, the elder woman immediately passes misogynist comments which certainly affects the younger one but due to lack of liberating ideas, such patriarchal behaviours are not questioned. If giving birth to a son still makes a woman superior to a woman who has given birth to one or many women, I am afraid I need write more about the social condition of the region in more details and try to explain why only women who elope with other men makes headlines in every second interaction of the local people. The male supremacy is such that it is taken for granted that males cannot be wrong, even if they are totally dehumanised and turned out an oppressor in the process. Now, having said that I don't think a woman practising infidelity is okay.

This is my preliminary research of the location and through this write-up, I intend to bring to the notice of relevant people that even in the 21st century, parts of our country remain so unbelievably prone to crimes and social imbalance which surely adds up to the misery of our nation when it comes to overall development status. There is a massive need to help these people fix their day-to-day problems while also guiding the women to choose to live a life of dignity.

I would like to conclude my writing by stating that, the government should plan strategies and develop frameworks best fitted to eliminate gender discrimination and take initiatives to work on the mental health of the people of all age groups in all parts of the state as well as in the country, stressing more on the rural belts and critical areas adjacent to borders. □□□

Note:

1. I am grateful to the anonymous local women and the men for providing insightful comments regarding their day-to-day life struggles.

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THE ARCHITECT OF CARPET BOMBINGS

What Kissinger Wrought

Dylan Matthews

ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST important statesmen gave the world a series of diplomatic breakthroughs, and hundreds of thousands of bodies. Henry Kissinger, the former secretary of state who crafted foreign policy for Presidents Nixon and Ford, with an eye toward supporting friendly dictatorships that could help the US balance Soviet power, and helped direct a massive bombing campaign killing tens of thousands of Cambodians and Vietnamese, has died. He was 100. His carpet bombing campaigns in Cambodia caused untold suffering and misery for hundreds of thousands of people. Yet, instead of being considered a war criminal, he is remembered as a Nobel laureate.

As Richard Nixon's national security adviser in 1971, Kissinger was the prime mover behind the US's choice to quietly back West Pakistan in its campaign against the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), which would claim hundreds of thousands of lives.

After Bengali Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won the country's elections on a platform of autonomy for the East, Pakistan's military ruler Gen Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan launched a vicious crackdown that included genocide against Bengali Hindus and Muslims seen as sympathetic to India. Kissinger did not urge Yahya to respect the election results, or complain about the use of US weapons against civilians, or threaten to pull aid to Pakistan.

Instead, he and Nixon conspired to illegally transfer arms to Pakistan, once India entered the war in defence of East Pakistan in December 1971. Kissinger recalled Archer

Blood, the top US diplomat in East Pakistan who criticised US backing of Pakistan's mass slaughter, and sent him off to a personnel in Washington, DC, effectively ending his career as punishment for caring about civilian lives. Throughout the conflict, Kissinger urged inaction, warning internal critics of US policy that even the slightest pressure on its allies in Pakistan would backfire.

Midway through the slaughter, the CIA privately estimated that 200,000 had been killed. A later study using world health survey statistics puts the total at 269,000 violent war deaths. Some 10 million Bangladeshis were forced into India as refugees, and over 200,000 Bangladeshi women were raped as part of an organised campaign of intimidation and terror.

Nixon and Kissinger faced huge pressure to act from Democrats in Congress (notably Sen Ted Kennedy), from the press, from advocacy initiatives like George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh, from the State Department, and from some of Kissinger's own aides. They still did nothing, a favour that did not go unnoticed by Yahya. "Yahya was effusive in his gratitude to Nixon," Bass writes. "In a warm letter, he sympathised about the American public pressure that Nixon was withstanding, and insisted that reports of atrocities were Indian-inspired exaggerations."

Apologists for Kissinger's support of genocide—like the Bush administration's ambassador to India Robert Blackwill—argue that standing idly by was necessary because Pakistan helped America's opening to China. But America's

support for Pakistan preceded its use as a secret back channel to China, and was not the only such channel that existed.

