

frontier

Vol. 56 : No. 38

ISSN 0016-2094

March 17-23, 2024

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Published weekly for Germinal Publications Pvt. Ltd. by Sharmistha Dutta from 44, Balaram Dey Street, Kolkata-700006 and Printed by her at Laser Aid, 35A/3, Biplabi Barin Ghosh Sarani, Kolkata-700 067.

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[Typeset by THE D-COMLASER, 60 Sikdar Bagan Street, Kolkata-4, Ph : 98361-58319]

Political Violence in Bengal

VIOLENCE BEGETS VIOLENCE. AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN West Bengal is now endemic, with the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) documenting an average of 20 political killings annually from 1999 to 2016.

Particularly alarming is the surge in violence following the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, with at least 47 political killings of workers affiliated with the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the majority of which occurred in South Bengal. Right now South Bengal is again in the news for what is happening -or not happening- in Sandeshkhali. Accusations of sexual harassment and land grabbing have been levied against some of their leaders. And the opposition parties are utilising it to derive maximum mileage in the coming parliamentary elections. The Centre sent a fact-finding team, led by the former Chief Justice of the Patna High Court, possibly to assess the damage the ruling TMC might suffer in the coming general elections due to Sandeshkhali factor. Quite expectedly, a member of the 'independent fact-finding team', labelled the prevailing atmosphere in the island as 'horrifying'.

The situation in Sandeshkhali escalated on January 5 when an enforcement directorate (ED) team conducting a raid at one Sheikh Sahajan's house, was attacked by a mob allegedly owing allegiance to the ruling TMC. This incident further fuelled public outrage, particularly among women, who have been protesting vigorously since February 7 against atrocities committed by local TMC leaders.

For one thing data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reveals a concerning trend in missing women cases, with West Bengal ranking as the second-largest state in terms of reported missing women. Despite being less populous than Maharashtra where 33,964 women were reported missing in 2018, West Bengal reported 31,299 missing women cases in the same year, disproportionately high for its population size. Notably, Kolkata, Nadia, Barasat, Barrackpore, South 24 Parganas and Murshidabad recorded the highest number of missing women cases, highlighting the severity of the issue.

Sandeshkhali, a region in South 24 Parganas, reflects the state's diverse demographic composition. Scheduled Castes (SCs) constitute 30.9 percent of the population, while Scheduled Tribes (STs) make up 25.9 percent. Ironically, this area—Sandeshkhali—once witnessed historic 'Tebhaga' move-

ment and communists had huge following among peasants. And people were above communal influence. Even the Muslim League during the British period failed to mobilise Muslim peasants for its communal agenda in this locality. Today communist presence among tillers can hardly be recognised.

The state's political history is characterised by a cycle of power shifts between different parties. The Indian National Congress (INC) dominated the political scene for over two decades post-independence, followed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)–CPI(M), which held power for more than three decades. Currently, the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) is in power. How-

ever, regardless of the ruling party and their professed ideological orientation, the culture of violent clashes between political workers, especially in rural Bengal has persisted, intensifying in recent years.

The proliferation of political violence has made it a central issue in public discourse and policy debates in India. It's a staple for the mainstream media with their committed bias towards the ruling dispensation at the centre. The contentious nature of politics in West Bengal has often led to violent confrontations, posing significant challenges to governance and stability.

The root cause of political violence lies in how to loot the exchequer through vote. In absence of employ-

ment opportunities foot soldiers are always ready to serve the parties with guns. And bomb making has become a cottage industry in Bengal.

Not that other states are free from political violence. Only the degree varies. It can't be otherwise in a situation of continuing criminalisation of politics. The mass mobilisation against social and economic injustice is the answer and yet all parties, irrespective of their colour indulge in cheap populism while doing some kind of shadow boxing during election season, avoiding real issues that affect ordinary people. Both communists and anti-communists are in the same boat. All of them are in a rat race to win elections—or lose them at any cost. □□□

COMMENT

Shutting Down Internets

INDIA IS THE LARGEST DEMOCRACY of the world. So they claim. But the Modi administration is continually defining and redefining democracy to suit their vested interests. It is at worst an elected autocracy gagging the voice of dissent at every level. Freedom House has downgraded India from "free" to "partly free", while V-Dem classifies India as "electoral autocracy" down from "electoral democracy". One way to cripple the opposition campaign is to shutdown internet and digital platforms. Internet shutdowns in India have escalated dramatically under the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. Modi's India is said to have recorded the highest number of internet cut-offs in the last five years. It's a kind of collective punishment to people for raising their voices against social and economic injustice. In truth, the blanket digital ban is an alarming trend to make Modi's India a notorious police state.

