

# frontier

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## India vs China

INDIA HAS OUTPACED CHINA IN ECONOMIC GROWTH FOR THE past two years—its GDP grew 6.1 percent last quarter, compared with China's 4.5 percent. At first glance, the statistics seem promising. But the ground reality is otherwise. India is far behind China in every sphere.

The US strategists think India is China's natural adversary; the two countries share more than 2,000 miles of disputed, undemarcated border, where conflict breaks out sporadically. Right now they are at loggerheads in the Ladakh region. The bigger and stronger China's competitors are in Asia, the greater the prospects for a balance of power favourable to the United States. So they are trying to integrate India into their strategic orbit. With Modi's US diplomacy getting extra-ordinary focus in recent months in international media the saffron brigade has begun to believe that India is already a 'super power'.

In 2006, the World Economic Forum in Davos heralded India as the "world's fastest-growing free market democracy" and the then-Indian trade minister said that India's economy would shortly surpass China's. But these predictions didn't come true.

Despite India's fast growth over the past two years—when India joined the club of the world's five largest economies—India's economy has remained much smaller than China's. In the early 2000s, China's manufacturing, exports, and GDP were about two to three times larger than India's. Now, China's economy is about five times larger, with a GDP of \$17.7 trillion versus India's GDP of \$3.2 trillion.

India has been falling behind in the race to develop science and technology to power economic growth. China graduates nearly twice as many STEM students as India. China spends 2 percent of its GDP on research and development, while India spends 0.7 percent. Four of the world's 20 biggest tech companies by revenue are Chinese; none are based in India. China produces over half of the world's 5G infrastructure, India just 1 percent. TikTok and similar apps created in China are now global leaders, but India has yet to create a tech product that has gone global. When it comes to producing artificial intelligence (AI), China is the only global rival to the United States. China holds 65 percent of the world's AI patents, compared with India's 3 percent. China's AI firms have received \$95 billion in private investment from 2013 through 2022 versus India's \$7 billion. And top-tier AI researchers hail primarily from China, the United States, and Europe, while India lags behind.

The international community has rightly celebrated China's "anti-poverty miracle" that has essentially eliminated abject poverty. In contrast, India continues to have high levels of poverty and malnutrition. In 1980, 90 percent of China's 1 billion citizens had incomes below the World Bank's threshold for abject poverty. Today, that number is

approximately zero. Yet more than 10 percent of India's population of 1.4 billion continue to live below the World Bank extreme poverty line of \$2.15 per day. India also has one of the worst rates of child malnutrition in the world.

In truth the idea that New Delhi will counter Beijing has created an arms import behemoth. India has

opened a huge arms Bazar for the US military-industrial complex. There is a lot of confusion about the Indo-U.S. relationship, but the strategic logic is inexorable. India is unlikely to become a counter-weight to China in the foreseeable future.

For one thing the future does not always resemble the past. □□□

[Contributed]

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## COMMENT

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### Climate Issues are Class Issues

AS ENVOYS GATHERED IN Bonn, Germany in early June for this year's annual climate talks in November average global surface temperatures were more than 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels for several days the EU-funded Copernicus Climate Change Service said. In truth climate nears point of no return as land, sea temperatures break records. The target of keeping global warming within 1.5C is fast moving out of reach experts say with nations failing to set more ambitious goals despite months of record breaking heat on land and sea. After every climate summit it is business as usual. The capitalist production system cannot run without endangering the very survival of humanity on the planet earth.

Capitalism is producing climate catastrophe due to its insatiable appetite for the accumulation of an unprecedented level of profit at the cost of people and the planet. In search of profit, capitalism destroys the environment on a daily basis. The worldwide capitalist system creates, sustains, and expands the ecological imbalance by consistently exploiting nature and human beings. The pandemic of global warming, environmental crisis, water and air pollution, desertification, floods, cyclones, food insecurities, and the growth of different diseases are the

products of capitalism, which is inseparable from multiple forms of crisis. The working-class people aren't contributing to producing such a crisis, but they are the worst victims of all these forms of crisis. However, the frenzied articulation of the climate crisis is dominated by capitalist corporations and their ideologues in media, politics, and society.

The oversimplified version of climate change looks at the ecological crisis merely as an environmental issue, suggesting that it can be controlled and reversed through policies promoting sustainable production and minimising everyday consumption. However, such a dominant policy framework faces three key issues. Firstly, it fails to address the fundamental character of capitalism as a system based on limitless exploitation. Secondly, it places the burden of environmental issues on the masses, while overlooking the role of capitalism and its detrimental impacts on the environment. Lastly, it disregards the disproportionate impact of ecological disasters on the working-class population. In contrast, the capitalist discourse tends to blame people, their food habits, and their insatiable desires as the causes of the climate crisis. However, in reality, it is capitalism itself that undermines the foundations of a sustainable need-based

society and promotes a desire-based consumer society for its own sustainability.

The theology of capitalist development trajectory proves to be an ecological disaster trap, rendering capitalism incapable of solving the ecological crisis. Despite its role in the growth of environmental disasters, the class elites and chained intellectuals persist in promoting capitalism while ignoring its detrimental impact. Advocates of capitalism attempt to repackage the exploitative system as shareholder capitalism, which devalues nature and human beings in order to maximise profit by destroying the environment. Given this context, it becomes crucial for progressive forces to shape the narrative based on the environmental realities under capitalism, acknowledging that climate justice is an unattainable dream within this framework.

It is crucial to expose the fraudulent mainstream narratives and corporate logic surrounding the climate crisis. Addressing climate issues necessitates addressing class issues as well. The fight for environmental sustainability is inherently a struggle against capitalism. The working-class masses bear the brunt of the consequences of climate change. Resolving the climate crisis requires the redistribution of resources and means of production to tackle issues of poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment. Climate issues are inherently tied to class issues, and overcoming the climate crisis necessi-

tates engaging in class struggles. The future of people and the planet depends on a troika consisting of a broad-based solidarity across all environmental movements, a shared understanding of the nature of capitalism and its detrimental impacts

on the environment, and the recognition that climate issues are fundamentally class issues. Embracing these principles is essential in promoting an ecologically sustainable world. □□□

[Contributed]

#### NOTE

## Gandhi and Gita Press

*Arup Kumar Sen writes:*

**T**HE MAJORITARIAN HINDU mindset is very much operative in the mode of functioning of the Indian State in recent years. The latest manifestation of this mindset is very much evident in the recent selection of Gita Press for the Gandhi Peace Prize. The Union Ministry of Culture said in its media release that the jury headed by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi selected Gorakhpur-based Gita Press for the award “in recognition of its outstanding contribution towards social, economic and political transformation through non-violent and other Gandhian methods.” The paradox lies in the fact that the Gita Press founder, Jaydayal Goyandka and the founder editor of its magazine Kalyan, Hanuman Prasad Poddar, who had close relations with Gandhi at a time, were among the 25000-odd people arrested in the wake of Gandhi’s assassination in 1948. It may be mentioned in this

connection what the present Union cabinet minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Bhupender Yadav stated in the context of the award being conferred on Gita Press: “Had Mahatma Gandhi lived to see the day, he couldn’t have been happier and prouder. Gandhi appreciated the work done by Gita press. He and Poddar shared a bond of friendship. Gandhi, in fact, was a contributor to the first issue of Kalyan, Gita Press’ flagship monthly magazine, published in August 1926.”

