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Founder-Editor : **SAMAR SEN**

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Editor : **TIMIR BASU**Assistant Editor : **Subhasis Mukherjee**

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E-mail : frontierweekly@yahoo.co.in
frontierweekly@hotmail.com

Website: <https://www.frontierweekly.com>

Telephone : 2530-0065

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Israel's March of Genocide

RAFAH, ON GAZA'S SOUTHERN BORDER WITH EGYPT, IS THE last refuge for nearly 1.5 million Palestinians displaced by the ongoing Israeli war. Pinned up against the Egyptian border, Palestinians in Rafah are a captive population. Speaking about the Israeli government's plans to invade Rafah, the UN Special Rapporteur in Palestine stated starkly: "The risk of a massacre of unprecedented scale looms on the horizon".

First, Israel destroyed the north of Gaza, concentrating people in Rafah. Then, it engineered a humanitarian crisis, destroying medical infrastructure, food supplies, refusing to allow aid to enter, and pushing the US and some European countries to cut funding to UNRWA. Now, the Israeli military plans to invade and decimate the huge refugee camp of its own creation. This is nothing short of a policy of extermination or ethnic cleansing.

After indiscriminately flattening Gaza and pushing Palestinians towards famine, now the Israeli military is seeking to remove the Palestinians from the entire Gaza strip permanently, whether by displacement, disease, hunger or execution. This is the second stage of genocide.

The Palestinian population in Rafah is essentially defenceless. "The unprecedented density of Rafah's population makes it nearly impossible to protect civilians in the event of ground attacks." In truth Israel is already carrying out aerial bombing as well, somewhat selectively, to cover its troops on the ground. Rafah is already a living hell and Israel now wants to burn Palestinians alive in this biggest open air prison in the world.

Fleeing to Egypt is not an option, either. The Egyptian government absolutely refuses to allow the Palestinians in Rafah to enter—knowing that it is almost certain that Israel would never allow them to return to Gaza. This would be a displacement even greater in population than the Nakba of 1948, in which 75% of the Palestinian population was expelled from their homes. Then due to American pressure the Egyptian authorities are reportedly making some make-shift shelters at the border to cope with an emergency situation, albeit Egypt lately dismissed the report as baseless.

Trapping Palestinians between a militarised border and its genocidal army, what the Israeli government is calling an "invasion" would look more like a mass displacement—or a mass execution. The miserable fact is that these scores of deaths are preventable: those from famine and disease, by allowing in aid; those from the ongoing Israeli military assault, by an immediate

ceasefire. But the Israeli regime has every intention of hastening this cataclysm, and the so-called international community is still, unconscionably, horrifyingly, refusing to stop supporting this accelerating genocide. What is more America is now sending more military hardware to boost the sagging morale of the Israeli soldiers while paying lip service to 'humanitarian pause', not permanent ceasefire and advocating two-state formula somewhat vaguely. Israel's repeated allegations that hospitals were used by terrorists proved false. More than a third of a year into this unspeakable brutality, this may be the most direst hour of all.

Facing the possibility of an even more devastating stage of genocide, grief, fear, and helplessness are all too real. And at the same time, it is as crucial now as ever that peace marchers around the world continue to mobilise with a diversity of tactics.

No one thing, no one action, can end this genocide. While this moment is devastating, there are all kinds of ways people can act to save the Palestinians. It's good news that progressive Jews across the world are opposing the Israeli government's barbarism and supporting the Palestinian cause.

Israel is at war with: people

who are sick, cold, hungry, displaced from their homes, and grieving murdered family members. Forced into camps at the border, people in Rafah must spend most of their days searching for food, fuel, and basic supplies. The stoppage of aid to UNRWA has only exacerbated these horrors.

Eighteen of Hamas 24 battalions are no longer functional, but the remaining fighting units are largely in Rafah and this is the main reason why Israel is determined to carry out operations in Rafah despite opposition by some of Israel's staunch allies including America. □ [Contributed]

19-02-2024

COMMENT

Bonds in Question

IN YET ANOTHER LANDMARK judgement the Supreme Court on February 15 struck down the controversial Electoral Bond (EB) scheme introduced by Prime Minister Modi in 2018. One of the purposes of the bond plan was to curb black money in electoral politics. In truth it was a nice device to make black money white. The apex court held that the electoral bond scheme by anonymising contributions to political parties infringes upon the right to information of the voter provided under Article 19(1) of the Constitution. These bonds must be bought from the State Bank of India (SBI) but can be donated to political parties anonymously. Here lies the crux of the matter. In 2019 the Election Commission of India [ECI] described the system as a retrograde step but did nothing for enhancement of transparency and accountability. With the Electoral Bond Culture in force the big business houses were happy because they found in it a unique opportunity to indulge in money laundering through their shell and loss making companies. Not for

nothing Modi is the darling of corporate bosses.

Since 2018, secret 'well-wishers' are said to have donated 16,000 crore rupees [more than \$ 1.9 billion] to political parties through the bond scheme. As per estimates of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), a non-governmental organisation, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the main beneficiary of Bond Bonanza as 57 percent of donations between 2018 and March 2022 went to their coffer. The next largest party, the Indian National Congress received 9.52 billion rupees (about \$ 115 m). As SBI is the sole selling agent of these bonds, the party in power, has complete sway over the process. Donors think twice before patronising opposition parties.

In 2017 and later in 2018 ADR, Common Cause and the CPM filed two separate petitions in the Supreme Court urging it to put an end to the EB system. And the all important top court ruling came in February 2024, just before the crucial general elections. All parties have started election campaigns in their

own way and they need money. Cash for vote is a time-tested practice in many backward areas.

For one thing BJP has all the money and it matters a lot in swinging election pitch in its favour. It is the biggest election enterprise investing a lot in propaganda and doles. It is now an open secret that some of the top Indian monopoly houses get special treatment from the government. Officially they say the notorious 'licence and permit raj' has gone with the Congress but in reality it is very much there and EB is the source of favouritism in allocating government contracts. It begets corruption in refined form.

EB allows unlimited donations by companies which is 'antithetical to free and fair elections'. This would authorise 'unrestrained influence of companies on the electoral process and violates the principles of free and fair elections and political equality', denying level playing fields for all.

The impact of this judgement is far-reaching, no doubt, but what will happen in the real world is anybody's guess. The way elections are funded in India is unlikely to change for the better because the Election Commission in league with paramilitary forces at the tacit ap-

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proval of the party in authority, hardly plays its neutral role. The Commission across the country has been extremely disappointing.

Those who think the SC verdict is a serious blow to the BJP are actually nursing an illusion. It won't affect the party much because it is in abso-

lute power as the Congress was for 20 years before them. The Election Commission expressed its willingness to follow SC's instructions on electoral bonds but it failed to categorically state when the details of the Bonds will be made public.

□□□

NOTE**March to Delhi Again***M N Ravunni and Shantol write:*

IN 2022, THE FARMERS' STRIKE that lasted for a year inspired and motivated toilers across the country.

Accepting the demands raised by the farmers, the government finally made an official announcement:

- 1) It would roll back the three farm laws which, in the final analysis, were detrimental to the interest of the country itself.
- 2) The minimum support price [MSP] recommended by the M S Swaminathan Commission will be implemented.
- 3) Strike-related cases will be withdrawn.
- 4) Decent compensation will be given to the families of those killed during the strike.
- 5) Agricultural debts will be written off.
- 6) Reduction in electricity bills will be effected.