As Ford's national security adviser and secretary of state in 1975, Kissinger gave Indonesian dictator Suharto an explicit green light to invade East Timor, an action which resulted in the deaths of at least 100,000 civilians.

East Timor, which shares the island of Timor with Indonesia, was a Portuguese colony when Portugal's right-wing Estado Novo dictatorship collapsed. That caused instability and a brief civil war on the island, won by the leftist party Fretilin, which then unilaterally declared independence. Indonesia shortly thereafter decided to invade and annex the territory. The US, which had partnered with Suharto a decade earlier when he overthrew a president viewed as too communist-sympathetic, was willing to play along to stabilise the region and assist a loyal ally.

The Indonesian military at the time was heavily supplied by the United States through Military Assistance Programme (MAP) authorisations. University of Connecticut historian Brad Simpson, in conjunction with the National Security Archive at George Washington University,

For Frontier Contact

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filed FOIA requests for relevant documents around the East Timor invasion, and found a telegram from American diplomats in Jakarta to DC reporting that roughly 90 percent of the weapons Indonesia used to take East Timor came from the United States.

“As the Vietnam War wound to a close, the Ford Administration possessed an unusual degree of influence over Suharto, who remained committed to military modernisation using US equipment, anxious to forge closer ties to Washington, and concerned about international opinion. There is no evidence, however, that the Ford Administration even considered exerting any pressure on Indonesia not to invade.”

Many of Kissinger’s and the Nixon and Ford administrations’ worst offenses were conducted through brutal allies, like Suharto and Yahya. But one notable mass casualty event was carried out on their direct orders: the mass bombing of Cambodia.

Bombing missions in Cambodia were not an invention of the Nixon administration. The US was dropping bombs on the country during Lyndon B Johnson’s tenure commanding the war as well. “From 1965 to 1968, 2,565 sorties took place over Cambodia, with 214 tons of bombs dropped,” historians Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan write in their groundbreaking article on the Cambodian air war. “These early strikes were likely designed to support the nearly two thousand secret

ground incursions conducted by the CIA and US Special Forces during that period.”

But the air war under Johnson and the air war under Nixon were of completely different scales. Johnson dropped 214 tons of bombs on the country; the total payload dropped on Cambodia from 1969 to 1973 was on the order of 500,000 tons.

For the first two years of the Nixon bombing effort, Owen and Kiernan explain, the campaign was mostly limited to the Vietnamese border area, albeit with much larger payloads than under Johnson. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese had substantial presences in the area, and Nixon and Kissinger viewed them as a legitimate military target despite a lack of congressional authorisation.

Then the effort truly ramped up in December 1970 on direct orders from Nixon, who told then-National Security Adviser Kissinger he wanted more bombing, deeper into the country, with “no limitation on mileage and ... no limitation on budget.” Kissinger dutifully passed along the order, telling Gen Alexander Haig, “He wants a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. He doesn’t want to hear anything. It’s an order, it’s to be done. Anything that flies, on anything that moves. You got that?”

In humanitarian terms, these bombings were a disaster. Kiernan’s preferred estimate is that Nixon and Kissinger’s policy killed between 50,000 and 150,000 civilians directly through the bombings, with the high-end figure more likely. Other estimates run even higher, up to 300,000 or so.

Kissinger’s record influencing Vietnam policy began even before he joined the Nixon administration. While serving as an adviser to the Johnson-Hubert Humphrey administration in the Paris Peace Talks of 1968, Kissinger fed confidential in-

formation from the proceedings to Nixon’s campaign, which in turn passed the intelligence along to the South Vietnamese government. This contributed to the scuttling of the talks, and the continuation of the war for seven more years.

As Nixon biographer John A Farrell has recounted, the plot centered on Anna Chennault, a Republican fundraiser and ardent anti-communist. Chennault met with Nixon, his campaign manager John Mitchell, and South Vietnamese ambassador to the US Bui Diem in 1968, where they arranged for Chennault to work as a conduit between the campaign and South Vietnam. Kissinger was aware of this connection, and that conversations with Mitchell could get back to South Vietnam.