But one gets a counter-narrative of the relationship between Gandhi and Gita Press, from Akshaya Mukul, the author of Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India: “Their relationship started auspiciously with bhakti...By the late-1940s, Gandhi had become immensely unpopular with the Gita Press. In 1949, RSS chief M S Golwalkar was touring the United Provinces after being released

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from jail for his alleged role in Gandhi’s murder. Himself now free, (Hanuman Prasad) Poddar presided over a function to welcome Golwalkar at the Town Hall in Banaras... Post Gandhi assassination, Kalyan went quiet on him for a few months but resumed carrying his old articles. It was Gandhi only in name and as ironic as the peace prize Gita Press has received in his name.”

The above counter-narrative makes people aware that the Hindu Right is trying to appropriate Gandhi in its statecraft.

□□□

#### THE UCC CONTROVERSY-I

## Uniform Civil Code: Is It Desirable?

*I Mallikarjuna Sharma*

**I**NDIAN CONSTITUTION DOES not deal with the concept of Uniform Civil Code in any detail but the desire/wish to secure it is expressed laconically in a short directive principle of state policy—Article 44 just says: “44. Uniform civil

code for the citizens.—The State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India.” And for all these 75 years or more post-independence years nothing much in that direction has been attempted but today sud-

denly the rightwing Government of India proposes to rush through things in that regard confounding all lovers of democracy and human rights about what dangerous consequences could ensue from this effort. As such there is an imperative need to go into the ‘maahoul’ (climate) of the late 1940s and into the Constituent Assembly Debates to try to learn the responses and comments of the constitution makers in that

regard which led to the framing of this particular directive principle.

This is briefly explained in the Constitution of India website as follows:

Article 35, Draft Constitution of India 1948 laid down: “The State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India.” And after intense and somewhat heated debates in the Constituent Assembly the same was approved and numbered as Article 44 in the Constitution of India, 1950, without even a single comma or full stop being altered. A summary in the Constitution net website informs people:

“Draft Article 35 (Article 44) was debated on 23 November 1948. As the text of the Draft Article suggests, it directed the State to bring about a uniform civil code across India.

“...Debate around the Draft Article triggered conflict in the Assembly. Most of the opposition to the Draft Article came from Muslim members [Mohammed Ismail Khan, Naziruddin Ahmad, Mahboob Ali Baig, et al] who moved amendments to keep personal laws out of its scope. One member proposed a proviso that would have operationalised the Draft Article only with the prior assent of the community.

“The arguments mobilised to attack the Draft Article included— first, that uniform civil code violated freedom of religion; second, that it would create disharmony within the Muslim community; and third, that it was incorrect to interfere with personal law

without the approval of the specific religious communities involved.

“The Draft Article did find support from other quarters. A Drafting Committee member [Sri Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar] argued that a uniform civil code was important to uphold the unity of the country, and the Constitution’s secular credentials. He reminded Muslims members that this was not a provision that would affect the Muslim community alone—even the Hindu community had to deal with it. It was further added that women’s rights could never be secured without a uniform civil code. Also, the argument that it would violate religious freedom under the Constitution was rejected—the Constitution gave space for social reform legislation.

“At the end of the debate, it was clarified that there was nothing new about the Uniform civil code, there was already a common civil code in India. The only difference with the new code was that it would cover marriage and inheritance—which were not under the scope of the existing code. It was also pointed out that this was a Directive Principle, the State was not obliged to bring the provision into effect immediately and there was space for the consent of communities to be obtained.”

“Finally, the Draft article was adopted on the same day, without any amendments.” [Source: <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/debates/23-nov-1948/>.]

It’s true that the Supreme Court also, on more than one occasion,

questioned the Government of India as to why the Uniform Civil Code has not been formulated yet. It cannot be arbitrarily rushed in. In truth the very wisdom of the Constituent Assembly in passing such a directive principle is open to question—since ages even notorious invaders of the countries did not meddle with the personal laws of various communities in India. Any such measures in this regard, mainly as a measure of vote bank politics in the context of the forthcoming 2024 general elections will only ensue in hazardous negative consequences and seriously violate the golden principle of ‘unity in diversity’ which sustained the country since ages and is essential for the continued existence, reputation and identity of the country too. People need more self-determination, short of secession, to constituent states, units and even diverse communities, and not any damage to or curtailing of such rights and autonomous systems already in existence. Indians have waited for more than 75 years and so no harm in waiting for another long period—now say for another 25 years even. For one thing “Uniformity cannot be and should not be commanded. Rather room and time should be given for liberal reforms in the personal laws of all communities and when they gradually go on converging then uniformity can be, if wisdom still demands so, sought and tried to be achieved.” □□□

*[Advocate and Editor, Law Animated World; a socio-political activist too. Emphases in bold is by the author]*

## THE UCC CONTROVERSY-II

### Opposition: Playing to the BJP’s Script

**Yogendra Yadav**

**T**HE BHARATIYA JANATA Party [BJP] government’s predictable move to reignite the controversy over the Uniform Civil

Code (UCC) has invited predictable responses. Opposition leaders have played this move. Questioning the need for the Law Commission to

take this up again, several opposition leaders have effectively positioned themselves against the UCC. Muslim organisations have gone a step further and condemned it as a sinister move that is against minorities and the Constitution. The stage appears set for an ideological battle, both tragic and ironic, with the BJP

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pushing for the constitutional promise of a UCC and the secular politics arrayed against it.

This is exactly how the BJP must have scripted this debate. It is a mark of present times that secular politics retreats from whatever ground the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP illegitimately encroach upon—Hinduism, traditions, nationalism, and now the UCC. If this retreat must be halted, secular politics must reclaim the principled and progressive position on the UCC. It must assert that the UCC has nothing to do with customs and practices of any one religion; it is about asserting the uniform primacy of constitutional principles of equality between and within religious communities and uniformly ensuring gender justice. It must realise that opposing the idea of a UCC is poor politics. Besides, it is a bad political strategy in the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

The idea of a UCC has a simple and powerful rationale: equality before the law. If all citizens can be governed by the same penal code, why not apply the same principle to civil code as well? Different communities can enjoy their separate customs and rituals, but how can any community be allowed to violate the fundamental rights of individuals? Can a community's right to religion or culture be allowed to trump the right to equality for the women in that community?