These were the main demands that the Modi government promised to implement. Prime Minister Modi himself publicly apologised to the nation about his government's stance towards farmers. Now Modi is completing the second term and quite naturally, at least in this parliament, farmers' government is over. The last parliamentary session ended shouting "Jai Sriram" and dispersed. They hardly bothered about making any statement regarding the unaddressed issues of the farmers.

Farmers' organisations had expected a declaration on the assurances given to them. It did not

happen. Farmers realised that they were cheated as usual. Forced into desperation they ultimately took to the streets.

They have started marching again to Delhi with protest slogans and a legitimate demand for the fulfilment of the promises made to them.

For one thing 600 farmers had to give their lives. They are martyrs of the historic peasant movement. India is the second largest agricultural country. And the hard fact is that it is these deceived farmers who are producing food grains Modi needed badly to keep his programme of free ration to 80 crore people. At the same time, it is the Indian farmers who continue to be neglected. According to conservative estimates of the 9 years of Modi government 2 lakh farmers have committed suicide. In other words this means an average of 30 farmers a day. And yet they boast of running the world's fifth largest economy.

Now the central government is taking a hostile attitude towards these farmers who are "food providers". The government has made war-like preparations to prevent protestors from Punjab, UP and Haryana from entering Delhi and terrorise agitating farmers who have come only to voice their grievances. In UP and Haryana, they raid farmers' houses and arrest them indiscriminately. In and around Delhi, Haryana and UP Sec. 144 has been imposed. Internet connectivity has been suspended in the region. Roads to Delhi are bar-

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ricaded with concrete blocks topped with coils of barbed wire. Moreover, the roads are blocked with nails and huge spikes are scattered to stop the farmers' march! Experiments have also begun to tear- gas protestors using unmanned aerial vehicles. There are reports of water cannons being fired at some places. State police and paramilitary forces have been deployed in large numbers. Almost a battlefield scenario!

There are farmers who are still in jail due to the non-withdrawal of cases against them. At the same time, a Union Minister's son, who killed the farmers by driving his car into the protestors, is happily out on bail.

When the Centre declares war on farmers, PM Modi, who has not even laid a single foundation stone of a productive government institution in 9 years, was busy in inaugurating a Hindu temple in UAE.

Images have started coming of farmers driving up in their vehicles and pulling down barricades, defying the cowardly moves of the Modi government. □□□

[M N Ravunni is Chairperson and Shantol is General Convener of PORATTOM General Council, Keralam]

'CRISIS IN CIVILISATION'

Samar Sen Memorial Discussion

Sohini Sengupta
Sourav Chattopadhyay

IN RECENT YEARS, A RANGE of lectures and seminars by various collectives have commemorated the legacy of Samar Sen. The annual lectures organised by the Bengali quarterly Anustup have been the earliest of such efforts, with the first lecture being delivered in 1989. For 2024, the Anustup Samar Sen memorial discussion was held on 12 February, the form of panel discussion causing a transition from the tradition of the Samar Sen memorial lecture. The discussion was held at the P C Mahalanobis Auditorium, Presidency University, with a focus on the theme, 'Crisis in Civilisation.' The speakers for the event were author and former civil servant Anita Agnihotri, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, and cultural critic Samik Bandyopadhyay. The discussion was moderated by Uttam Kumar Biswas, associate professor of Bengali at Presidency University.

Sandipan Sen from Anustup introduced the speakers, followed by Anil Acharya, editor of the Anustup Patrika, who delivered a brief speech on the tradition of Samar Sen memorial lectures. Acharya spoke of the persistent importance of Samar Sen's legacy of resistance in the present era of social crisis. Samar Sen was ever unflinching in the face of power, both during his years of involvement with *Now and Frontier*, and his absence in the current times of sociopolitical upheaval only reminds people of how necessary his presence was, and would have been even today.

The theme of the discussion was inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's 1941 public address of the same

name. The central thematic was argued and discussed by the speakers across three overlapping domains—the economic-political, the socio-cultural, and the planetary.

Anita Agnihotri addressed the exploitation of women's lives and labour by the state in an age of capitalist accumulation. Agnihotri began with the larger issue of how the citizen is turned into a subject by the capitalist state through its web of surveillance. Presently, the state demands an increasing amount of personal information from its citizens—from Aadhaar card linkages to the recent facial scans in airports. This all-encompassing surveillance state signals the degeneration of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism. Agnihotri demonstrated, through examples of the highly contested Sardar Sarovar Dam, and the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan's exploitative employment of janitors and manual scavengers, how promises of progress in India have brought about only a pretense of equality, and indifference towards the growing inequality. In the broader context of an increasingly authoritarian regime exerting control over the state, women find themselves doubly marginalised through the exploitation and devaluation of their labour. A majority of women are employed in informal and care-giving sectors, which fail to provide them, job security, social security, or any basic recognition of their contribution. Agnihotri spoke of the poverty faced by women-headed households, driven fundamentally by lack of maternity or childcare leave, job security, and pervasive domestic and

workplace violence. Women's presence in some of the most critical sectors—as Asha workers, Anganwadi workers, or midday meal providers, goes unnoticed and unrewarded. Further, an oppressive environment, exemplified by incidents like the rape and violation of women in Sandeshkhali, underscores the systemic nature of the issue. The silencing of resistant voices is not only an insult to those fighting for their livelihoods but also perpetuates a cycle of exploitation. The disparity between doubled subsidies and stagnant wages further exacerbates the situation—for instance, Lakshmi-r Bhandar, a domestic ration scheme, was raised in value, while salaries of female mid-day meal workers remained stagnant even after prolonged protests—revealing the broader pattern of exploitation in profit-driven regimes. This system not only fosters economic inequality but also reinforces patriarchal structures, perpetuating the subjugation of women.

Following Agnihotri's sociopolitical critique of an exploitative capitalist society that doubly oppresses women, Samik Bandyopadhyay brought the discussion to the more cultural domain of theatre. Reading out a declaration issued to the leading theatre groups of the country by the National School of Drama concerning participation in the Bharat Rang Mahotsav (a lavishly funded cultural gathering for theatre groups across India, held every year in Delhi), Bandyopadhyay pointed out how authoritarian language had percolated into civil declarations. He showed how the words 'required', 'directed', and 'mandatory' were repeatedly used in the declaration, and how this signalled the slow but steady curbing of social freedom. Bandyopadhyay argued that the mechanisms of organising the Bharat Rang Mahotsav—which included mandatory submissions of a

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skit performance based on one of three assigned topics, to be performed by theatre groups on the same date and submitted through the same government portal was an example of the culling of cultural autonomy. In contrast, he reminisced about the culture of plurality that was fostered by the Nehruvian establishment of the Sahitya Akademi, the Sangeet Natak Akademi, and the Lalit Kala Akademi, and with events such as the Shanti Sanskriti Utsav organised at Md Ali Park, Kolkata. Bandyopadhyay stated that the erasure of this atmosphere of cultural dignity and plurality to build the present condition of all-encompassing capitalism and state surveillance leaves hardly any space for doubt whether people are on the cusp of a civilisational crisis; India has, in fact, already entered a state of cultural destitution.

As the final speaker, Dipesh Chakrabarty's address spoke to both of the previous speakers and expanded the central question of the lecture from the 'crisis in civilisation' to the 'crisis of a future'. Chakrabarty brought into conversation a historical perspective on the civilisational crisis with the present concerns of global warming, thus signaling that the crisis was in fact of humans as geological agents on a planetary scale.