A surge since 2020 in India's

utilisation of internet shutdowns has surpassed even openly authoritarian regimes such as Russia, Sudan, Iran, Myanmar, and Ethiopia. This period has marked a tendency toward digital authoritarianism, notably triggered by responses to various protests.

Much of this trend can be traced back to August 2017 when the Modi government issued a rule under the Telegraph Act, granting legal authority for such shutdowns. Before this, there was legal ambiguity surrounding the permissibility of such a move in India.

The alteration in the Act was seen as beneficial to the BJP government, particularly when it unilaterally revoked the semi-autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, abolishing Article 370 and imposed an 18-month internet blackout. Also, last year, the north-eastern state of Manipur experienced an indefinite internet shutdown, causing widespread devastation among its people. The horror of Manipur ethnic violence and subsequent police action or inaction remained largely

unreported. What came out in the mainstream media was far from the reality.

The idea of collective punishment, where the entire population suffers due to perceived threats, has virtually become normalised, particularly in Kashmir and Manipur.

The government of India has not only imposed an internet ban amid the ongoing farmers' protest but has also issued two sets of blocking orders for social media accounts and links related to the protests, with 177 links and accounts blocked, including 42 X accounts. Most accounts withheld or suspended were critical of the BJP government and its various measures to bash the minority community. This intolerance is deep-rooted and it has already paved the way for the rise of fascism.

Meanwhile X, via its Global Government Affairs account, announced it would withhold some accounts and posts in India following government orders despite disagreeing with the action and citing freedom of expression.

Digital experts contend that the substantial increase in web censorship and internet shutdowns just

weeks before India's general election is deeply concerning.

There had been a noticeable increase in content takedown and blocking of social media handles related to the on-going farmer's protests. As the protest movement turned chaotic with police using tear gas, rubber bullets, iron pellets and water cannon the government wants to erase the real scenario in the name of 'fighting' fake news.

How citizens could exercise their right to peaceful assembly if all protests were deemed as a public emergency or matter of public safety is a big question.

For one thing X served as a reliable medium for farmers during their protests in 2020-21. The platform was instrumental in issuing official press releases, documenting

police excesses, fostering community, and garnering sympathy for their cause through hashtags. It emerged as a crucial informational conduit for farmers to articulate their demands and counter disinformation.

"The situation today is different. Blocking orders for Twitter [now X] accounts of farm leaders have been issued in advance. This form of censorship is without any transparency or natural justice".

Globally, bills are being tabled advocating for the right to the internet as a basic human right. However, in this part of the world, internet shut-downs are being enforced upon citizens regularly. Right to freedom of expression is now a luxury, available only to the advocates of ruling party ideology.

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NOTE

PM Awas—Many Questions

Bharat Dogra writes:

ALL THE KOL TRIBAL FAMILIES of Dafai hamlet of Karvi block, Chittrakut district are extremely poor and vulnerable. In a rare achievement, almost all of them have received housing assistance under PM Awas. What is more, corruption and payment of commissions has been avoided in this particular village, although it is a common practice elsewhere. In the case of most of the households here, almost all of the house construction (leaving aside plastering) has been completed. If several of them have not yet moved in, it is because an auspicious worship considered important in their culture is still awaited.

For one thing even without plastering and white washing and some finishing touches the government funds were not adequate for the house and as these are really very poor people with no savings and with precarious livelihoods, they had no op-

tion but to borrow the remaining money at a high rate of interest from private moneylenders. The result is that they have the new house but have to return a high sum on weekly basis which may be very difficult to pay particularly during the lean season of livelihood opportunities. The lenders have stated clearly that they have to return the loan instalments in time no matter what the compulsions of borrowers are.

Villagers gave the break down of the minimal expenditure for the two room house constructed under this scheme (in Rs):

1. 7000 bricks—Rs 42,000
2. 6 quintal iron bars—Rs 36,000
3. Two trolley stones (gitti)—6000
4. 70 sacks of cement—Rs 22,000
5. Five trolleys of sand—Rs 15,000
6. Doors etc.—Rs 10,000
7. Mason—Rs 12,000
8. Plastering—Rs 25,000
9. Whitewashing, misc, labour other

than mason, interest payment in the course of house construction as government funds are released in instalments, money spent when overcharged etc. If toilets and washrooms are to be constructed, these too need funds. There are no toilets in this village yet.

Keeping in view all these aspects and inflation, what these villagers need is about Rs 2 lakh for a housing unit, and not Rs 1.20 lakh in three instalments (each instalment paid after certain work has been completed).

In this particular village bribes have not been given or taken in the housing scheme, the villagers said. However elsewhere when bribes are common, the situation becomes even more difficult for the really poor households selected under this scheme.