These are not BJP arguments. This was the rationale behind the original demand for UCC by women's organisations. This was the broad consensus within the Constituent Assembly. In fact, there was a proposal to put this provision in the Fundamental Rights that was shelved in the context of Partition. The rationale given above was used by Jawaharlal Nehru, BR Ambedkar and Ram Manohar Lohia when they

advocated for the UCC. And this was the ground for the feminist movement to demand the UCC in independent India.

Article 44 of the Constitution contains this non-justiciable Directive Principle: "The State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India." Those who keep demanding that the State must comply with the Directive Principles enunciated in the Constitution cannot suddenly turn their backs to one of these key principles. One cannot say that 73 years after adopting the Constitution, the country is not ready for this idea.

The opposition to the UCC is also bad optics. The whole point of reviving this proposal, 10 months before the national election and five years after it was thoroughly discussed and rejected by the previous Law Commission appointed by the Modi government, is to open another site for minority bashing. The purpose is to insinuate that the parties like the Congress could shove reforms of family laws down the throat of the Hindus but dare not do the same to the Muslims and Christians. The idea is to push the opposition into a photo-op with the conservative leadership of the Muslim and Christian communities. As in the case of the debate on triple talaq, the opposition is stepping into this trap.

Instead of opposing the idea of UCC, the opposition should question the BJP's misreading of what a 'uniform' civil code would mean. Instead of objecting to the label, the critics should invite a debate on the substance of the proposed UCC. In this, the opposition could learn in this respect from the nuanced and principled position of the feminist movement that stands up to conservative religious orthodoxy as well as the BJP's attempt to appropriate

this idea. And it could draw upon the very detailed and cogent reasoning in the discussion paper prepared by the 21st Law Commission.

The BJP plays upon the literal and shallow meaning of the 'uniform' civil code. It assumes that uniformity implies singularity and sameness. So, in this reading, a 'uniform' civil code must mean a single law that must replace the multiple family laws that exist in the country. And that law must contain identical provisions for marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance for members of all religious communities. This is the version the BJP wishes to push. And this is the version that BJP critics wish to resist. But this is a misreading of the constitutional directive.

The vision of social reformers, intent of the Constitution makers, and demand of the feminist movement invite a deeper reading of what it means to have a 'uniform' civil code. A uniform code is neither identical nor singular; instead, it entails common principles but differentiated rules. This is similar to the well-accepted principle of common but differentiated responsibility in climate justice negotiations. Here, uniformity would mean that all religious and social communities would be subjected to the same set of constitutional principles. No family

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law of any community would be allowed to violate the right to equality, the right against discrimination, and the idea of gender justice. Any custom or family law that violates these principles would have to go.

At the same time, these common principles may take different forms for different communities, depending upon their existing or codified practices. Unlike Hindu customs, Muslim marriage is a contract based on nikahnama. A 'uniform' civil code need not require Muslims to abandon this, nor would it require Hindus to adopt it. Different communities can continue to follow radically different, even contrary customs and practices relating to marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance as long as they do not violate a uniform set of constitutional principles.

The UCC will not happen in one day through a single legislative stroke that erases everything that existed before it. The realisation of UCC in this approach would require three far-reaching legislative changes. First, it would require extensive reform of the existing personal laws as sug-

gested by the 21st Law Commission. That should include restricting and discouraging the legally permissible but infrequent practice of polygamy among Muslims while safeguarding the interest of making provisions to safeguard the interests of women. It would also mean safeguarding the interests of women in the many instances of the legally impermissible but existent practice of polygamy among Hindus and other communities, simplification of divorce and adoption among Christians, and doing away with notice period under the Special Marriage Act. The Law Commission has also recommended doing away with the doctrine of coparcenary under the Hindu law and tax privileges of the Hindu Undivided Family. All these changes may be resisted by the religious orthodoxy, both from majority and minority communities. But secular politics must stand up to that pressure.

The second legislative change would involve the codification of customs and practices of different communities that are not yet covered by any law. For instance, the

principle that the interest of the child must be paramount in any dispute concerning custody or guardianship needs to be included in law.

Third, the scope of the existing Special Marriage Act should be expanded to create a common civil code for those citizens who do not wish to be governed by any of the existing community-specific family laws. A prototype of such a code already exists in Goa and is applicable to all Goan citizens, irrespective of religion. Ambedkar had suggested a voluntary civil code along these lines.

For far too long, secular politics has vacated the ground that the BJP has intruded upon. The UCC must not become one more example of this self-defeating politics. Instead of running shy of the idea, the opposition must demand the UCC along the lines suggested above. Instead of playing to the BJP's script and joining hands with the conservative leadership of minority communities, secular politics must call the BJP's bluff and ask it to present a substantial draft of the proposed UCC. □□□

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## A PEEP INTO ARCHIVES

# Emergency and RSS

*Shamsul Islam*

**O**N THE 48TH ANNIVERSARY of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi [June 25, 1975-March 21, 1977] people are witnessing once again the farce of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) claiming that it opposed it with full might. PM Modi described it as the "darkest period" in Indian history in his weekly radio talk, 'Mann ki Baat' on June 18, 2023. A senior RSS functionary who also happened to be a former Vice-President of India claimed: "The RSS played an important role in organising protests against

the Emergency. These developments highlight the importance of active citizenship and grassroots movements in safeguarding democracy and advocating for the rights and freedoms of all citizens."

Present day RSS-BJP rulers boast that RSS fought against the Emergency not due to any compulsion but as article of faith in democracy. How RSS cadres ruling India today love democracy is to be seen and believed. The Indian jails which were supposed to incarcerate anti-social elements are packed with young

activists ranging from brilliant school/university students (large number of them being girls) to leading intellectuals and senior citizens in 70s and 80s with serious ailments. According to reputed world studies on the status of global democracy, "India ranks 108th in the Electoral Democracy Index of the Democracy report 2023 released by V-Dem Institute. The country ranks way below countries such as Tanzania, Bolivia, Mexico, Singapore and Nigeria. India has also been named in the top 10 autocratising countries in the last 10 years in the report. India's ranking dipped from the 100th position in 2022 to 108th this year in the report's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI)."

On the World Press Freedom Day

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(WPDF) (3rd May), the World Press Freedom Index 2023 was published by 'Reporters Without Borders' (RSF). India ranked 161st among the 180 countries with a score of 36.62. In 2022, India's rank was 150.

In fact, totalitarianism is in the veins of RSS cadres who are fond of rule by IRON MEN. Democracy and RSS are antithetical is not what critics of the Hindutva politics highlight but is what the most prominent ideologue of the RSS, MS Golwalkar, also known as 'Guru of Hate' [whom PM Modi credits for grooming him into a political leader] decreed while addressing the 1350 top level cadres of the RSS in 1940 declared, "RSS inspired by one flag, one leader and one ideology is lighting the flame of Hindutva in each and every corner of this great land."