In “late September, and again in early October 1968,” Kissinger (still working for LBJ at this point) leaked to Mitchell that there was “a better than even chance” that the Johnson administration would halt air strikes on North Vietnam in hopes of reaching a peace deal. The Soviet leadership, which as the North’s military and financial backer had deep influence over its government, had informed Johnson that a halt to bombings would “contribute to a breakthrough.”

“On October 31, Johnson announced his bombing halt,” Farrell writes, “But South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu dragged his feet, announcing his reluctance to join in peace talks. ... Without Thieu’s support, the bombing halt looked like a cheap political trick, employed to get Humphrey elected.”

Chennault, it turned out, had passed along Kissinger’s intelligence to the South Vietnamese, convincing them to hold out for a better deal under Nixon rather than come to the table under Johnson (and his preferred successor Humphrey).

The Paris talks would drag on for

For **Frontier Contact**

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four more years before ending on January 27, 1973, with a deal that provided for the removal of all US troops; Kissinger shared a Nobel Peace Prize for finalising talks he had sabotaged over four years and at least 21,126 American combat deaths earlier (not to mention the

untold tens of thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao deaths that took place in those years). Within months, though, North and South Vietnam began fighting again, and two years after the accords North Vietnam invaded and annexed the South.

Kissinger reportedly tried to return the Nobel Peace Prize he won for negotiating the treaty when Saigon fell in 1975; his North Vietnamese counterpart, Lê Ð?c Th?, refused the prize in the first place, as no peace had been won. □□□

[Source: Vox]

POINT OF VIEW

Constitution Day and Ambedkar

I Mallikarjuna Sharma

THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA was fully formulated and finalised after prolonged debates in the Constituent Assembly for years, and much preparatory work preceding that, by the end of November 1949 and ultimately adopted by the Constituent Assembly on 26 November 1949 and came into force two months later—from 26 January 1950, which date is celebrated as the Republic Day by all Indians. However, the actual date of adoption—26 November 1949—seems to have gone without official recognition till recently; however, it was being celebrated as Law Day by the legal fraternity.

It is notable that in one such celebration of Law Day at the Supreme Court lawns on 26 November 2011 Hon'ble Shri S H Kapadia, [the then] Chief Justice of India, had briefly stated:

“We have assembled today to celebrate the anniversary of a momentous event, the anniversary of the adoption of our Constitution, the day on which our founding fathers subscribed to this document by signing the same and thereby unfolding the philosophy—social, economic and political, for the governance of free India. We have every reason to be proud of and to celebrate that unique occasion. We take this opportunity to thank the founding fathers, for this document,

who spent a good deal of their time and energy in giving shape to this *suprema lex* which was to guide the future destination of the country. We are ever grateful to them.” [He concluded...]-“India is an aspirational democracy. It is the shared idea of India to emerge from Society which has individuals of diverse ideologies, cultures and religious denominations. We must, therefore, identify common strands that will bind us, as one nation and one people. Unless this is done, we cannot build a modern and strong India. // In the hierarchy of values, judicial integrity is above judicial independence. Judicial accountability needs to be balanced with judicial independence. I would request the Bar as well as eminent jurists to deliberate upon constitutional concepts such as Judicial Independence and Judicial Accountability. We, the Judges, do not mind a studied fair criticism. However, as an advice to the Bar please do not dismantle an Institution without showing how to build a better one. // Please remember ‘When an Institution No Longer matters, we no longer matter’.”

However, the much awaited or much needed official recognition came only after the installation of a new non-Congress Government under Narendra Modi at the Centre in 2014. On 19 November 2015 a gazette notification declaring the

decision of the Government of India to celebrate 26 November of every year as “the CONSTITUTION DAY to promote constitutional values among citizens” has been issued by the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment of the Ministry Of Social Justice And Empowerment. The notification also mentioned about the invaluable services of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly, under the chairmanship of Dr B R Ambedkar, in drafting the Constitution of India and that the current year was also witnessing the 125th birth anniversary of Dr BR Ambedkar who had chaired the Constituent Assembly and played a pivotal role in the drafting of the Constitution of India.