Another question relates to the unskilled work done by the beneficiary household members. They are supposed to be paid for this and have been told the likely sum is Rs 18,000 or so but they have not received this yet. The scheme of Rs

12,000 for toilet construction has also not reached this village yet, and regarding this it is often stated that this amount should be increased keeping in view of real expenses needed for proper construction in

inflationary times.

In Dafai in some cases old kutchas houses were demolished when new ones were constructed, but in some cases these were not. This writer saw a new house which has been

beautifully integrated with the old dwelling. This family has constructed the new house in such a way that both can be used together and are almost attached to each other with a little open space in between. □□□

INDIAN REALITY

Redefining Imperialism

Arup Baisya

THERE EXISTS DIVERSITY within Marxist revolutionary circle in conceptualising the phenomenon of fascism vis-à-vis dictatorship in the Indian context. And one must understand that there cannot be any static definition of it for all time to come. But on one count, revolutionaries agree that there are many camps which are pitted against the forces that are hell bent on changing the form of state from constitutional democracy to an authoritarian regime. These camps can be broadly delineated as Bourgeois democratic, Reformist left and Revolutionary left. The political content of the three camps differentiates them with distinctive features. Bourgeois camp wants a space for them for capital investment and profit and the concomitant constitutional democracy. Left reformists want to extend the bourgeois space so that profit motive is restricted in such a way that the welfare of the toiling masses is guaranteed, the left revolutionaries espouse the ultimate defeat of the fascist vis-à-vis authoritarian regime only through radical transformation of the society under the leadership of working class. Broadly speaking, these three forces go through a process of permutation and combination while combating the transformation of the fascist/authoritarian transformation of the state albeit dictated by the social balance of force at any moment of time.

So, this is important that a revo-

lutionary party continuously assess the situation to formulate its task ahead, both strategically and tactically. It is unfortunate that a section of revolutionaries jumped the gun with a mechanical and static interpretation of the here and now and set their task to sit on the lap of the Congress to combat fascist/authoritarian transformation of the state. This mechanical anti-Marxist approach compels them to hurriedly formulate an inchoate idea of revolutionary unity which smacks of choosing the bed-fellows for constructing an opportunistic comfort-zone. The Indian revolutionaries with the legacy of Naxalbari uprising have a chequered past to always side with the ongoing class-struggle and intensifying the class-struggle for a radical transformation of the society. It does not mean that one claims to occupy the position of the science of social change without committing any mistake in theory of praxis and to epitomise the knowledge of the ongoing class-struggle and its future ramifications. Marxism does not entail staticity of mindset and demands continuous assessment of the concrete situation through concrete analysis.

What India is witnessing now resembles the social transformation that leads the gradual predominance of the capitalist social order which Marx described as “primitive accumulation”. Marx described it as a pre-condition for establishing a

centralised absolutist state capable of upholding the new capitalist social order that emerges from appropriation of property and proletarianisation while at the same time legitimising it as a regime of ‘freedom and equality’. But Marx saw the early capitalist colonialism in the form of British act for settlement in Australia and emphasised the internal dynamics of capitalism for territorial expansion. In the present form of imperialism, the dependent economy like India is pursuing a state policy of income deflation of the vast majority of Indian masses caused by the displacement of peasants and permanent workforce as “primitive accumulation” for sustenance of imperialist division of labour based on unequal exchange and transfer of value from periphery to centre.

J A Hobson in 1902 coined a new popular term to describe the phenomena of his age: imperialism. Many of Hobson's ideas influenced the Marxist theories of imperialism that were to be formulated a few years later. According to Hobson capitalism appears to have moved beyond its ‘competitive’ stage and entered a new phase characterised by high levels of concentration of capital in ‘trusts’ and ‘combines’. The growth of production is accompanied by reduction in the income of the labouring masses, in turn triggering a fall in consumption and leading to recurrent capitalist crises. Export of capital is an answer to the problem of the crisis. Imperialism is a symptom of the capitalist crisis of under-consumption. Rudolf Hilferding introduced into Marxist theory the

idea of a 'latest phase' of capitalism, characterised by the formation of monopolistic enterprises which abolish capitalist competition, fusion of bank and industrial capital leading to the formation of finance capital, which is seen as the ultimate form of capital, subordination of the state to monopolies and finance capital, and finally, emergence of an expansionist policy of colonial annexations and war. Luxemburg in her critique of Marx described Imperialism as the political expression of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle for what remains still open of the non-capitalist environment. In continuation of Hobson and Hilferding, Lenin approached the question of imperialism from the viewpoint of a revolutionary strategy under which the working class might win power and political tactics on the movements of national self-determination that were developing in various countries. It is to be borne in mind that Lenin upheld right to self-determination to formulate the revolutionary task of his time when such movement was a dominant feature of people's movement, and he was not quite averse to Luxemburg's opposition to national self-determination from a basic Marxist tenet. His analysis of imperialism of his time dictated him to include national self-determina-

tion movement as a revolutionary movement. Instead of a uniform global socio-economic structure, Lenin formulated the concept of imperialist chain as he emphasised on Marxist theory of state and the political power. What counts is not simply economic development but the overall power of each state that is a link in the chain. The imperialist chain involves the material, domestic and international, precondition for proletarian revolution and this is the theory of weak link.