One must evaluate the RSS claim of fighting the Emergency with the contemporary RSS documents. The 3rd Supremo of RSS, Madhukar Dattatraya Deoras wrote the first letter of praise to Indira Gandhi within two months of the imposition of Emergency. It was the time when state terror was running amok. In letter dated, August 22, 1975 he began with the following praise of Indira: "I heard your address to the nation which you delivered on August 15, 1975 from Red Fort on radio in jail [Yervada jail] with attention. Your address was timely and balanced so I decided to write to you".

Indira Gandhi did not respond to it. So Deoras wrote another letter to Indira on November 10, 1975. He began his letter with congratulating her on being cleared by the Supreme Court of disqualification which was ordered by the Allahabad High Court, "All the five Justices of the Supreme Court have declared your election constitutional, heartiest greetings for it."

It is to be noted that opposition was firmly of the opinion that this

judgment was 'managed' by the Congress. In the course of the letter he declared that "RSS has been named in context of Jaiprakash Narayan's movement. The government has also connected RSS with Gujarat movement and Bihar movement without any reason...Sangh has no relation with these movements..." [Ibid, pp-272-73]

Since Indira Gandhi did not respond to this letter too, RSS chief got hold of Vinoba Bhave who supported the Emergency religiously and was a favourite of Indira Gandhi. In a letter dated January 12, 1976, Deoras begged that Acharya should suggest the way that ban on RSS was removed. [Ibid, pp-275-77] Since Acharya too did not respond to Deoras letter, the latter in another communication without date desperately wrote: "According to press reports respected PM [Indira Gandhi] is going to meet you at Pavnar Ashram on January 24. At that time there will be discussion about the present condition of the country. I beg you to try to remove the wrong assumptions of PM about RSS so that ban on RSS is lifted and RSS members are released from jails. We are looking forward for the times when RSS and its members are able to contribute to the plans of progress which are being run in all the fields under the leadership of PM." [Ibid, p. 278]

[All these letters written in Hindi are reproduced from a publication of the RSS.]

Balraj Madhok, a senior ideologue of the RSS who died as pracharak [whole-timer] of RSS in 2016 in his autobiography without mincing words wrote that Sarsanghchalak Deoras was fond of good living and when was held under MISA, "wrote two letters on August 22, 1975 and November 10, 1975 to Indira Gandhi for reconsidering her attitude towards the Sangh

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and lifting the ban from it. He also wrote a letter to Shri Vinoba Bhave requesting him to try to remove from Indira Gandhi's heart anti [Sangh] feelings." [Zindagi Ka Safar -3: Deendayal Upadhyay Ki Hatya Se Indira Gandhi Ki Hatya Tak (Journey of Life-3: From the Murder of Deendayal Upadhyay to the Murder of Indira Gandhi), Dinman, Delhi, 2003, p. 188-189.]

It is to be noted that former President of the Indian Republic, Pranab Mukherjee was invited by the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat as the chief guest at the graduation ceremony of its new recruits in 2018. It would be naïve to believe that Bhagwat did not know that Pranab Mukherjee was indicted as one of

the top leaders of Congress for Emergency excesses.

It is shameful that despite these facts thousands of RSS cadres continue to get monthly family pension for the persecution during Emergency. The BJP ruled states like Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra decided to award a monthly pension of Rs 20,000 to those who were jailed during the Emergency period for less than 2 months and Rs 10000 to those who were jailed for less than a month. This rule took care of the financial interest of those RSS cadres who submitted mercy letters completing only one or two months' jail term. For securing such a fat pension there was no such condition that the ben-

eficiary should have been in jail for the whole period of the Emergency.

The Nation needs to remember that the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi was withdrawn by her on March 21, 1977 and her party lost next general elections. However, RSS-BJP oligarchy continues to rule with an iron fist and relying on anti-terror laws without imposing an Emergency; it is the new NORMAL under Modi as PM. □□□

*notoinjustice@gmail.com*

[Link for some of S. Islam's writings in English, Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati and video interviews/debates: <http://du-in.academia.edu/ShamsulIslam>

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## DIARY OF A DOCTOR

### 'The Gorakhpur Hospital Tragedy'

*Joydip Ghosal*

THE GORAKHPUR HOSPITAL Tragedy', a doctor's memoir of a deadly medical crisis (Published by PAN) is Kafeel Khan's chronicle of the shocking events that unfolded in August 2017. This first-hand gut-wrenching record of events detailed the turmoil in the wake of the incident. The authorities failed miserably to pin the blame on the perpetrators. They denied that the hospital's oxygen supply had been ceased. Instead of unearthing the truth behind the gruesome deaths of sixty infants at the state-run Baba Raghav Das Medical College in Gorakhpur they blamed Dr Kafeel Khan for the fatalities. Between 10 and 12 August in 2017 he worked round the clock and tried to restore and fix the problem regarding the supply of life-saving oxygen to the infants and children admitted in the ICU and wards of the Pediatrics Department. That happenings spanning over two to three days would soon

lead to life-changing struggle of his own. In no uncertain terms it was a fight for liberty. It was tantamount to war to remain in the profession of healing and treating, a battle to live and work in the place where he was born. This book is a documentation of that arduous journey he was forced to commence after the tragedy that flung his life into topsy-turvy. According to Manoj Singh, the journalist, the reportage on the Oxygen fiasco rendered it synonymous with the identity of Dr Khan.

In this book he documented his early life. Working at the Kasturba Hospital in Manipal laid the foundation for his understanding of the basic tenets of medical profession. He was trained to think his patients above everything else. Their economic status, gender, religion were irrelevant. Their nature of illness mattered most and how they could be transported to the path of healing. On 8 August 2016 he joined the

BRD Medical College as a lecturer in the Department of Pediatrics. He was a permanent employee on probation. As a doctor and long term resident of Gorakhpur he was aware of the outbreak of Acute Encephalitis Syndrome or AES. The author here tried to decipher this health problem from a societal angle. This virulent Japanese Encephalitis was prevalent amongst the most underprivileged. Children afflicted with AES belonged to poor, marginalised community. Author threw lights on the 7Ps that were long associated with AES. Those were- population, poverty, poor nutrition, poor and inadequate supply of potable water, poor sanitation, poor vaccine and poor hygiene. He wondered how 'mosquitoes differentiated between poor and rich kids'.