For the benefit of the readers, the said Gazette notification is being reproduced here in full:

**MINISTRY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE
AND EMPOWERMENT**

*(Department of Social Justice and
Empowerment)*

NOTIFICATION

*New Delhi, the 19th November, 2015
F. No. 19022/11/2015-VI (E).—
Whereas the people of India, having
solemnly resolved to secure to all its
citizens Justice, Liberty, Equality and
to promote Fraternity among all,
adopted, enacted and gave to them-
selves the Constitution of India in
the Constituent Assembly on the
26th day of November, 1949;*

And whereas the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly, under the Chairmanship of Dr B R Ambedkar, provided its invaluable services in drafting the Constitution

of India and the nation is celebrating the One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Birth Anniversary of Dr B R Ambedkar in recognition of his contribution to building modern India;

Now, therefore, the Government of India has decided to celebrate the 26th day of the November of every year as the "CONSTITUTION DAY" to promote constitutional values among citizens.

B L MEENA, Jt. Secy.

Ever since, Indians are celebrating this day of 26 NOVEMBER as the Constitution Day. But there is a lacunae in the above notification and the present portrayal of the history/facts of the Constitution framing, with the adulation of Dr Ambedkar as the "Father of the Constitution", in the press and other media, as well as by almost all political parties including the various communist parties/groups in the country (mainly as vote bank politics).

First of all, this writer does not agree at all to the characterisation or terming of Dr Ambedkar as the "Father of the Indian Constitution" though his sterling services and struggles for the depressed classes and his achievement in drafting the second draft of the constitution and steering it through the prolonged debates in the Constituent Assembly must be recognised. It's difficult for this writer to assign to any person the status of 'Father of Indian Constitution' however eminent he may be. In the case of Ambedkar he was all along his life intensely pro-British, a loyalist to the core, never participated in the freedom struggle, and was always sparring with the Congress and Gandhi who were, in the main, leading the non-violent national movement in India then and had no affinity at all to the violent nationalist movement by several revolutionary groups. Moreover, he was a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council under the British Rule dur-

ing 1942-46 as a Labour Member, and that in a period when intense final agitations like the Quit India movement and then the Royal Indian Navy revolt etc were being waged /sponsored by Congress and other nationalist parties/groups. Earlier too in 1931 when he displayed some soft corner towards revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh in an editorial note written in his edited JANATA he merely termed them "victims", consciously refraining from calling them "martyrs". Also, he seems to have mis-portrayed the Bheema-Koregaon battle with the British by the Maharashtra Peshwa army as a victory of Mahars (a scheduled caste community in Maharashtra) against a casteist (Brahman-vadi) Peshwa regime whereas in fact that battle was indecisive in its result and also several Rajputs, Marathas etc too participated in it on the British side. Wikipedia informs that:

"The Battle of Koregaon was fought on 1 January 1818 between the British East India Company and the Peshwa faction of the Maratha Confederacy, at Koregaon Bhima. / / A 28,000-strong force led by Peshwa Bajji Rao II whilst on their way to attack the company-held Pune, were unexpectedly met by an 800-strong Company force that was on its way to reinforce the British troops in Pune. The Peshwa dispatched around 2,000 soldiers to attack the force which sought entrenchment in Koregaon. Led by Captain Francis Staunton, the Company troops defended their position for nearly 12 hours, before the Peshwa's troops ultimately withdrew, fearing the imminent arrival of a larger British force. // The battle was part of the Third Anglo Maratha war, a series of battles that culminated in the defeat of the Peshwa rule and subsequent rule of the British East India Company in nearly all of Western, Central and Southern

India. There is a "victory pillar" (obelisk) in Koregaon commemorating the battle." // "Out of the 834 Company troops, 275 were killed, wounded or missing. The dead included two officers — Assistant-Surgeon Wingate and Lieutenant Chisholm; Lieutenant Pattison later died of his wounds in Shirur. Among the infantrymen, 50 were killed and 105 wounded. Among the artillery, 12 were killed and 8 were wounded. The dead Company soldiers of Indian origin included 22 Mahars, 16 Marathas, 8 Rajputs, 2 Muslims, and 1-2 Jews. // According to the British estimates, around 500 to 600 of Peshwa's soldiers were killed or wounded in the battle."