Many new features have now emerged in the global scale. In contradistinction to 'zero-migration' policy prior to neoliberalism when the settlement of migrant labour was barred by the protectionist regimes, the settlement of migrant labourers domestically and internationally post-1980s in significant number has changed the global capitalist contour. The export of capital that was envisaged as imperialism in Lenin's time has been extended as the shifting of entire modern industry from developed to underdeveloped or from centre to periphery both nationally and internationally and this has become the dominant feature of present time. The subordination of industrial capital to monopoly finance capital has taken a new form where finance capital has developed its own market globally and this global chain of

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finance capital has also become the dominant feature of the present time. In continuation of the Leninist tradition, the Marxist revolutionaries have the task to redefine the imperialism of the present time, if not a new-imperialism, with the viewpoint of formulating a revolutionary strategy under which the working class might win power and political tactics on the movements that were developing in various countries. Such attempts are being made in that direction, but the revolutionaries need to articulate this in the context of rise of neo-fascism or authoritarianism (whatever it might be called) and the concomitant rise of new people's movements.

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SHELL-SHOCKED

Dispatches from a War

Joydip Ghosal

MOHAMMED OMER IN HIS book *Shell-Shocked, Dispatches from a War*, On the ground under Israel's assault (Publisher Speaking Tiger) documented the third major Israeli assault on the Gaza strip. He is a Palestinian journalist. In 2008 he was awarded the Martha Gellhorn Prize for journalism.

He has reported extensively for Al Jazeera, the Nation, Democracy Now!, and the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. Noam Chomsky wrote "Mohammed Omer could easily have escaped the horror of Israel's impending assault on the trapped and helpless people of tortured Gaza. Instead, he chose to stay, to record..."

The author owed it to Palestinian people and Israeli people to get to the truth. The book was on Operation Protective Edge, launched in early July 2014 which was most savage and ferocious attack on the Gazans. For 51 days the Gazans felt unspeakable agonies. The author lived through the horrendous brutalities along with his wife and then three-month-old son. He attempted to provide a firsthand account of life on the ground during the crackdown and mayhem.

While writing the book the image

of Jalal Jundia kept visiting his mind who lost everything. During the summer of 2014 he saw him sitting atop the ruins of his family home surrounded by rubble and dust. Where they could go now as their home had been ravaged? Jundia asked the author every time when the western countries with their pontification about human rights would take steps against this violation in keeping with their lofty ideals. It often felt that Gazans did not just exist. The author tried to reassure him, bolster his courage. He promised him that his voice would not go unheeded. He would strive to share his story.

The Gazans were ensnared in Gaza and they were so hindered that they were unable to move. They could only pray for the bombings to end. Perhaps then they could try to rebuild their life from the scratch.

The author asked a pertinent question. Israel's authority stood as priority in the media. But no one ever tried to raise the issue of Palestinians who were expelled from their homes. But the author proudly proclaimed that after every attack they emerged more tightly coalesced together.

A year later, Jalal still could not find any shelter. The author though tried to remain optimistic which was not a tiny feat in that war-ravaged once beautiful and self-reliant coastal enclave. After the 1947-48 purge, Gaza became a safe haven for Palestinians who escaped the ethnic cleansing. Irgun, Stern and Lehi gangs drove them away. The author unequivocally declared that their reality was predicted upon Israel's determination to drive them away from their homes for good. Every minute and every day the people lived in a reality which was distorted and crumpled. After the Operation Protective Edge the vast majority of children remained traumatised. They continued to live under constant seize. They were unable to leave and people

could not visit them. They were limited in what they could import, buy or export. It was clearly evident that systemic tools of persecution infected all aspects of life. The life of non-favoured religion and race became traumatic. It ranged from imprisonment, arbitrary killings to prevent them from rebuilding their homes. Starvation diets caused by siege stripped them of their rights.

But the Palestinians asserted themselves. Despite all the brutalities they were still there. The author showed how they devised ways to survive. Women recycled the spent tank shells into flowerpots. Students returned to the bomb-out schools to resume their education. They tried to tape together the torn books.