On that fateful night the question that kept haunting him was how long would it be before the oxygen supply was restored? The impending shortage of oxygen had been communicated by oxygen pipeline operator in writing to the authorities. The supply of piped liquid oxygen ran out on August 10. When supply was finally



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restored on 2.15 AM on August 13, 18 adults and 63 infants perished. Khan with heroic endeavour tried to procure jumbo oxygen cylinders from private hospitals to mitigate the enormity of the crisis. He approached the local unit of Sashastra Seema Bal to give a truck. He thought that through this way maximum numbers of cylinders could be picked up from available sources. To pay for cylinders he handed over his ATM card. He and his colleagues started providing oxygen by using AMBU bags to the children who were on ventilator support. He had to wage battle on two fronts. First he had to deal with the worsening condition of the children and second he had to procure oxygen cylinders. Similar chaotic scene erupted in NICU wards. With the help of central oxygen operator Balwant he arranged for a truck. He paid Rs 20,000 from his own pocket and sent a worker to Khalilabad plant. A plant in Gida flatly declined to provide oxygen. It categorically said that its contract with the college had been terminated. Now IGL Faizabad was empowered to do this. Only after the renewal of contract it would supply oxygen. Through the whole period the administration displayed utter callousness and apathy.

The authorities had since main-

tained that no deaths occurred due to lack of oxygen. But Dr Kafeel Khan unequivocally established that it was not an accident that was random in nature. On the contrary it was the administration's apathy and indifference that precipitated the colossal tragedy. Officials tried to suppress the truth and blame it on those who tried to unearth the truth.

From a hero he was metamorphosed into a villain. He was accused of divulging the details to media. Even in the press conference chief minister denied the claim that children died due to oxygen shortage. A hateful vilification did the rounds on social media. TV channels presented their version by wrongly designating him as the head of pediatrics department or the superintendent of the hospital. They castigated him by putting the entire blame upon him. Later he was incarcerated.

Then an order was passed by Justices Siddhartha Varma and Ajit Kumar of the Allahabad High Court where it was unequivocally stated that "We are at pain in observing that ... non-supplying of oxygen to the hospitals is a criminal act and not less than a genocide by those who have been entrusted with the task to ensure continuous procurement and supply chain of the liquid medical oxy-

gen. "A probe panel led by Principal Secretary absolved him of any charges of medical negligence, dereliction of duty and corruption but found him guilty of 'private practice until 8 August 2016'. A division Bench of the Supreme Court comprising Justice Indira Banerjee and

Justice Sanjay Krishan Kaul directed the UP Government to pay the subsistence allowance that was due to him.

In 2020 the UP STF grilled him in Mumbai because of his speech against CAA on the campus of Aligarh Muslim University. He was sent to Mathura Jail. Even National Security Act was invoked against him. The high court, however, quashed the criminal proceedings against him for his speech at AMU.

Kafeel Khan's efforts also drew attention to dismal scenario in healthcare sector. But few days later he faced suspension. For medical negligence and corruption FIR had been filed against him. Soon he was put behind the bar. For one thing attempts to intimidate him into silence had made him all the more aware of what he owed to society. He had found that working for the most marginalised section of the society was the only way he could be at peace with himself. □□□

## INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

### Expelling Each Other's Journalists

*Ramakrishnan*

ONLY A FEW WEEKS AGO, the Wall Street Journal had reported that China and India have effectively kicked out a large number of each other's journalists by refusing to renew their visas. The Indian media initially cited that report, and there was no independent coverage.

According to a report in Bloomberg, KJM Varma, a reporter

with PTI was asked to leave China by the end of June. "With this, China will not have a single Indian journalist reporting from the country, down from four. The other three journalists—from Hindustan Times, The Hindu, and Prasar Bharati—were either asked to leave the country or their visa renewal applications were denied," wrote Aadil Brar, who was earlier a China media journalist

at the BBC: "The expulsion of Indian journalists from Beijing has left Indian media organisations in a blind state. With the latest spat, the rift between India and China is as wide now as the vast expanse of the Himalayas. A bridge, for now, has been burnt."

Former ambassador to China and former foreign secretary Nirupama Rao tweeted: "This is the worst time I've seen in my living memory in India-China relations. And I'm not exaggerating. It's serious." Indian journalists were present in Beijing even during the 1962 war.

Spokesperson Arindam Bagchi of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said in an official statement. “Chinese journalists in India have no difficulties in reporting. However, Indian journalists in China have been operating with difficulties—such as not being permitted to hire locals as correspondents or journalists.

Negating claims (including of discrimination) implied by MEA, Anurag Viswanath, a Singapore-based Sinologist, noted: China’s “restrictions on hiring locals appear universally applicable to all foreign organisations. It is incumbent on Chinese State media journalists being granted visas and is linked to the overall health of bilateral relations.”

There were comments linking India’s steps to China’s ‘aggressive’ behaviour, as seen ever since Galwan 2020, but facts are otherwise. Anurag Vishwanath wrote citing Hu, “the downward spiral began in 2016, and became exacerbated in 2020.” India has not approved visas since 2020, leading to a drop from 14 journalists to one.” Indian public will miss ground realities, will depend on “Anglo-Saxon narrative,” she said,

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as the Indian journalists “will lack immersive experience”, and they “miss experiencing China’s legendary hospitality.” “Indian insight will be a sore gap.”

scroll.in, Jun 11, 2023, reported it was indeed a case of Tit-for-tat expulsions: “Beijing’s revocation in recent months of the accreditations of three Indian correspondents and decision to freeze the visas of two, effectively barring them from returning to China to work, comes in retaliation to Delhi’s measures against Chinese state media journalists. China has also reportedly threatened counter-measures against the last Indian accredited reporter in Beijing if the visa of the last Chinese correspondent in India is not renewed.” China is reportedly demanding that India must provide Chinese journalists year-long visas instead of the three-month permits they had been receiving.

The background with relevant facts, as given by China, is given below. “Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said at a regular news conference in Beijing on May 31, it was New Delhi that started the trend, leaving the Chinese side with no choice but to reciprocate...” It remains unclear how that will benefit India, and what New Delhi intends to do to end the deadlock. “Chinese journalists have suffered unfair and discriminatory treatment in India for a long time now.

“In 2017, the Indian side shortened the validity of visas held by Chinese journalists in India to three months, or even one month, without giving any valid reason. Since 2020, the Indian side has refused to review and approve Chinese journalists’ applications to be stationed in India. As a result, the number of Chinese journalists stationed in India has plummeted from 14 in normal times to just one now.” The

report said that a journalist of the China Global Television Network stationed in India had been asked, “without any explanation”, by New Delhi in 2020 to leave the country within ten days although his visa was still valid for two more months. “As of May 31, 2023 the Indian side had not renewed the visa of the last Chinese journalist in the country. The number of Chinese journalists stationed in India is therefore about to drop to zero.”

What India stands to lose from journalists being expelled from China: “.the understanding Indians have of their enormous neighbour stands to be impaired, say Indian correspondents who have previously reported from China. The absence of Indian journalists in China will deprive Indian audiences of an Indian perspective on Beijing’s view of the simmering border conflict as well as developments in the world’s second-largest economy. “Not having Indian reporters in China” may lead to misconceptions as we’ll be relying more on imagination”, said Atul Aneja, who reported from China for The Hindu between 2014 and 2020. “The hostility will increase if we don’t get the exact picture. It’s important to have our eyes on the ground.” Sowmiya Ashok, a former Beijing correspondent for The Indian Express, added that “having boots on the ground...feeds into both public perception and effective diplomacy”.