"...the Dalit scholar Anand Teltumbde has argued that portraying the Battle of Bhima Koregaon as the battle of Mahars against their caste oppression in Peshwa rule is misleading. Teltumbde mentions that most of those died in the battle (27 out of 49) were not Mahar, and the Peshwa army actually retreated fearing the arrival of a larger British force. Thus, he considers painting of the battle as "Mahars' against the Peshwas' Brahmanic rule" to be misleading."

Further elderly freedom fighters of those days used to say that he showed an attitude of discrimination against Mangs (another scheduled caste community in Maharashtra) with more concern and favour towards Mahars (his own native community) in his activities. Also, Dr Ambedkar was not that popular among the people of Bombay or Maharashtra in those days and was

repeatedly registering electoral defeats and could not be elected to the Constituent Assembly even from Maharashtra regions. Ultimately it was from Bengal due to the help (sacrifice?) of Mr Jogendranath Mondal that he was elected to and found a place in the 389-member

Constituent Assembly of India. Then, one should also note that even after the framing of the Constitution was over and it was proclaimed and published on 26 November 1949, Dr Ambedkar continuously lost elections in Bombay province in the two general elections afterwards. And it is also said that Ambedkar could become the first Law Minister of India only due to the insistence of Gandhi who prevailed upon the reluctant Nehru to take him to that post. As for Ambedkar's own views and expressed opinions on the Constitution and his own role in the framing of the Constitution one can say those are not so charitable to his credit. In regard to the Constitution - "Ambedkar expressed his disapproval for the constitution in 1953 during a parliament session and said "People always keep on saying to me "Oh you are the maker of the constitution". My answer is "I was a hack. What I was asked to do, I did much against my will." Ambedkar added that, "I am quite prepared to say that I shall be the first person to burn it out. I do not want it. It does not suit anybody"."

Then, to his credit, he was quite humble in estimating his own role in the framing of the Constitution: "The

credit that is given to me does not really belong to me. It belongs partly to Sir B N Rau, the Constitutional Adviser to the Constituent Assembly who prepared a rough draft of the Constitution for the consideration of the Drafting Committee. A part of the credit must go to the members of the Drafting Committee who, as I have said, have sat for 141 days and without whose ingenuity of devise new formulae and capacity to tolerate and to accommodate different points of view, the task of framing the Constitution could not have come to so successful a conclusion. Much greater, share of the credit must go to Mr S N Mukherjee, the Chief Draftsman of the Constitution. His ability to put the most intricate proposals in the simplest and clearest legal form can rarely be equalled, nor his capacity for hard work. He has been an acquisition to the Assembly. Without his help, this Assembly would have taken many more years to finalise the Constitution. I must not omit to mention the members of the staff working under Mr Mukherjee. For, I know how hard they have worked and how long they have toiled sometimes even beyond midnight. I want to thank them all for their effort and their co-operation. (Cheers)."

For one thing his very popular surname AMBEDKAR (in his name Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar) was bestowed by his affectionate Brahmin teacher Krishnaji Keshav Ambedkar, who changed his surname from 'Ambadawekar' to his own surname 'Ambedkar' in school records. It's not known whether this lending of the surname, accepted by himself and become popular among the people of India, has been acknowledged with thanks to his teacher by Dr Ambedkar in any of his voluminous writings.

So, in this writer's opinion the above Gazette Notification as well as the later virtual 'deification' of Dr Ambedkar as the "Father of the Indian Constitution" are quite defective in these respects and the notification should have also mentioned the roles of other stalwarts preceding him in the framing of the Constitution—especially of the eminent scholarly statesman, Dr B N RAU who—if at all any one person can be said to have drafted the Constitution—can be said to be that singular personality. Dr B N Rau's sterling role in framing the first coherent draft of the Constitution for Independent (united) India must be recognised.