At the outset, Chakrabarty discussed the common association of the idea of 'sabyata' with etiquette; yet, the idea of sabyata as entrenched in the politics of etiquette, which was prevalent in feudal systems and courts, and in many non-Western societies, transformed with the European Enlightenment. This evolved idea of civilisation—which Tagore also draws on—was from the moment of its genesis perceived as one that was filled with the possibility of crisis. Throughout history, the 'crisis in civilisation' has recurred, with various epochs seen as periods

of upheaval. The idea of civilisation itself is an intellectual battleground, Chakrabarty argued; at any point, who is 'civil' or 'sabya', who is uncivil or barbaric, and what is civilisation defined by, are questions that have repeatedly debated across history. Chakrabarty argued that the idea of crisis is deeply intertwined with the concept of civilisation itself, as notions of progress and decline are central to how societies understand themselves and their place in the world. He elaborated on how different societies have experienced and interpreted crises differently, often based on cultural, political, and economic factors; what may be a crisis for some is viewed as opportunity and advancement by others. Perceptions of the present and time itself vary greatly between those who claim civility and those labeled as uncivil. Raising the example of the Bengal Renaissance, Chakrabarty demonstrated how the impact of a historical transition is variously judged across time. From the time of Samar Sen, Chakrabarty noted, there was an inheritance of the notion of the Hindu Bengali middle class as a declining social group. Such histories of decline are written across different periods—from Parsi history in the 18th century to European history after the World Wars, to Bengali perceptions of the social present in the post-partition period.

Yet, all such perceptions of civilisation crisis are enmeshed with an idea of the future as open: where civilisation must move from its dystopic present to a better future. All ideas of social change carry with them a vague, indefinite sense of the future, and it is the incalculability of that future and the hope it offers that enable the promise of revolution. Presently, however, the rapidly escalating global warming represents a profound challenge to the very idea of civilisation, as it

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exposes the interconnectedness of human societies and the natural world. Chakrabarty explored how climate change disrupts ecosystems, displaces populations, and exacerbates social inequalities, particularly impacting marginalised communities and developing nations. He emphasised the need for collective action to address climate change, transcending national boundaries and political divides, and also debated the ethical dimensions of climate change, highlighting the re-

sponsibilities of wealthy nations and individuals who have disproportionately contributed to greenhouse gas emissions. The present crisis, he argued, is not simply one of civilisation but a 'crisis of a future' —a state in which the future ascribed to and imagined for themselves by humans shrinks to a definite, limited scale. He demonstrated how climate crisis will only exacerbate differences between powerful, developed countries and developing ones, between wealthy communities and margina-

lised groups, and argued that the impending crisis of the future requires concerned people to open up the definition of 'civilisation' itself, to speak out against otherisation and oppression in the face of a larger crisis. Chakrabarty's address inspired numerous threads of comments and discussion from the audience, with areas of discussion ranging from the uses of technology to the connections between majoritarianism and power in an era of climate change. □□□

"CHARIOT OF TRUST"

An Illusion of Prosperity

Sunil Ray

THE "CHARIOT OF TRUST" is now rolled out in the Indian Republic by the current political regime in power. It is claimed to be an unquestionable truth by the latter. Its influence on the economic historians of tomorrow may not be inconsequential unless chariot is thwarted. Till then, economic prosperity of the nation in all its likelihood will no way be different from what some say a 'magical realism'. The magical realism takes a different route however unscientific it is, to justify itself. Illusion, in consonance with this, is created to facilitate the current regime to make 'false claim' particularly about what it has achieved for the impoverished of the Republic of India.

Why the "Chariot of Trust" matters, is that it finds its sacred engagement to follow a preposterous method to rationalise its claim about the steep decline of the incidence of poverty. The "make believe" approach emerges out of it only to convert the chariot of trust into some form of social capital to push the republic into the kingdom of falsity. The purpose is to mask the truth. The scale at which the incidence of

destitution is haunting the people of the Republic is carefully trampled down. What, however, should never go unnoticed here is how the method to rationalise the claim is used to overshadow the truth about impoverishment of the millions which is deepening over the years.

The "Chariot of Trust" wants the Republic not to trust what Global Hunger Index reveals, the truth about "development of underdevelopment" (which is silently eating away the vitality of the economy in terms of incessant rise of impoverishment (when 80% of the people of the Republic suffer from some form of food insecurity?) How does one downplay the fact that India was ranked 111 among 125 countries as the same Index shows? The "Chariot of Trust" wants people not to believe that the India accounts for nearly 60% of the global increase in poverty in 2020, just little before the onset of Covid-19 (Pew Research). Even the significant decline of cumulative income of the households during the same period especially of the poorer households, as Azim Premji University revealed is reduced to insignificance by the Chariot of Trust.

NMPI and Development fallacy

The report recently released by the NITI Aayog on National Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (NMPI) provides one the context to argue how delusional it is to push the 'Make believe' approach of the present political dispensation forward. It's troublesome to repeat the rigorous statistical infrastructure, nor the flawed methodology being followed (already exposed by several scholars particularly when National consumption expenditure survey is not conducted by the present regime for years) to declare that 24.82 crore people moved out of poverty in nine years from 2013-14 to 2022-23. In other words, as per the findings of the MPI, India witnessed a steep decline of poverty from 29.17 percent to 11.28 percent in the period concerned.

Despite such a steep decline in poverty why it is that two-third of the population of the Republic are fed freely by the ruling regime? It implies that actually poverty is deepening steeply rather than declining. Besides, how is it possible to make such tall claim without the wherewithal (freebies) of the government? Does it not imply that the claim being made will collapse once wherewithal from the government stops flowing? What is much more disastrous and hence absolutely unacceptable is the

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sustainability argument. It claims that such a 'great Transformation' will put millions of these impoverished lot who hardly could manage to get two square a meal a day today on the road to sustainable development tomorrow, the development that sustains over time.

It is what may be called 'development fallacy' that has pervaded the economy but have substantial bearing on impoverishment of the people of India. For instance, MPI as an index captures access of the people to health, education and standard of living, measured through 12 indicators but not quality of the services/facilities. If someone is found, as per the index, to have access, he/she is claimed to have been out of poverty. However, such a claim becomes meaningless and, hence, misleading if it is examined against the backdrop of the quality of the services/facilities which is too poor to account for.

This is precisely one of the reasons why MPI which is primarily driven by access alone is too feeble a measure to claim such a substantial improvement in extricating the impoverished from poverty trap in the country. Even if one assumes access to education is made available to a large number of the poor (an unrealistic assumption though!), but quality is absent (as several studies show) end goal is never met. Similarly, one may have opened bank/post office account, but the latter is not made operational or no transaction has taken place. Hence, the end goal is never met. Does the MPI take this into account? No.

GDP growth and employment

The story of achieving higher growth rate of GDP being instrumental to dilution of impoverishment seems to be gradually becoming less appealing in the absence of any credible evidence. But, the unbroken legacy of the Washington Consensus that

the Chariot of Trust is carrying forward continues to create oasis of hope in the minds of the unemployed to access productive employment opportunities through trickle-down effect. While crux of the accumulated impoverishment lies in the absence of creation of employment opportunities, the sermon given by the neo-liberals constantly about realisation of the trickle-down effect has proved to be mockery of development against the backdrop of the stock of unemployed that have been increasing at a frightening scale.