This view is shared on the other side of the border too. “The presence of more journalists from China in India would help to bridge the gap between the two countries and foster a deeper understanding of each other’s cultures and perspectives,” Wang Zichen, a former reporter at China’s state-owned news agency Xinhua, told the Wall Street Journal: “This, in turn, could lead to a reduction in hostility and a more peaceful resolution to the border

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dispute.” That is exactly what USA and the west do not want.

New Delhi, however, dismissed the allegation and urged Beijing to continue to facilitate journalists from India so that they could continue to stay in and report from China. Indians should however note this: Washington also imposed restrictions on Chinese news outlets, forcing Chinese journalists out of the United States. However, unlike the situation between India and China, a large pool of American and Chinese correspondents had been allowed to stay back in Beijing and Washington.

China Daily pointedly asked: “There are more Indian journalists working in China than vice versa. Although Beijing is not interested in a tit-for-tat game, it has more cards than New Delhi to play in the farce that India has started. Or does it (India) want the two neighbours not to have any correspondents stationed in each other's country, leaving the job of telling Indian and Chinese stories to Western media outlets?...”

A case worth recalling is Tiananmen Square incidents, 1989. They are a classic example wherein foreign media claimed that Chinese troops had fired into the crowds with several hundred casualties, admittedly a false claim, that was sold for decades. Vijay Gokhale, then a young diplomat serving in Beijing, and later India's Foreign Secretary was a direct witness to the drama that unfolded there. He wrote 30 years later the book, *Tiananmen Square: The Making of a Protest—A Diplomat Looks Back* (2021 May) :

“...My personal experience during those 50 days was that a lot of the western media fed off each other and fed off the students in the square, without actually cross-checking their information... Or that their sources were questionable. For me that was a revelation. That is why I felt I needed to bring out that the Chinese side is

hiding some facts but also that the western media was giving its own slant to the whole thing.” Gokhale provided “a fascinating insight on the hypocrisy of the Western media as they went about indulging in brazen speculation and rumour mongering thereby making an absolute and capital mockery of journalistic ethics.” (He mentioned he had reported this to GOI at that time also, now in public.)

Today distorted news by Western media about China is a daily spectacle, spreading lies and hatred, promoting war-like atmosphere, and harming peace. India will have to depend on such media.

But this development shows the media relations are worse today, and that at a time Indian Business has a very high, an unprecedented level of, bilateral trade with China, at \$ 135 billion in 2022, up 8 percent from \$ 125 billion in 2021. Trade with China has a very high import content, despite Modi-led BJP's call Boycott Chinese goods, meant for public consumption: India's trade deficit is now around \$ 100 billion. Indian Businesses want to import cheaper components and other inputs from China that go into their products, meant also to be exported. They want people to boycott, thus forego, Chinese goods available at economic rates, so that they and MNCs grab Indian market and make enormous profits. That is ‘Swadeshi’ meant to cater to their market interests. Yes to business, No to exchange of news, with China?

Modi in USA said: “democracy is in our DNA. Democracy is our spirit. Democracy runs in our veins. We live democracy.” President Biden agreed: ...“The whole world has a stake in our success, both of us in maintaining our democracies ... makes us affiliate partners and enables us to expand democratic institutions across ... the world.” If that

were so, why this blockade of media? Is this the purpose of democracy, in the eyes of ‘democratic allies’ USA and India? Is this multipolarity India claims?

The ‘free press’ for India means relying on Anglo-Saxon media regarding China. That's what the USA desires.

China stressed that “China is still willing to maintain communication with India under the principles of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit. It is to be hoped that India will reciprocate by responding to China's legitimate concerns, and take concrete steps as soon as possible to create favourable conditions for restoring normal exchanges between the media organisations of the two countries.” (2023 June 2 China Daily.)

“Amid reports that China has expelled most Indian journalists, the Indian government said it's in touch with Beijing on the issue and expressed hope that Chinese authorities will facilitate the continued presence of Indian journalists working and reporting from China.” That was a report by Times of India, TNN / Jun 3, 2023.

Now it is four weeks since the reports appeared. Modi is busy selling Indian democracy in USA, making claims of Atmanirbhar bharat in defence too, of course subordinating India to America's Asia-Pacific strategy. India has not come out if it wants an independent media, particularly in relation to China. No Atmanirbhar bharat (self-reliant) media? Reporting China is being outsourced to the biased western media, full of venom and disinformation towards China. It is not in the interest of Indian people and of peace. □□□

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## WHAT IS AT STAKE?

**'Surfeit of Democracy'***Nilofar Suhrawardy*

**S**O, THE WORLD IS NOT oblivious of the state of democracy in India. The issue is not the degree to which democracy is ingrained in India's DNA but more pertinently the degree to which it is not allowed to be abused and is actually practised. Irrespective of however "noble" democratic claims may be of respected politicians, office-holders in various capacities and others; the degree to which credibility of the same is believed and not questioned cannot be ignored. This is partly suggested by question posed at the press conference jointly addressed by President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi towards the end of latter's visit. Indeed, both the leaders went over-board in asserting the importance of democratic DNA in both the countries. Of course, both are viewed as world's most important democratic countries. Modi's US visit has also been hailed in certain circles as meeting of two great democracies. Notwithstanding the importance accorded to democratic DNAs of both countries, this

notion is a little difficult to accept. The question is not of the concept of DNA being illogically linked with democracy. There is no knowing if in coming days some religious "expert" does not try proving its "validity" on the basis of some manufactured "facts." Yes, this also implies that however hard the so-called democratic giants try and convince the world of democratic significance of their meeting, one cannot ignore the hard reality of democracy facing risks.

It is not without reason that former US President Barack Obama recently commented on risk of India pulling "apart" if rights of minorities are not upheld, during an exclusive interview to CNN. What needs attention, from the democratic angle, of his being apparently conscious of rights of minorities not being upheld in India. It may be recalled; he made similar comments during his visit to India in 2015. He was the chief guest at India's Republic Day parade (January 26), the first US head of state to attend this. It was Modi's first term in office as Prime Minister. Prior to concluding his trip, while addressing an audience of around 1,500 people Obama pointedly mentioned that India needed to combat human trafficking and slavery, elevate status of girls and women, promote religious tolerance and also fight climate change.