□□□

A CONTESTED QUESTION

Is Palestine Considered a State?

Clare Roth

THE QUESTION OF PALESTINIAN statehood has been disputed for decades—the current Israel-Hamas conflict has just brought it to the forefront again. Here are the basics.

Though Palestine is not officially considered a state, the Palestinian Authority has flown their official flag for decades. Palestinian statehood is currently disputed among scholars,

diplomats and individual nations. Here's what you should know.

There are two theories of statehood: The declarative theory and the constitutive theory.

Subscribers to the declarative theory say a state can be considered as such if it meets the definition of statehood declared in the 1933 Montevideo Convention, which says that in order to be considered a state,

a territory must have a permanent population, a defined territory, its own government and the capacity to enter relations with other states. The convention explains that the political existence of a state "is independent of recognition by the other states."

"Even before recognition the state has the right to defend its integrity and independence, to provide for its conservation and prosperity, and consequently to organize itself as it sees fit, to legislate upon its interests, administer its services, and to define the jurisdiction and competence of its courts," it says.

That leads to the second theory of statehood: constitutive theory. Unlike the Montevideo Convention, this theory says that a state can only be considered a state if the rest of the world recognises it as such. This theory is not codified in law: rather, it considers modern statehood a matter of both international law and diplomacy.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the US, an ally of Israel, has blocked a number of Palestinian bids for statehood.

Scholars have differing opinions on whether the Palestinian territories fit the legal definition of a state.

Some say they do, while others say they don't meet the requirements enshrined in the Montevideo Convention.

Some argue against the use of the Montevideo Convention in determining statehood altogether, saying the Palestinian territories' best hope of claiming statehood is through international recognition.

The majority of the 193 UN member states—139—recognize the Palestinian territories as a state.

A state's bid to join the United Nations must be approved by at least nine of the 15 members of the UN Security Council. If any of the five permanent members of the council veto the bid, the country cannot join. China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States make up those five. The Palestinian territories are not recognised by the US, France or the UK as a state.

These three nations have said they will not recognise Palestinian

statehood until the conflict with Israel is peacefully resolved. Nine of the 27 EU member states recognise Palestinian statehood. Almost all of the EU member states that recognise Palestinian statehood were once members of the Soviet-aligned Eastern bloc, and all recognised its statehood before joining the European Union.

Sweden, which recognised Palestinian statehood in 2014, is the only country to have done so as a member of the bloc.

Palestine is currently considered a nonmember observer state to the UN, which means it is welcomed to participate in sessions of the General Assembly and can maintain offices at the UN headquarters in New York.

Because of its nonmember observer status granted in 2012, it was given membership in the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2015, the only permanent international court that can prosecute individuals for war crimes.

In 2021, then-Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced that the ICC was opening an investigation into the situation in the Palestinian territories. Palestine's accession to the Rome Statute and ICC membership gave the ICC the legal capacity to investigate crimes committed by Palestinians or on Palestinian territory.

The probe, which Israel has condemned, is currently ongoing.

Germany, like the US and many of its EU counterparts, does not recognise Palestinian statehood. It does, however, support "the establishment of a future Palestinian state as part of a two state solution nego-

tiated between the parties to the conflict," according to the German Foreign Ministry.

As it does not recognise Palestine as a state, Germany uses the term "Palestinian territories" for the occupied West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza. When speaking with Palestinian representatives, it uses the term "Palestinian Authority."

Germany's position on Palestinian statehood has come up in the country's courts in cases that have to do with refugee status. In a November 2020 decision, a German court confirmed that "there is no Palestinian nationality" and no state of Palestine. The court ruled that the Palestinian refugees in question be considered "stateless."

Since Palestine isn't a UN member state, it cannot vote in UN General Assembly resolutions.