A recent study conducted by Azim Premji University related to employment intensity of capital is certainly an eye opener in this regard. It reveals that "after adjusting for inflation, the number of jobs generated for every Rs of one crore investment fell between 1994 and 2015. In factories, Rs one crore of investment led to 33 jobs in 1994. By 2015, it fell to eight jobs (Times of India, 05-02-2024). This apart, among family enterprises units that are smaller in size, an investment of Rs 1 crore led to 4675 jobs in 1994. However, in 2015, just 702 jobs were created for the same investment. Not to talk about the decline in real wage rate, which has aggravated the living standard of the deprived further. Yet the economy of the Republic with almost 70 percent of its people who are living in the margin pulls on. It can do so by creating development illusion which is subsumed to the colonial 'catching-up' culture. It is here that one may ask: Can development be sustainable if millions of people are kept out of productive employment and income opportunities (not distress)?

Freebies as antidote

While the flawed perspective ingrained in its obscurantist approach yielded a dreadful employment scenario, freebies culture is chosen as anti-dote to poverty and is rated as a vehicle to

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transform the economy so as to achieve sustainable development. The employment creation which is the most reliable instrument for fighting out impoverishment is substituted by freebies. The truth is that freebies are fundamentally different from welfare schemes. As it is well established (even RBI observes) freebies are not public or merit goods like education and health care and expenses that the state incurs towards their delivery have wider implications especially for long-term economic development. It is justified on the ground that such welfare measures help the majority of the people to salvage from economic distress that come about in the wake of market failure. And, finally, such measures contribute greatly to improve human development index. But freebies are doled out with a different purpose and have nothing to do with long-term development. The purpose is to mask the real intention of the ruling party which is nothing but to influence the electorate to cast their vote in its favour. Nevertheless, the Chariot of Trust put the latter in the same box of merit goods and justify it as having same development implications for the poor.

Be that as it may. But how does one discount the parasitical impact of such intervention on the poor and

then estimates development outcome as positive and significant? Besides, no credible evidence exists that show freebies boosts up overall effective demand of the economy at the aggregate level causing an expansion of the home market. For, it has limited multiplier effect at the local level in the present context.

Structural reforms

In a market economy, 'Chariot of Trust' is never an unquestionable truth. The unquestionable truth is expansion of the home market as its fundamental pre-condition that must be met by way of raising the effective demand of the poor for the goods and services economy produces. Such a rise in demand is effected through the rise of their disposable income. And, this is possible to achieve only if employment and income of the poor rises. Why is agriculture and its allied activities as a potent source to raise the income level of the impoverished is downplayed? Where is the end of the 'catching-up culture' so that the same is assigned the crucial role to invigorate the home market to expand? No republic can do justice to the poor in a market economy like India's unless 70% of its population who are now living in the margin become active participant in the market along with the rest 30% of its population.

It requires structural reforms particularly of the agrarian economy from ownership of all forms of natural resources and their market. Reforms of the agricultural market needs urgent attention to escape from alarming agrarian crisis. All these together require a new policy perspective which differs from what the neo-liberals have been preaching for years. The decline in well-being because of decline in employment opportunities within the value creation of limited material production, is countered here by way of calibrating utilisation of local resources and job creation. It is here that one may argue how good growth can be promoted against bad growth. In other words, such production processes and services must be encouraged to grow at the local level that could fully internalise costs, involve renewable energies, zero emission, continue recycling of natural resources and restore 'Earth's ecosystem'.

The economy could benefit from it in two ways. On the one hand, they are small scale projects but energy-efficient, non-polluting and community-oriented: on the other, they have the potential to create local jobs through investment in green technologies. One may then have reasons to believe that the new per-

spective will act as a 'game changer' that makes market to act for the people rather than people to act according to what the market asks for. This will open up the routes to the local productive forces to be released and utilised for the local economy to grow as well. Its ramification on employment creation of the poor and thereby their participation in the market will be immense.

Conclusion

Hence, excessive reliance on trickle-down effect for employment creation and improving the well-being of those who are living in the margin on a long term basis is an illusion. Economic development is self-defeating in the long run. For, it bypasses the largest segment of the people of the republic the impoverished ones, (almost two-third) and create a huge development gap for them. Although the ruling regime attempts to fill the gap by doling out freebies, nobody knows whether the gap could ever be filled up. But what one knows that it is leading to the emergence of a 'parasite economy'. □□□

[Prof. Sunil Ray is former director of A N Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna. Presently, he is advisor to Impact and Policy Research Institute, Delhi and Centre for Development Studies and Communication, Jaipur]

MINOR DISSECTIONS

Indian Health Budget 2024

Jayanta Bhattacharya

BEFORE SCRUTINISING THE health portions of the budget it should be enlightening to traverse through some previous occurrences during 2021-2023 period. National Family Health Survey (NFHS) is the most reliable data-set regarding different aspects of health, family, economic differentials and so on. NFHS-5 survey had revealed

that over 57 percent of women and over 67 percent of children suffer from anaemia in the country. Prevalence of anaemia to such an extent cannot be dismissed as a mild problem or an isolated occurrence. Medical experts have pointed out that it is a major contributor to maternal and child mortality. It hinders growth and development in children, lead-

ing to long term implications for their health and well being. Anaemia also reduces resistance to infections among women and children. The impact on adolescent girls and pregnant women is a matter of grave concern. Was it an inconvenient for the government? For a government that believes in strong and 'positive' data, to work in tandem with its political campaign for electoral victories, the NFHS-5 had thrown up several data sets inconvenient for the government. For example, it showed that India was nowhere close

to being open defecation free – a claim that this government, including the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, often makes. Nineteen percent of households do not use any toilet facility, meaning that they practise open defecation, the NFHS-5 had pointed out. There is not a single state or Union Territory, except for Lakshadweep, where 100% of the population has access to a toilet, it had said. The NFHS-5 had also showed that more than 40% households did not have access to clean cooking fuel – thus questioning the claims of success of the Ujjwala Yojana. It said in rural areas, more than half the population, 57%, does not have access to LPG or natural gas. As a result, the high-placed government termed it as “flawed”. The Economic Times (October 16, 2023) published it under the heading “No place in Modi government for independent voices: Congress on revocation of IIPS director's suspension after he resigns”.

Truly speaking, NFHS data sets are collected and collated and prepared by International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and does other such important exercises on the behalf of the Indian government. The IIPS comes under the Union health ministry. It is an autonomous organisation of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the Government of India (GOI). Moreover, it is an institute deemed to be university. However, IIPS produced the NFHS-5. In this report, as the prevalence of anaemia among Indian population in such a huge proportion that the GOI was “Unhappy With Data Sets” used and sacked its director K S James being the scapegoat. The news was broadly publicised in most of the national dailies. Interestingly, K S James is an internationally acclaimed scholar serving as the visiting fellow in various universities of the Netherlands,

Australia, UK, France and the Harvard University.

Importantly, the Lancet (Global Health) in their study titled “Haemoglobin thresholds to define anaemia in a national sample of healthy children and adolescents aged 1–19 years in India: a population-based study” (9 June 2021) reported, “These findings support the re-examination of WHO haemoglobin cut offs to define anaemia. Our haemoglobin reference percentiles, derived from healthy participants in a large representative Indian survey, are suitable for national use in India. Substantial variations in the 5th percentile of haemoglobin values across the 1–19 years age range and between sexes argue against constructing common cut offs in stratified age groups for convenience ... In conclusion, on the basis of high-quality national data from a recent survey, this study provides contemporary age-specific and sex-specific haemoglobin reference centiles for children and adolescents aged 1–19 years, which are suitable for national use in India.”