Cutting of electricity, gas and water was another grim reality. Many of Gaza's farmers had been forced to abandon their animals and crops paralysing agricultural works. The students tried to study by candle light. According to author they focused on basics and carried on with grit and determination. The occupation was not about religion but it was about natural resources. In Gaza Christians and Muslims faced the same tribulations. Both faiths had seen their places of worships destroyed by F-16. The author showed both faiths were incarcerated, humiliated, starved. Despite these "both faiths remain united in a spirit of common humanity". According to the author he would like to see a single state where tolerance and equity would be the only way forward for Palestinians and Israelis. He emphasised that the problem was policy. Dynamics and policy had to be changed.

Actually it centred on who would reap benefits from those resources ranging from arable land to gas reservoirs beneath West Bank and coastal waters in Gaza. Political and economic clout also played a piv-

otal role. A Palestinian doctor said "Trauma is a term which they have used in the West when they were talking about normal situations and there is a breakdown. This breakdown is trauma, but for us Palestinians, trauma is the daily life." In 2012 the United Nations agency for Palestinian Refugees observed that among the PTSD patients 42 per cent were children. The disease itself rose by 100 per cent. Children did not have the mental strength to cope up with these grim realities. Many reported symptoms of mental turmoil and strain and anger.

This book contained pieces that were arranged in chronological order. This book showed how media controlled the narrative in favour of the oppressor. It became evident that Palestinian version was under-reported. Israel spent enormous money to spin the media narrative. With graphic details this book delineated the sheer brutality of the Israeli attack. False air strike warnings was another ploy to cause 'maximum collective fear'. It caused maximum impact without firing a single shot. Gaza's churches that provided shelters to families remained potential targets for Israel's war machines. Gaza's fishermen were worst affected by the relentless offensive. Near constant barrage of Israeli air strike dismantled their lives. This book with poignant details showed how civilians were summarily executed. Israeli soldiers used Palestinians as human shields and fired on civilians in Khuza'a in southern Gaza. That pain of catastrophe was shared by all Palestinians. Even thousands of farm animals fell victims to the Israeli assault in Gaza.

In order to understand the present crisis this book is an essential read that delved deeper into the recent past to unearth the horrific brutalities.

□□□

WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

Mockery of Primary School Education

*Paran Amitava
Kanika Sharma*

FEW THINGS ARE MORE important for a society than its children's education. Evidence shows that children's primary education has immediate and long-term effects on both individual and collective well-being. It is one of the most agreed upon means of development. Yet Bihar, one of India's poorest states, is turning its back on school education. Such is the dismal conclusion of a recent survey of government schools in north Bihar.

The survey was conducted by the Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan (JJSS) in August 2023. Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan is a registered trade union of unorganised sector workers that aims to empower the rural poor to demand better services and claim their entitlements. The organisation works in the Seemanachal area of North Bihar, with Araria and Katihar districts as its strongholds.

The survey covered 81 primary and upper primary schools in Araria and Katihar districts of Bihar (JJSS 2023). The sample schools were spread across 11 blocks in these two districts and were randomly selected from among those that had at least 50% Dalit, Adivasi, minority, or other backward class (OBC) students. The survey found that most schools struggle to meet bare minimum standards, as illustrated by the report card on primary schools.

Funding for government schools comes from the centre and the state in a 60:40 ratio under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA). In recent years, there has been a decelerating trend in the centre's share in Bihar. The large financial gap between the needed spending and the actual

spending has a very adverse effect on low resource base states such as Bihar.

A direct impact of this can be seen in the severe shortage of teachers in government schools. Of the sample schools, 79% failed to meet the norm prescribed in the Right to Education (RTE) Act of at least one teacher for every 30 pupils at the primary level. In addition, Bihar's classification of teachers into three groups, based on pay, nature of contract, and selection criteria, create a pecking order and discord amongst the workforce. As one of them said, "Classification of teachers, with different types given different salaries, should end. Teachers are needed based on their subject matter expertise."

The shortage of funds is reflected in the absence of basic infrastructure. The JJSS survey found that most schools have cramped classrooms, with very few tables and chairs. Washrooms were largely dysfunctional, and there was no water supply. Boundary walls were a rarity. The school management committee fund meant to maintain the premises was insufficient.

The JJSS survey found many students in schools had no textbooks or uniforms. There were various reasons for this, but the main one was families were using the money for other necessities.