A state can have statehood but not be a UN member state. For example, Switzerland only joined the UN as a member state in 2002, while Liechtenstein didn't join until 1990 and San Marino until 1992. All were considered internationally recognised states before joining.

Palestine's nonmember observer status means it can observe UN proceedings but can't cast votes in the General Assembly. So, for example, Palestine couldn't vote in the recent failed resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict in the General Assembly. Nor could it vote on the resolution calling for a "humanitarian truce" in the conflict, which did pass. □□□

[Source: DW]

REVISITING A SHYAM BENEGAL FILM

Manthan (Churning) 1976

Sobhika Vasanthan

THE FIRST CROWD-FUNDED Indian film, *Manthan* [Churning] (1976), is a constant reminder of how powerful the might of collective action and community empowerment is in the face of adversity. The film, produced through an effort

involving over 500,000 farmers donating two rupees each, encapsulates the essence of grassroots movements and the transformative power of unity.

Directed by Shyam Benegal, the film paints a vivid picture of the struggles faced by farmers within the

exploitative framework of the milk industry while chronicling their journey toward establishing a cooperative dairy society. Inspired by the true story of the pioneering milk cooperative movement led by Verghese Kurien, *Manthan*, also known as 'The Churning', captures the essence of the Indian White Revolution.

The film chronicles the true story of a group of impoverished farmers in Gujarat's Kheda district who, driven

by a collective vision for societal well-being, forgo self-interest. Spearheaded by figures like local social activist Tribhovandas Patel, their efforts led to the establishment of the Kaira District Co-operative Milk Producers' Union. This grassroots initiative soon replicated across Gujarat, culminating in the creation of Amul, a dairy cooperative founded in Anand in 1946. Today, Amul is a collaborative endeavour jointly owned by approximately 2.6 million milk producers in Gujarat.

The film intricately captures the complexities of rural life, depicting the deep-seated suspicions perpetuated by socio-political codes. The film captures the struggles of marginalised communities, the clash between castes, and the resistance against progressive policies designed by well-intentioned urban intellectuals.

Set in rural Gujarat, the film resonates with the sights and sounds of village life. It begins with the farmers daily lives revolving around cattle-rearing and milk production, which they sell to a local dairy owner, Mishra, portrayed by Amrish Puri. However, Mishra's exploitative practices pay them meagre amounts for their hard-earned produce. Dr Rao, portrayed by Girish Karnad, a young veterinary sur-

geon, embodies Verghese Kurien, the force behind the White Revolution.

Dr Rao, accompanied by his team including Deshmukh (Mohan Agashe) and Chandravarkar (Anant Nag), arrive in the village with a vision — to establish a cooperative dairy society owned and managed by the villagers themselves. However, navigating the intricate web of village politics, rigid casteism, and societal distrust poses a formidable challenge.

Manthan portrays the evolving dynamics within the village, highlighting the transformative journey of characters like Bhola, portrayed by Naseeruddin Shah. Initially harbouring deep resentment against higher caste figures, Bhola's journey reflects a transformation fueled by trust and belief in Dr Rao's vision. Bindu (Smita Patil), a young mother whose husband has abandoned her, becomes a pivotal character in the film and challenges established societal norms.

The film brilliantly captures the tensions and alliances between different factions within the village. The election for the head of the cooperative becomes a battleground of ideologies, symbolising the clash between traditional power structures and emerging voices of change. Bhola's

victory in the election becomes a triumph of collective willpower, sparking hope and joy among the marginalised.

Despite these tensions, the film doesn't shy away from portraying the adversities faced by those advocating change. Dr Rao finds himself embroiled in false accusations, disrupting his vision and testing his resolve. Bindu, coerced into signing false legal documents, represents the challenges faced by women who dare to challenge the status quo.

Despite the setbacks, Manthan exudes hope and resilience. Dr Rao's departure from the village doesn't dampen the spirits of those inspired by his vision. Bhola and Bindu also emerge as torchbearers of change, continuing the work of the cooperative with determination.