Another esteemed journal PLoS published a report (September 6, 2023) titled “Is the burden of anaemia among Indian adolescent women increasing? Evidence from Indian Demographic and Health Surveys (2015–21)”. It noted – “The prevalence of anaemia among adolescent women in India increased from 54.2% (99% CI: 53.6–54.8) to 58.9% (99% CI: 58.3–59.5) over the study period (2015–16 to 2019–21). Among the 28 Indian states, 21 reported an increase in the prevalence of anaemia ... In conclusion, the rise in anaemia prevalence among adolescent women in India suggests the need for targeted interventions to mitigate the burden of anaemia and enhance the overall health of this population.”

In another study (“Shooting shad-

ows: India’s struggle to reduce the burden of anaemia”) published in the British Journal of Nutrition (6 April 2023) it was reported – “Despite several efforts by the Government of India, the national burden of anaemia remains high and its growing prevalence (between 2015–2016 and 2019–2021) is concerning to India’s public health system ... The Indian government should prioritise conducting a nationwide survey for estimating the burden of anaemia and its clinical determinants for all age groups using venous blood samples.”

The Budget Itself

Such definite and positive suggestions, no doubt, might have appeared much disturbing to the ruling party, especially at the international level. Following this, NFHS-6 was prepared sans “flawed data”. The inclusion of anaemia as an indicator was dropped. Against this perspective, one can do a brief survey of “health budget 2024”. The health sector received little traction this year too. For years, experts have suggested that the health budget should be at least 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and even the National Health Policy, 2017 put the target for increasing the budget to at least 2.5 percent of GDP by 2025. The FM allocated only Rs

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90,171 crore to the health sector for the crucial election year 2024-2025. The health allocation at 2.5 percent should have been Rs 8,19,000 crore, given the projected GDP for 2024-25 of Rs 3,27,71,808 crore. At 40 percent, the Union government's contribution should have been Rs 3,27,718 crore.

Here one should take into account three basic considerations—(1) “clinical health” (treatment of individuals in public hospitals or private clinics and five-star corporate hospitals) and “public health” (the science of protecting and improving the health of people and their communities) should not be equated and primary health centres are the cornerstone of public health, (2) consequently, “curative” health should not be paired with “preventive” health—these two are philosophically, socially and epistemologically different categories, and finally, (3) whether to “vertical” health programmes (like American model) or “horizontal” health programmes (like many European countries and Cuba).

Coming to the materiality of this year's budget, in the interim budget presented for the year 2024-25, Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman pitched for a ‘Viksit Bharat’ by 2047. However, in that imagination of a ‘developed India’, the budget allocation for the department of health and family welfare and the department of health research, and key nutrition programmes have dipped for the FY 2024-25 as compared to FY 2023-24 budget estimates, when adjusted for

inflation. Against the allocation of Rs 86,175 crore (according to budget estimates) for the department of health and family welfare for FY 2023-24, the allocation for 2024-25 stood at Rs 87,656 crore. While this seems to be an increase in absolute numbers, when adjusted for inflation at even 5%, this is a decline of 3.17%. Thus, in real terms, the budget for the health and family welfare department has gone down. For FY 2024-25, the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY) has been allocated Rs 2,400 crore as against the budget estimate of Rs 3,365 crore for the last financial year. This essays a decline of 33% even without taking into account the inflation. The Pradhan Mantri Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission (PM-ABHIM) is a flagship scheme of India government. This also saw a decline in allocation as compared to budget estimates for last year. It has been allocated Rs 4,107 crore for FY 2024-25 as compared to Rs 4,200 crore last year.

There is a separate head in the budget document titled “Establishment Expenditure of New AIIMS”. “It provides for establishment expenditure of 22 new AIIMS located at different states”, the document says. Under this head too, the budget estimates for FY 2024-25 have declined to Rs 6,800 crore from Rs 6,835 crore (budget estimates) for the previous year. But, actually speaking, according to a parliamentary reply given last year, not one of the 16 institutes conceived from 2014 is fully functional yet. The Indian Coun-

cil of Medical Research (ICMR), which comes under the department of health research and is the most prominent research body for health and science, has been allocated Rs 2,432 crore for FY 2024-25 as against Rs 2,360 crore for last year. Again, while in absolute numbers, this seems to be an increase, but when adjusted for inflation for even 5%, it is a decline of 1.87%. The scheme (Poshan 2.0 for providing nutrition) has been allocated Rs 21,200 crore for FY 2024-25, an increase from Rs 20,554.31 crore (budget estimates) from previous financial year. However, when adjusted with inflation of 5%, this allocation is actually a decline of 1.77%.

One worrying feature is that the decline in budgeted expenditure for health with respect to the total budgeted expenditure of the central government is worrying; the health sector outlay has fallen over the years, from 2.66% in 2022-23 and 2.06% in 2023-24 to around 1.98% this year. Additionally, considering the inflation rate of 5.69% in December 2023, health spending in real terms has decreased. In fact, the budgeted expenditure for the two ministries is a meagre 0.27% of the GDP estimate for 2024-25. Following the devastating assault on primary health care during the COVID period one can only expect that public health programmes should be reinvigorated on the one hand, and revitalisation of primary health care on the other. Is it the time to be bamboozled and befooled again? □□□

THE SUPREME COURT JUDGEMENT

Scrapping Electoral Bonds Scheme

I Mallikarjuna Sharma

DURING THE FIRST PHASE of the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) central government itself the Electoral Bonds scheme permitting funding of politi-

cal parties by anonymous donors was introduced, mainly at the initiative of the then Finance Minister, late Arun Jaitley, which resulted in almost unlimited and anonymous

corporate funding of political parties, the maximum benefit going to the ruling party, BJP. Congress also got some hundreds of crores rupees through electoral bonds. On 15 February 2024, The Supreme Court struck down the electoral bonds scheme as unconstitutional and invalid and gave several directions in this regard.

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The Court identified the issues involved as follows: a.) Whether unlimited corporate funding to political parties, as envisaged by the amendment to Section 182(1) of the Companies Act infringes the principle of free and fair elections and violates Article 14 of the Constitution; and b.) Whether the non-disclosure of information on voluntary contributions to political parties under the Electoral Bond Scheme and the amendments to Section 29C of the RPA, Section 182(3) of the Companies Act and Section 13A(b) of the IT Act are violative of the right to information of citizens under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution.

Mr. Prashant Bhushan, senior counsel, argued on behalf of the petitioners. So did Sri Kapil Sibal, Senior Counsel, Mr. Vijay Hansaria, Mr. Sanjay Hegde, Senior counsels and yet other counsels on similar lines. Attorney General of India and Solicitor General of India argued supporting the electoral bonds scheme and underscoring that it was in effect curbing black money transactions in elections processes.

The Court felt that the challenge to the statutory amendments and the Electoral Bond Scheme cannot be adjudicated in isolation without a reference to the actual impact of money on electoral politics. And also that right to information of voters is crucial element in maintaining and promoting democratic elections process in the country. Case law relating both was extensively discussed. The court stated that Electoral democracy in India is premised on the principle of political equality which the Constitution guarantees in two ways. First, by guaranteeing the principle of "one person one vote" which assures equal representation in voting. Second, the Constitution ensures that socio-economic inequality does not perpetuate political inequality by mandating reservation of

seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Parliament and State Assemblies. The Constitution guarantees political equality by focusing on the 'elector' and the 'elected'. The Court came to the opinion that that the information about funding to a political party is essential for a voter to exercise their freedom to vote in an effective manner. The Electoral Bond Scheme and the impugned provisions to the extent that they infringe upon the right to information of the voter by anonymising contributions through electoral bonds are violative of Article 19(1)(a).