Paradoxically, the points made by Obama in 2015 figured again though at a different level during Modi's recent US-visit. The second question posed before him during the press conference referred to climate change. Here, one may also take note of the importance ac-

corded by White House to Biden-Modi press conference. It was described, reportedly, as a "big deal." This is because India apparently reluctantly agreed to Modi's participation in the press conference and that too virtually at the last minute. Certainly, Modi accords a great importance to media where boosting his image is concerned. But he is also known not to have addressed any press conference in India since assuming charge as the country's prime minister. So, his having finally consented to address the joint press conference was viewed as a "big deal." It may of course be deliberated, whether the press conference really proved to be big deal? Or should these words be interpreted satirically? It may hardly be viewed as a big deal but for usage of words "democratic DNA" by both the leaders and the question posed before Modi regarding religious minorities and free speech in India.

The preceding point can perhaps be best understood by those who may or may not accord some importance to the so-called democratic DNA, medically. That is another issue. However, linking DNA with democracy doesn't really sound democratic. One was under the impression that irrespective of what is DNA of any individual, democratic ethics and values demand that she/ be considered as equal as others. Debating on DNA- decided by hereditary material- would be going off-track. But yes, incidents of communal violence as well as abuse linked with religious, caste, class, tribal and other social and/or economic differences, still occur in India. Briefly, recent protests of farmers on not getting minimum support price regarding sunflower crop, of celebrated women wrestlers against sexual harassment, that of citizens as well as organisations demanding

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peace in a north-eastern Indian state (Manipur) reported to be “burning,” and communal incidents including targeting of Indian minorities- their religious places and houses, alleged curbs and pressure on various outlets of media, discrimination against sections viewed as “untouchables,” “social outcastes” and more are just a few examples reflecting the nature

of Indian democracy at present. Discrimination and bias at various levels, including colour, does prevail in the other democratic giant also- United States. At the same time, the fact that abuse of democracy is not silently accepted, nationally and globally, and there still prevails freedom as well as courage to question the same in both countries cannot

be ignored. Certainly, democratic rhetoric voiced by power-holders in their comments- whether marked by guarded enthusiasm and/or reluctance – to a degree is suggestive of relevance still accorded to democracy and also a tacit acknowledgement of democracy being at stake! □□□

[Source: *Countercurrents.org*]

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**UNCAT**


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## Victims of Torture

*Kirity Roy*

**2**6TH JUNE 2023, MARKS the 25th International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. On this occasion the global citizens must know the exceptionally grim picture of torture in India.

As early as 1981, the Supreme Court of India has said “...nothing is more cowardly and unconscionable than a person in police custody being beaten up and nothing inflicts deeper wound on our constitutional culture than a state official running berserk regardless of human rights” [Kishore Singh V. State of Rajasthan (AIR 1981 SC 625)]. As early as 1997, the UN Human Rights Committee has expressed its concern about the widespread use of torture by the law enforcement agencies in India. (CCPR/C/79/Add.81). Similar concerns were expressed by the Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD/C/IND/CO/19) in 2007 and the Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (E/C.12/IND/CO/5) in 2008.

In the book of criminal laws in India, ‘torture’ is not defined anywhere. In India there are no special anti-torture laws which can bind the arms of the perpetrators. The persistence of inhuman treatment by the police and state officials makes it apparent that India is determined to protect violence by the police. India

is one of the remaining five countries that has yet to ratify the 1987 United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT).

On this very day (June 26) in the year of 1987, the UNCAT was introduced with the goal of the eradication of this inhuman act. Data say that this atrocious act is still very much prevalent in India. According to NCRB report in 2021, there were 6 cases of custodial death due to torture of police in the custody. It is needless to say that this government data do not reflect the true picture. Apart from that, only the torture happening in custody can be documented. In India one can find instances of torture outside the custody, too. In India, apart from torture, extra judicial execution, rape, violence against Muslims, Dalits and other marginalised sections are also very much prevalent. These are very much interlinked with the phenomena of torture. As stated by minister of State, Ministry of Home Affairs, Mr Nityananda Rai, there were 655 cases of extra-judicial executions in India between 2017 and 2022.

It is noteworthy that the country has about 178 Human Rights Institutions. But most of them are almost inactive when it comes to actively

fighting for the justice of the victims. And it is also to be noted that, in many cases, bureaucrats and persons with records of erstwhile perpetration of human rights violations are heading these institutions.

Between October 2018 and May 2023, MASUM has documented a total of 116 cases of torture by State forces. In truth this record only reflects the situation in 4 Indo-Bangladesh border districts in West Bengal. Thus, one can safely assume that the country-wide picture will be grimmer than the official record. Besides, during the medico-legal investigation of cases of torture, the Istanbul protocol, Minnesota Protocol and other international instruments are not followed.

The cause of a deeper concern is that the government forces are committing these atrocities with a blanket of impunity due to the ‘Sanction regime.’ Looking at this grim picture, human rights bodies must reiterate a few demands on the anti-torture day:

- The UNCAT must be ratified by the government of India with immediate effect. Domestic legis-

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lation to counter torture must be introduced in India with immediate effect.

- As a deterrent, the government forces must be trained and sensitized accordingly in order to stop the use of torture.

- The medico-legal experts must be trained about the Istanbul Protocol, the Minnesota Protocol and other international instruments that deal with the cases effectively.

- The systematic impunity must be

stopped at once and the perpetrators of torture should be brought under justice in the open court of law.

*[Kirty Roy is Secretary of Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM)]*

#### 1400 BILLION DOLLARS?

## Ever Rising US Military Budget

**Bharat Dogra**

**M**OST ESTIMATES OF US military spending mention a figure of 886 billion dollars or so. This is higher than the combined military spending of the next ten biggest spenders, most of whom are allies of the USA. This is 3 times the military spending of China.

However a recent review of US defence spending by defence analyst Winslow Wheeler has mentioned a figure of 1447 billion dollars after making some important corrections and also including related defense expenditures which are generally left out in commonly quoted official figures of 886 billion dollars.

Winslow Wheeler has written, “The big spenders, especially, like to distort the size of our spending—and to mis-measure it—with gimmicks and yardsticks that have almost nothing to do with dollars spent.”

The revised estimate by Wheeler seeks to correct some figures and to include some left-out figures relating to nuclear weapons, homeland security from terrorists and criminals, and international security.

Wheeler’s complete calculations were reported in a review by Andrew Cockburn published in ‘Responsible Statecraft’ (May 7, 2023).

The Wall Street Journal noted in a recent analysis that spending on defence and veterans’ care is likely to pass 1000 billion dollars next year.

Recently a lot of concern has been

expressed by various prominent persons over efforts that keep getting made for further increases even after big military budgets have been sanctioned. One of these efforts relates to the presentation of a list of ‘unfunded priorities’ to the Congress by military sources. It has been seen over the years that this practice results in the further addition of billions of dollars more to the defence budget.

Concern is also being expressed over the very high profit margins of the biggest weapon companies and military contractors. The big profit margins merely on the supply of spare parts by some companies which effectively act as monopoly suppliers has come as a shock to many people.

Serious concern is also being expressed regarding the increases in military spending that can take place even later in the year in the context of funding that is designated as “an emergency requirement or for overseas contingency operation”. As the Congressional Budget Office has stated, funding for this “would not be constrained.”