Upon its release, the film attracted truckloads of farmers who saw it as their own, leading to its outstanding success at the box office. In its nuanced portrayal of societal complexities and human fortitude, Manthan remains a gem in Indian cinema that continues to inspire and provoke contemplation on the power of unity and the pursuit of a better tomorrow. □□□
[The entire movie is available on YouTube.]

[Source: Homegrown]

LETTER

Custodial Death of Supriya Santra

Supriya Santra, belonging to the Scheduled Caste community, was arrested on May 26, 2023, in connection with Barasat Police Station Case No-365/2023. His arrest and subsequent death raise serious concerns, especially given the circumstances surrounding her demise.

Supriya's father and uncle went to Mohanpur police station to lodge a complaint about the disappearance of Supriya on 27.5.23 at 8am, the on-duty police persons did not receive the written complaint nor did they inform about the arrest of Supriya.

Uncle of deceased Supriya Sushil

Ch Santra met Supriya at Dumdum Central Jail on 29.6.23. There was no complaint from the deceased. He was completely fit and alert both physically and mentally.

On 5.6.23 police of Mohanpur PS informed the deceased family that Supriya died due to illness at Dumdum Central Jail on 4.6.23. The victim family was never informed about the illness of the deceased by police or jail authorities.

The family of the deceased asserts that Supriya Santra's death is a case of custodial death, and they have brought to the attention a critical violation of legal procedures. Despite the sensitive nature of this case, an inquest, under section 176

(A) of Cr.P.C. was not conducted by a judicial magistrate, which is a clear infringement of established legal protocols and a violation of fundamental human rights.

He died on 4th June 2023 at R G Kar Medical College and Hospital, but a post mortem examination was conducted on 6th June 2023. Why so late? Who is responsible for such an inhuman act? Is it not dereliction of duty of government employees?

Kirity Roy, Secretary, MASUM & National Convenor, PACTI

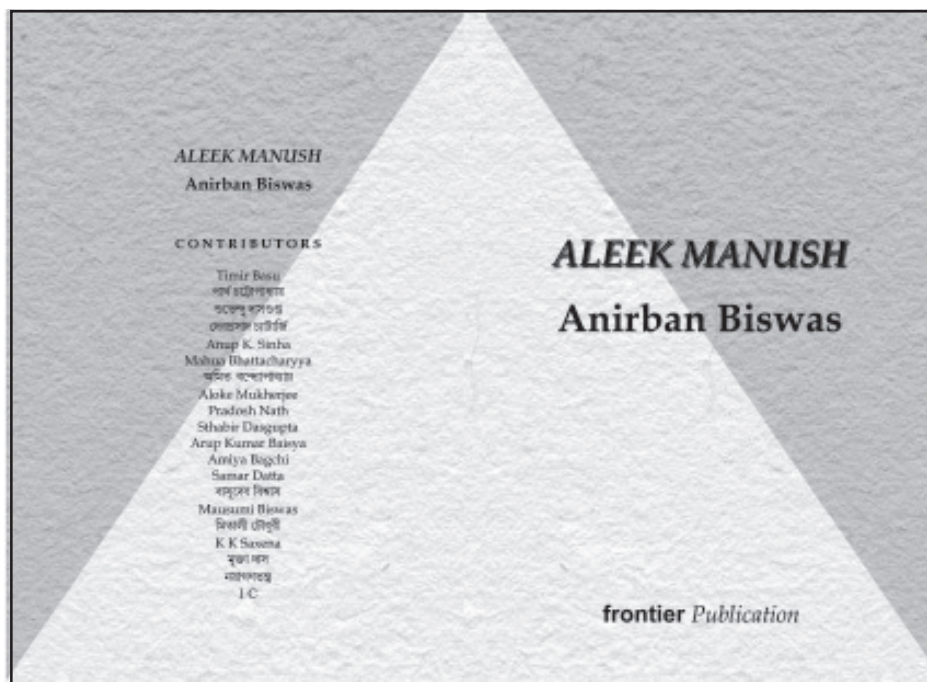
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