The Court also proceeded to determine whether the infringement of the right to information of the voters is justified vis-à-vis the purposes of (a) curbing black money; and (b) protecting donor privacy. Court came to the conclusion that Electoral Bond Scheme is not the only means for curbing black money in Electoral Finance. There are other alternatives which substantially fulfil the purpose and impact the right to information minimally when compared to the impact of electoral bonds on the right to information.

On donor privacy the Court came to the conclusive opinion that - The Union of India has been unable to establish that the measure employed in Clause 7(4) of the Electoral Bond Scheme is the least restrictive means to balance the rights of informational privacy to political contributions and the right to information of political contributions. Thus, the amendment to Section 13A (b) of the IT Act introduced by the Finance Act 2017, and the amendment to Section 29C(1) of the RPA are unconstitutional. The question is whether this Court should only strike down the non-disclosure provision in the Electoral Bond Scheme which is Clause 7(4). However, the anonymity of the contributor is intrinsic to

the Electoral Bond Scheme. The Electoral Bond is not distinguishable from other modes of contributions through the banking channels such as cheque transfer, transfer through the Electronic Clearing System or direct debit if the anonymity component of the Scheme is struck down. Thus, the Electoral Bond Scheme 2018 will also consequentially have to be struck down as unconstitutional.

The Court also did not see the necessity of viewing the non-disclosure requirement in Section 182(3) of the Companies Act from the lens of a shareholder in this case when we have identified the impact of non-disclosure of information on political funding from the larger compass of a citizen and a voter. In view of the above discussion, Section 182(3) as amended by the Finance Act 2017 is declared unconstitutional.

The Court expressed the opinion that companies and individuals cannot be equated for the purpose of political contributions. The Court came to the following conclusions:

a. The Electoral Bond Scheme, the proviso to Section 29C (1) of the Representation of the People Act 1951 (as amended by Section 137 of Finance Act 2017), Section 182(3) of the Companies Act (as amended by Section 154 of the Finance Act 2017), and Section 13A(b) (as amended by Section 11 of Finance Act 2017) are violative of Article 19(1)(a) and unconstitutional; and b. The deletion of the proviso to Section 182(1) of the Companies Act permitting unlimited corporate contributions to political parties is arbitrary and violative of Article 14.

The Court directed the disclosure of information on contributions received by political parties under the Electoral Bond Scheme to give logical and complete effect to its ruling. The Court made it clear that in its

interim order dated 12 April 2019 itself, it directed that the information of donations received and donations which will be received must be submitted by political parties to the ECI in a sealed cover; that political parties submit detailed particulars of the donors as against each Bond, the amount of each bond and the full particulars of the credit received against each bond, namely, the particulars of the bank account to which the amount has been credited and the date on which each such credit was made. The Court observed that pursuant to that interim direction, the ECI must have collected particulars of contributions made to political parties through Electoral Bonds.

The Court issued the following directions consequent upon its final opinions: a.) The issuing bank shall herewith stop the issuance of Electoral Bonds; b.) SBI shall submit details of the Electoral Bonds purchased since the interim order of this Court dated 12 April 2019 till date to the ECI. The details shall

include the date of purchase of each Electoral Bond, the name of the purchaser of the bond and the denomination of the Electoral Bond purchased; c.) SBI shall submit the details of political parties which have received contributions through Electoral Bonds since the interim order of this Court dated 12 April 2019 till date to the ECI. SBI must disclose details of each Electoral Bond encashed by political parties which shall include the date of encashment and the denomination of the Electoral Bond; d.) SBI shall submit the above information to the ECI within three weeks from the date of this judgment, that is, by 6 March 2024; e.) The ECI shall publish the information shared by the SBI on its official website within one week of the receipt of the information, that is, by 13 March 2024; and f.) Electoral Bonds which are within the validity period of fifteen days but that which have not been encashed by the political party yet shall be returned by the political party or the purchaser depending on who is in

possession of the bond to the issuing bank. The issuing bank, upon the return of the valid bond, shall refund the amount to the purchaser's account.

Sri Sanjiv Khanna, J. delivered a separate concurrent opinion agreeing with the opinions and conclusions of the Court Opinion delivered by Sri Chandrachud, CJI, but at the same time clarified that he arrived at the same by a different reasoning including application of the doctrine of proportionality and hence penned down a separate opinion. He extracted a table of donations received by various political parties in India as given in the petitioner's averments wherein it was stated that BJP got the lion's share of such donations through electoral bonds.

In general, the decision is welcome but the question how far corporations should be allowed to contribute to political parties and how much in the maximum they can contribute, seems not definitely decided.

□□□

FARMERS PROTEST

The Return of Agrarian Question

Atanu Chakravarty

THESE ARE FARMERS AND not criminals.... If you have to honour MS Swaminathan then we have to take our farmers along with us".

These words of Dr Madhura Swaminathan, Economist and daughter of Bharat Ratna M S Swaminathan drew thunderous applause among the scientists during an event organised by Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) in Delhi's Pusa.

Once again the government's police administration has laid bare its fangs, raised its ugly head to stop the 'Delhi Chalho' [Delhi march] of agitat-

ing farmers. And for the first time in this country, Haryana police fired rubber bullets while bursting tear gas shells upon the protesting farmers from drones, made by DRISHYIA, a public listed company set up in 2021, for the purpose of surveying infra projects and monitoring of crops, but now being used as a weapon against those who cultivate fields. The security establishment fortified the borders at Singhu-Tikri and Ghazipur with multilayered barricades using concertina wires, nails, concrete blocks and shipping containers. Jails were kept ready to put the agitators behind the bars.

But what are the demands of the farmers? Swaminathan Commission recommended minimum support price (MSP) on crops should be raised to at least 50 percent above the weighted average cost of production incurred by farmers, farm debt waivers, cancellation of international agreement impacting the agricultural sector, pension scheme of Rs 5,000 for farmers and farm labourers, compensation for families of farmers who died during the previous farmers protest movement in 2020-21. The farmers in western UP were affected by the Jewar airport project and Yamuna Expressway. In Haryana's Sonapat farmers protesting against land acquisition for power cables have joined this movement adding strength.

A terrible distress has engulfed Indian agriculture. The fight for MSP

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is not a mere economic demand; it has challenged the free market doctrine and big corporates vying to capture the entire farm economy in India.

As per the report of National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), during 2014- 2022, 100,471 farmers committed suicide, which amounts to 30 suicides per day in these years! In the second term of Modi Government, the total farmer suicides increased in absolute numbers, from 10,281 to 11, 281, and most worryingly, suicide among the agricultural workers seems to be much higher from 4,324 to 6,083! Vidharba and Marathwada of Maharashtra were the worst affected regions.

Notwithstanding the self-congratulatory praise of moving 25 crore people out of poverty, 30 trillion dollar economy by 2047 and an economy setting to rebound from the crisis of slowdown, the harsh reality is that the Indian economy is facing its worst crisis of rural distress. The most important indicator of deepening rural distress as pointed out by economist Himangshu is the data on real wages from the labour bureau. In truth in the last five years, agricultural wages in real terms have grown at only 0.2 % per annum (until Nov 2023) and non-farm wages declined at 0.9% per year (A reality check for Budget, Indian Express, 3 February, 2024).