In some cases, primary schools were running in temporary shelters made of bamboo and straw. In one primary school, which had 150 students on its rolls and one classroom, teaching was impossible. The investigators observed, "The infrastructure

of the school was very bad. The classroom was made of bamboo and mud and quite damaged. The roof was of tin. It is difficult to imagine any type of teaching happening in the school. Two newly installed hand pumps did not work. A cow was grazing in the school premises. There is no proper road to the school."

If that was not enough, 9% of the sample schools had no building of their own. They functioned from vacant government offices or in neighbouring schools. Of all government schools in Bihar, 7% had no building, and 120 of them were in Patna district .

Bihar's education system follows several policies that are ineffective and may even be doing more harm than good. One of them is the direct benefit transfer system for distributing textbooks and uniforms. Under this, money is sent to the bank accounts of children (or their parents), and they are expected to buy textbooks and uniforms on their own.

The JJSS survey found many students in schools had no textbooks or uniforms. There were various reasons for this, but the main one was families were using the money for other necessities. The failure to ensure every student has books and uniforms has serious consequences. In a schooling system focused on textbooks, it is very difficult to learn without them, and uniforms possibly help mitigate signs of inequality among students.

Thankfully, the direct benefit transfer system for textbooks has been withdrawn this year, but it continues for uniforms. Incidentally, most teachers are opposed to the direct benefit transfer system. As one of them put it, "Distribution of textbooks should be done by the government in a timely manner. Direct benefit transfer for textbooks does not help as many parents spend the money on other expenses."

Another example of misguided policies relates to school attendance records. Teachers in Bihar routinely over-report student attendance. The main reason, it seems, is that the local administration sends them show-cause notices if there are large short-falls in student attendance on consecutive days. This fear-based policy drives teachers to inflate attendance figures in the registers.

“The number of students present was hugely over-reported. The teacher explained that sometimes due to festivals the attendance of students drops sharply for a few days. If they report the actual numbers, they get a show-cause notice from their superiors and they must bribe people to get the problem sorted. So they gradually decrease the number of students instead of reporting the actual numbers.”

According to teachers, over-reporting of attendance also has something to do with the cost of eggs, which are a part of the midday meal. The government’s costing norms underestimate the market price of eggs, and teachers make up for this

by over-reporting attendance. On an average, we found that the number of students present according to the attendance registers was about twice the number present at the time the investigators visited.

Teachers in Bihar routinely over-report student attendance. The main reason, it seems, is that the local administration sends them show-cause notices if there are large short-falls in student attendance on consecutive days.

Another massive policy failure relates to the Covid-19 crisis. The Covid-19 lockdown brought all physical classes to a halt. While better-off children were able to fall back on online learning, most students enrolled in government schools had nothing of the kind. In most of the sample schools, teachers reported that many students in grades 3 to 5 had forgotten to read and write by the time they came back to school.

Despite this, no significant remedial measures were initiated in the following academic session. Extra classes were not held and school timings were not extended. The only innovation was the distribution of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) textbooks, promoted by the central government. The survey found no clear sign of their helpfulness to students or teachers. The only positive was that in the absence of regular textbooks, these books were better than nothing.

Government schools in Bihar are on the verge of dysfunction. The clearest indication of this is student attendance. Average attendance rates, based on a direct count, were just 20% in primary schools and 23% in upper primary schools. Even the inflated figures reported in registers were low—40% for primary schools and 44% for upper primary schools.

There is an urgent need to understand why school attendance figures are so low in Bihar. Low teaching

standards and inactivity in the classroom may discourage students from attending regularly. Teachers reported their inability to retain students after the midday meal. Prolonged school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic have affected children’s school-going habits and created an impression that it is not important to go to school. This exodus has been reinforced by the denial of textbooks and uniforms under the direct benefit transfer system. The cumulative effect is that most students are not in school on most days.

Children’s absence from schools is associated with a growing reliance on modestly priced private tuition. Many parents and students depended on such tuition classes in the absence of functioning schools. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that most of the students who are absent from government schools make up for it by taking private tuitions.

Tuition centres mostly work as places of rote learning for examinations and do not provide a wholesome environment for growing children that functioning schools do.

The schooling system in Jharkhand is also in a bad shape, but it is better than Bihar, judging from a similar survey conducted in Jharkhand in 2022. Jharkhand has higher student attendance rates, better compliance with RTE norms for pupil-teacher ratios, and somewhat better infrastructure. The midday meal in Jharkhand includes two eggs per child every week, compared with just one in Bihar. Problems such as missing textbooks and an overreliance on private tuition are not as bad as Bihar.

But there are some aspects in which Bihar takes the lead. There is a lower gender gap among teachers in Bihar, with more than 40% women teachers. Jharkhand has only 28%. Bihar also has a smaller proportion (about 10%) of single-teacher schools

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at the primary level. The figure for Jharkhand is a whopping 30%. On most counts, of course, the situation is quite grim in both states, but it can be said that, ever so slightly, primary and upper primary schools are doing better in Jharkhand than Bihar.