In the past this was often increased arbitrarily in the context of the conflict in Iraq to include all sorts of military expenditure. Now it is likely to be increased in the coming days in the context of the military assistance being provided to Ukraine.

The high levels of military spending much beyond real defence needs have become part of a vicious cycle.

A small and concentrated number of military contractors get huge and inflated orders from the government. They then use a part of their high profits to appoint high profile lobbyists who can ensure huge levels of military funding.

However Pentagon and defence department have repeatedly not been able to pass in audits and failed to account for a lot of spending.

This has understandably raised concerns relating to corruption. The other major area of domestic concern relates to the defence budget eating up so much of resources that adequate funds are difficult to find for many unmet needs of the weaker sections of US society, or for some other priority areas.

However another concern that should receive more attention relates to the impact of ever-increasing military budgets of the most powerful and aggressive country on the safety of people in many other countries, particularly in the context of the forever wars and proxy wars of the USA.

Hence campaigns to reduce the military budget of the USA should be an important concern of the peace movement.

At the same time it needs to be stated that the military budgets of several other countries also tend to present lower than actual figures, and this tendency is by no means confined only to the USA. Hence at world level also the military budget is likely to be significantly higher, compared to the estimates frequently cited. □□□

[The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Planet in Peril, Man over Machine and Earth without Borders.]

## LETTERS

**Joshimath and beyond**

Joshimath, a picturesque town nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, is facing a concerning issue—it is sinking under its own weight. The town's foundation is weak as it sits atop a glacial moraine, leaving it vulnerable to earthquakes. Moreover, the rapid increase in construction activities has made the situation worse, resulting in significant land deformation. Experts attribute this construction boom to the widening of the Char Dham Yatra road and National Highway 7, which are frequented by tourists and used to transport cargo to reach the holy shrine of Badrinath every year. Additionally, the Tapovan Vishnugad hydel project by NTPC Limited has also contributed to the situation.

The current crisis in Joshimath is a result of prioritising economics over a fragile ecology or the Himalayan ecosystem. The development model that has been followed for years has led to the open plundering of natural resources, ultimately leading to the present situation.

Atul Sati, the convenor-president of Joshimath Bachao Sangharsh Samiti, is spearheading the movement against maldevelopment and advocating for proper rehabilitation of affected people and preservation of the ecology.

'Moti Bagh' is an award-winning film by Nirmal Chander that highlights the complex and multilayered overall crisis in Uttarakhand - fraught with thousands of 'ghost villages' caused by mass migration to cities, the struggle to save farming, the socio-economic rift with Nepali agricultural labourers, all amidst increasing incidents of forest fires and earthquakes in a very fragile Himalayan ecology.

For over five decades, 83-year-old Vidyadutt Sharma has nurtured Moti Bagh, his 5 acre farm in a small Himalayan village. Around him are 7000 ghost villages—a chilling

testimony to large scale migration by locals in search of employment. Chronicling the changing landscape in verses of resistance, Vidyadutt Sharma and Ram Singh, his Nepali farmland, plough the fields and keep them alive, hoping to return Moti Bagh to its old glory.

**A Reader, Uttarakhand**

**Prigozhin**

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner mercenary group that was instrumental in capturing Bakhmut, is reportedly in Belarus now after the abortive mutiny. The Russian authorities dropped criminal charges against him and his fighters after he called off an uprising. Ukraine's President Zelensky described the revolt as a 'divine justice'. But euphoria didn't last long as the Russian army quickly got control of the battlefield.

Russian state media reported that the Wagner group will hand over military equipment to the Army, though there were few details. It's not clear how many Wagner fighters—Prigozhin recently said there were 25,000—would agree to be placed under the Russian Army's command.

In Russia, President Vladimir Putin sought to demonstrate control in a series of public appearances. During a rare outdoor speech on the Kremlin grounds, he thanked Russia's military for having "essentially stopped a civil war." He also vaguely warned of consequences for officials who helped Prigozhin enrich himself at Russia's expense.

Russia had said that it would grant amnesty to Prigozhin and his fighters. Under a deal brokered by President Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus, Prigozhin will live in exile there. Lukashenko said that he offered Wagner group members an "abandoned" military base in the country.

Prigozhin, a mercurial freelance warlord made a last-ditch attempt to win by force, one of the most

extraordinary Russian power struggles in recent memory. But he ultimately failed.

Amelia Nierenberg

**Silencing Setalvad**

The court directed Setalvad, who is currently out on interim bail, to surrender immediately. It also rejected her lawyer's request to give her 30 days to surrender

The Gujarat High Court Saturday[July1] rejected the regular bail plea of social activist Teesta Setalvad and directed her to surrender immediately, observing she made attempts to unsettle a democratically elected government and sully the image of the then chief minister and current Prime Minister Narendra Modi and tried to send him to jail.

Rejecting Setalvad's plea in a case of fabricating evidence to implicate innocent people in the 2002 post-Godhra riots cases, the court of Justice Nirzar Desai said that enlarging her will send a false signal that everything in a democratic country is lenient.

Setalvad was arrested in June last year along with former Gujarat Director General of Police R B Sreekumar and ex-IPS officer Sanjiv Bhatt in an offence registered by Ahmedabad crime branch police for allegedly fabricating evidence to frame innocent people in the post-Godhra riots cases. She was granted interim bail by the Supreme Court on September 2, 2022.

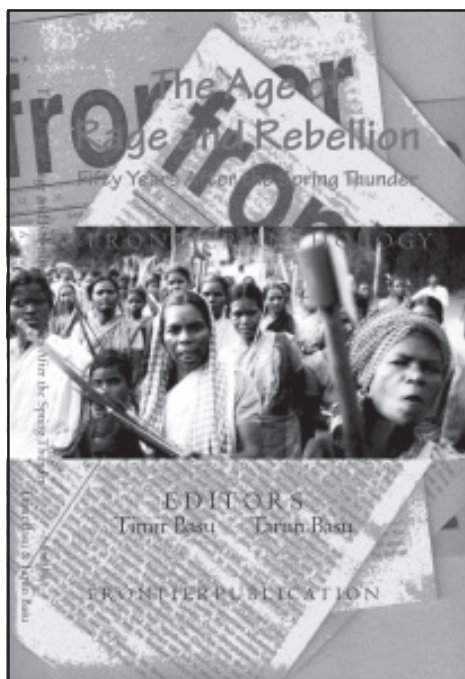
In its judgment, the high court observed that prima facie it appears that Setalvad used her close associates and riot victims to file false and fabricated affidavits before the Supreme Court with a view to unseat the establishment and to tarnish the image of establishment and the then chief minister (Modi).

Social activists are not safe in Modi's democracy. Any voice of dissent is being crushed with iron hands. Indians are living in an elected autocracy.

A Reader

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