Failure to get remunerative prices is a persistent problem in Indian agriculture. There is official data in this regard. In 2021 National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) released the Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Livestock Holdings of Households in Rural India (SAS) conducted in 2018-19. This is the most authoritative source of statistical information on economic conditions of Indian farms and farmers. SAS data shows that every third Indian farmer was dissatisfied with the prices they received for

their output in the market. In terms of quantity, farmers were dissatisfied with a quarter of the disposal of their crops. The dissatisfaction level was much bigger among those who grew crops such as fruits, vegetables (in terms of quantity sold at a dissatisfactory price) or pulses and oilseeds (in terms of dissatisfactory price).

The National Statistical Office's 77th round of survey shows that over 50% of the agricultural households are in debt, with the farmer's debt increasing by 58% over the last five years. Income from farming has decreased in real terms, with most of the agricultural income coming in the form of wages, or non-farm business. This increasing trend is transforming farmers into agricultural labourers, or in other words, proletarianisation of peasantry is on the rise.

Devinder Sharma, an eminent agricultural scientist said, as far as crop cultivation was concerned; the average agricultural households earned Rs 3,798 a month in 2018-19. In real terms when adjusted for inflation, the earnings from cultivation had declined by 8.9% between 2012-13 and 2018-19. Further, broken on a per day basis, a newspaper has worked out the income from crop cultivation at Rs 27 a day! Even a MGNREGA worker earns more. Income from cultivation is certainly less than earnings from an average lactating cow on a per day basis, given the farm gate price of approx Rs 30 a litre.

In 2011, Modi as Chief Minister of Gujarat and Chairman of a working group had submitted a report to the then PM Manmohan Singh, which said that 'in order to protect the interest of the farmers, we must ensure through legal provisions that no transaction between farmer and trader should be done below MSP'. In 2014, Modi promised MSP at least one and a half times the comprehensive cost

of production but after coming to power he simply forgot his poll promise. Rather, the Modi government filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court pleading that it would not be possible to determine the MSP according to the poll promise as such exercise would distort the market. On 22 February, 2016, on the eve of Union Budget, Modi made another promise on 'doubling farmer's income by 2022' as India completes 75 years of Independence.

A reversal of structural transformation in the workforce after 2017-18 is another glaring pointer of the terrible distress of rural economy. Decelerating private investment and absence of decent jobs have made the crisis-ridden agriculture the last refuge for those unable to find employment elsewhere. 42 million workers have moved back to the agriculture between 2017-18 and 2022-23 which is much higher than the level in 2011-12. A close look at the data would have shown a high increase in female self employment, working as unpaid labour, and 95 million people working without wages!

In the latest interim budget estimates, major heads such as agriculture, rural development, nutrition, education and health have either remained stagnant or declined in real terms. This would further push the rural economy back into distress.

The farmers have again torn asunder the sheen of Vikshit Bharat which Modi is propagating on the eve of general election, and the grit and resolve of the farmers will ultimately come out victorious.

For the last few weeks farmers are agitating all across the Europe. Farmers virtually blocked all seven motorways leading to Paris with thousands of tractors and are camped outside the city. Beginning in France, the protests soon spread over to Germany, where enraged farmers paralysed half of Berlin. The farm stir has

also spread to Romania, the Netherlands, Poland, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Belgium. Farmers in Spain, Italy and Greece are preparing to organise protest rallies in the coming months if their demands remain unaddressed. These European protests remind the protesting Indian farmers camping in the outskirts and blocking the highways leading to Delhi two years ago.

The European protests are prima-

rily against denial of an assured and rightful price to farmers. In European Union a small farmer receives mere 27 percent of what a consumer pays for farm products in a super market. The issue is identical in India too. Here a small farmer gets just 27 to 31 paise on every rupee of purchase by a consumer in a super market or a local Kirana (Grocery) store. The middlemen, big merchants and cor-

porate houses engaged in agri-business corner the lions share at the expense of basic producers.

At the time of writing [February 19] three Union Ministers reached Chandigarh to hold fourth round of talks with farmer leaders. The previous three rounds of talks largely remained inconclusive to address the farmers' demands for a legal guarantee of the MSP of their crops. □□□

LOOKING BACK

Subhas Ganguly—My Life Teacher

Sudipta Bhattacharya

“Write your name five times”

IT WAS A NICE MORNING IN the Autumn of 1989. Five or six 16-year-old boys were sitting on a “Shataranchi” on the floor, in a room full of books on diverse topics, artifacts from some scientific experiments, portable typewriter, seashells and what not. Boys were taken aback by the ask of their Statistics tutor, but they did repeat writing their names on a piece of paper five times.

“What do you see? Even if you write your own name with your own hands a couple of times at once, they will look different. This is due to some non-explainable random variation.”

This was my first exposure to the insightful way of scientific teaching that my “Sir”, Subhas Ganguly had advocated for the better part of his life. My interaction with him started as one of his students but it changed over the course of time to one of his disciples. I know Sir wouldn't have liked this choice of word of mine for describing my relationship with him but in absence of any other appro-

priate word, I would prefer sticking to this expression because deep inside I looked up to him as someone who had opened my eyes on many dimensions, starting from philosophy of scientific leaning all the way to the psychological challenges we face in our lives, humanity, the political aspects of modern time, history, just to name a few.

Every time I went to meet him during my visits to Kolkata, my time with Sir rolled from morning to afternoon, afternoon to late evening. But it never felt enough. I had so many questions to ask, and he had so much more to offer. Every time I came out of that flat, I felt that I would have to come back to listen to him again. Thinking out of the box has been a buzzword for years, but it is very difficult if not impossible to think differently unless someone gets the guidance of a person like Subhas Ganguly.

My discussion with Sir ranged from Bill Clinton to hanging of Dhananjay, Nandigram to intangible nature of particle-matter physics,

Osho Rajnish to Einstein, Bicycle Thieves to Rabindranath at such an ease that before I would realise, I got the name of five different books to read. Because of my living in America, I am somewhat aware of the oppression on the blacks by the system. But when I brought up that topic to him, Sir highlighted on the ‘genocide’ of Native Americans by the Europeans in the past few hundred years, a gruesome topic related to the settlement of Europeans in America that is hardly touched upon by any reasonable degree.

Last few years, since my children were born, my calling him over telephone or emailing him reduced. I could feel that Sir wanted me to call him more, but life intervened and I failed. Lately Sir used to tell me he was getting into a phase of depression, but I always hoped that next time I would go to visit him, I would find him as I had always seen him for the last 35 years of my life.

Like everyone near him, I will always miss my Sir; miss his scholarly and magnetic presence and guidance for becoming a better human being; but what I will crave for the rest of my life is the undercurrent of his love and affection that I cherished for decades together. □□□

LETTERS

Magsaysay Award

Dear Sandeep Pandey

Please accept my congratulations on your honest decision to return the cash component of the Magsaysay Award in 2002, and your present decision to return the Award itself too, in protest against

the US role in supporting Israel in its genocide in Gaza—since two US bodies, the Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation fund the Magsaysay Foundation, thus enabling it to offer the cash component along with the award to recipients.

But I wish you take a look further back at the life of the historical figure himself in whose name the Philippines-based institution operates—Ramon Magsaysay. If you probe into history, you may find to your shock that he spent a large part of his career presiding over a programme of ruthless killing of poor Filipino peasant protestors in 1953.

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He was then the Secretary of Defence under President Elpidio Quirino, and was entrusted with the task of suppressing the Hukbalahap rebellion led by the Communist Luis Taruk, who demanded peasants' rights to their lands. Not surprisingly, after he became the President in late 1953, his past anti-Communist record drew appreciation from the US which became his patron, pouring aid to develop the war-torn economy of the Philippines. Magsaysay remained a loyal and subservient ally of the US all through the Cold War years, which explains the US-funded institution of the award in his name after his death.