The Annual Status of Education Reports corroborate the sorry state of affairs in Bihar. ASER 2022 report showed that nearly 87% of grade 3 students, 63% of grade 5 students, and 30% of standard 8 students were unable to read a grade 2-level text. This shows that despite high enrolment rates and the appearance of near universal elementary education, a large proportion of children in Bihar do not obtain quality education in government schools and they also

cannot afford private tuition.

Yet, this crisis is off the radar. There is hardly any public discussion about the status of government schools in Bihar (or Jharkhand, for that matter). The school monitoring system through block resource centres is also in disarray. It was only in July 2023 that retired teachers were hired as new block resource persons and weekly visits, however ceremonial, were restarted.

Many decades ago, the Kothari Commission suggested that India increase its education budget to 6% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and spend one third of it on elementary education. Even today, the country spends only 2.9% of its GDP on education, and 35% of it goes to

elementary education (Sahay 2023). The financing gap is not new, but it has become worse in recent years.

Finally, a campaign on the right to education, with a special focus on underprivileged children, should be initiated. Ensuring that government schools work well is a matter of national importance. An urgent collective effort is needed to give children's education the attention it so obviously deserves. □□□

[Paran Amitava is an independent researcher studying the schooling system in Jharkhand. Kanika Sharma is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Emory University.]

[The authors are grateful to Jean Dreze for his comments on a previous version of this article.]

(Courtesy: The India Forum)

RIOTS AND RIOTS

Report on Communal Violence

CSSS Team

LORD RAM AND OTHER Hindu symbols were manipulated and misused by Hindu right wing political outfits to spread violence and assert domination over Muslims in the month of January, 2024. According to the monthly monitoring of communal violence conducted by Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), four out of the five communal riots that took place in the month of January were directly related to the Pran Pratisthan in Ayodhya. Out of these four communal riots, two were reported in Mumbai and Nagpur, Maharashtra, one in Vadodara in Gujarat and lastly in Madhya Pradesh- all in BJP ruled states. It is important to mention here that in 2022 and 2023, 28 communal riots took place around India, directly related to Ram Navami processions.

The role of hate speeches is significant in fomenting communal ten-

sions and riots. Seven instances of hate speeches were reported in the media in the month of January. These hate speeches broadly called for demolition of mosques, made baseless allegations of love jihad inciting hatred against Muslims, boycott of halal certification meat, use of bulldozers against Muslims and called for stricter action against Muslims after communal riots in Mira Road. The hate speeches were made by BJP leaders, MLA T Raja and MLA Nitesh Rane in Solapur and Mumbai in Maharashtra, MLA Geeta Jain in Mumbai and Anant Kumar Hegde, BJP Member of Parliament and BJP leader KS Eshwarappa from Karnataka. The hate speeches deepened prejudices against the Muslims.

Communal riots coinciding with Pran Pratisthan were used as a pretext to invite demolitions of properties belonging to Muslims. Mundane day to day altercations were given a

communal turn and deliberately projected as major incidents warranting and inviting "collective punishment" for the Muslims. For instance, the communal tension in Mira Road, Mumbai was very minor, mainly fueled by political ambitions of the local leaders trying to project these tensions as big communal riots and inviting demolition. Similarly, in Panvel, Mumbai, there was report of sloganeering on 22nd January but there were demands of demolitions of properties of Muslims in Panvel.

The public discourse in India in the month of January was largely dominated by the carefully constructed narrative around the Ayodhya Pran Pratisthan which marked a steady religionisation of the Indian socio-political landscape promoted by state. The consecration of Lord Ram in the Ayodhya temple on 22nd January saw unprecedented promotion of a religious event by the state. For instance, ten BJP ruled states- Maharashtra, Gujarat, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Goa, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan and Tripura in addition to AAP ruled

Delhi, declared a complete holiday or half day holiday to celebrate the Pran Pratisthan. This implied that schools, colleges and government offices amongst other state establishments remained closed on that day. Some of these state governments also prohibited sale of non-vegetarian food items, meat and alcohol on that day.