Given this political background of Magsaysay, should socialist and liberal humanist intellectuals accept an award named after him, and funded by his US patrons? Shouldn't they denounce Magsaysay himself while rejecting the award?

Sumanta Banerjee, Hyderabad Proletarian Internationalism

The Water Transport Workers Federation of India representing more than 3500 workers at the 11 Major Ports in the country has decided to refuse to load or unload weaponised cargoes from Israel or any other country which could handle military equipments and its allied cargo for war in Palestine.

We, the Port workers, part of labour unions would always stand against the war and killing innocent people like women and children. The recent attack of Israel on Gaza plunging thousands of Palestinians into immense suffering and loss. Women and children have been blown to pieces in the war. Parents were unable to recognise their children killed in bombings which were exploding everywhere.

At this juncture our Union members have collectively decided to refuse handling all types of weaponised cargoes. Loading and unloading these weapons helps provide organisations with the ability to kill innocent people.

Therefore, we, the Indian Port & Dock Workers from various Major Ports active in the ground of Cargo handling sector, call on our members to no longer handle any ships which carry military material to Palestine/Israel.

We, therefore, also call for an immediate ceasefire. As the responsible trade

unions, we declare our solidarity with those who campaign for peace. We call upon the workers of the world and peace-loving people to stand with the demand of free Palestine.

**T Narendra Rao
General Secretary
Water Transport Workers
Federation of India**

CITF 2024

The Colombo International Theatre Festival (CITF) which started in 2012, is approaching its successive 10th edition. CITF 2024 will feature Mono Dramas from across the globe, formal and informal interactions between artists from Sri Lanka and abroad, towards a sustained effort in curating a festival with a purpose of bringing innovative performances to Sri Lanka.

Over 70 countries covering all continents, 100 theatre groups and over 1000 artists and veterans have participated during the previous 09 years including Sri Lankan theatre fraternity. It is a stable and recognised festival. It is an International Theatre Festival.

Interact Art Theatre Institute is a small-scale theatre company. But the difference it has made over the years is not small.

The Colombo International Theatre Festival will be organised as an International Monodrama competitive festival in this year too.

Short Play Category—For South Asia Region only. Maximum duration is 15 minutes.

Long Play Category—Any theater group from around the world could participate. Minimum duration is 45 minutes to maximum 60 minutes.

The organisers will cover the local hospitality of the group & up to 4 members during the festival, and provide the meals, accommodation, performance venue, local transport and publicity.

The other expenses shall be borne by the participating group, including their travel to Sri Lanka and back visa if applicable and insurance, etc.

Theatre enthusiasts are ready for the new year with new hopes for the

2024 Theatre Festival... in August. Closing Date 10th March 2024.

Any further clarification, feel free to contact us on email interactartsl@gmail.com, Application Link—<https://citf.lk/index.php/dear-all-global-theatre-friends/>

**M Safeer, Festival Director
Prasad Wikramaratna
Festival Secretary
Colombo International
Theatre Festival (CITF)**

Alexei Navalny is Dead

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny died on February 16 after collapsing and losing consciousness at the penal colony north of the Arctic Circle where he was serving a long jail term.

Navalny, by far Russia's most popular opposition leader, was a lawyer by profession and rose to prominence more than a decade ago by lampooning the elite class round President Vladimir Putin and voicing allegations of corruption on a vast scale. He was 47. To his supporters he was Nelson Mandela of Russia.

Navalny earned admiration for Russia's disparate opposition for voluntarily returning to Russia in 2021 from Germany, where he had been treated for what Western laboratory tests showed was an attempt to poison him with a nerve agent.

Navalny said at the time that he was poisoned in Siberia in August 2020. The Kremlin denied trying to kill him and said there was no evidence he was poisoned with a nerve agent. In truth the Kremlin suggested Navalny who spent some time as a scholar at Yale University, was a CIA stooge and troublemaker out to topple the government and turn Moscow into a pliant US vassal state. Ideologically he was close to European far-right, advocating anti-immigration policy.

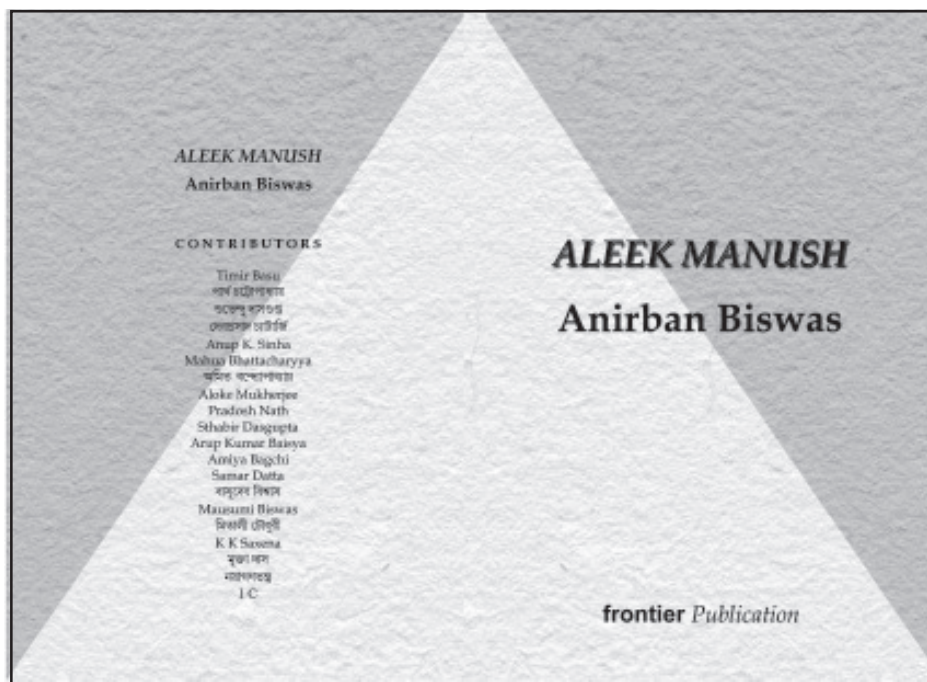
Almost all American and western leaders including Ukraine's Zelensky blamed it on Putin for his death. America and its western allies have long been trying to isolate Russia in view of the ongoing Ukraine war and Navalny's death in prison is a new weapon in their hands to mobilise public opinion against Russia across the world.

After meeting him in prison on 12th February his mother Lyudmila Navalnaya wrote on Facebook 'he was alive, healthy and happy'.

A Reader

A **frontier** Publication

Just Released



ALEEK MANUSH

Anirban Biswas

COMPILATION TEAM:

TIMIR BASU, ARUP SEN, NABINANDA SEN, TARUN BASU

CONTRIBUTORS:

TIMIR BASU, PARTHA CHATTOPADHYAY, SHUBHENDU DASGUPTA,
DEBAPROSAD CHATTERJEE, ANUP K. SINHA, MAHUA BHATTACHARYYA,
AMIT BANDYOPADHYAY, ALOKE MUKHERJEE, PRADOSH NATH, STHABIR
DASGUPTA, ARUP KUMAR BAISYA, AMIYA BAGCHI, SAMAR DATTA,
BASUDEB BISWAS, MAUSUMI BISWAS, MITALI CHOWDHURY, K K SAXENA,
MUKTA DAS, NAYAGANATANTRA, I C

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