Additionally, it's noteworthy that the state continued to spend public funds on the promotion of heritage associated with Hindu gods and symbols to the exclusion of heritage associated with other religions. Some of the examples include the curating of a wax museum in Ayodhya on the theme of Ramayana, Chhattisgarh's 'Shri Ramlala Darshan (Ayodhya Dham)' scheme and Odisha's Parikrama project in Puri. This trend coincides with another alarming trend of reclaiming places of worship of the Muslim commu-

nity. In Maharashtra, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has vowed to "liberate" Haji Malang Dargah. Similarly, after the Varanasi district Court order allowing puja inside the Gyanvapi mosque, within hours- 3am the following morning, the puja was performed in the "Vyas Tehkana". It appears that the puja was conducted in a haste since the Gyanvapi masjid committee has moved the Allahabad high court challenging the Varanasi district court's order allowing the Hindu side to perform puja in 'Vyas Tehkana' or the southern cellar of the Gyanvapi structure. Thus, though puja was performed within hours when one week's window was given to do the same to pre-empt any remedy the mosque committee could get from the High Court.

Emboldened by such actions endorsed by state, there is an evident rise of vigilante acts of Hindu right wing In Uttar Pradesh's

Shahjahanpur district for allegedly removing a flag from a mosque and replacing it with a saffron on 23rd January. Three men climbed on top of a mosque and removed the green flag there. They replaced it with a saffron flag with Jai Shri Ram written on it. They were arrested. In a similar incident, eleven miscreants hoisted saffron flags atop a mosque in the Tajganj area of Agra district during a shobha yatra on 22nd January. Agra police arrested them. A video of the incident was shot and made viral.

Additionally, demolitions continued to represent a weapon of hegemony to intimidate the Muslim community by using the trope of illegal encroachments. There were also reports of moral policing and violence against inter-faith couples, furthering the unsubstantiated claims of "love jihad".

□□□

RECALLING BERTOLT BRECHT

Nazi Germany, Saffron India

Javed Malick

IN 1938, GERMAN PLAY-wright and theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht talked about the Nazi regime in a conversation with his friend, the philosopher Walter Benjamin: "We must neglect nothing in our struggle against that lot. What they are planning is nothing small, make no mistake about it. They are planning for thirty thousand years ahead. Colossal things. Colossal crimes. They stop at nothing. They are out to destroy everything... That is why we too must think of everything."

Brecht was talking about his decision to include a set of poems for children in a collection related to fascism and war.

In a year that marks Brecht's 125th birth anniversary, his words

carry a greater sense of immediacy for people in India, more than ever before, such are the striking parallels between the Germany of the 1920s-30s and present-day India. For, Indians too are facing a situation where the forces of majoritarianism are trying to destroy everything that has so far held this nation together and given it its distinct pluralistic identity.

Therefore, to reflect on the life and times of the German theatre practitioner, whose theory and practice of theatre marked one of the most radical interventions in the 20th century, is not just appropriate but necessary.

Beginning in the turbulent climate of the post-World War I years, Brecht grew to artistic and political maturity during the 1920s when Germany was

being pulled in opposite directions by two powerful forces: fascism and socialism. The success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia had given a powerful impetus to Germany's leftwing movement. There was a massive mobilisation of workers, soldiers, and intellectuals, culminating in the short-lived uprising of 1919 led by the Spartacus Party, the precursor of the German Communist Party. Although the uprising failed and its leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were murdered, the influence of socialist ideas continued to resonate powerfully throughout the Weimar period (1919-1933).

However, alongside the widespread influence of leftwing politics, the period also witnessed the rise of fascism. During the 1920s, Hitler, who was a political non-entity until then, suddenly acquired prominence and became a serious threat to democracy in Germany. Under his leadership the Nazi Party grew from a

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minuscule group of frustrated war veterans to a force of massive proportion.

This phenomenal growth of Nazi influence and its support base coincided with the period of grave economic crisis unleashed by the stock market crash of 1929. It was mainly the working class and the lower middle class that bore the brunt of the crisis which had produced an enormous body of the unemployed. The Social Democratic government tried to contain the wave of strikes and proletarian agitations through repressive measures. In 1929, it passed the Law in Defence of the Republic, helping the erosion of democratic rights and the Constitution, which paved the way for fascism.

Using the plank of extreme nationalism and rabid anti-Semitic and anti-Communist diatribe, Hitler's National Socialist Party, or the Nazi Party, sought (and succeeded, to a large extent) in deflecting attention from the real economic issues. The entire Nazi politics was based on exploitation and glorification of racial prejudice and hatred.

Throughout the 1920s, theatre was an immensely popular form of propaganda. Even the fascists were using it. As one critic has observed, although "the cultural efforts of the fascists demonstrated their tendency towards cheap imitation, lack of fantasy, and frighteningly low intellectual level, they provided easy answers. Sophisticated methods were not needed to blame the Jews, communists, workers, or International Capital and Bolshevism for the crisis."

Theatre was also a favoured medium of left-wing writers and groups. Besides Erwin Piscator and Ernst Toller, and groups like Volksbuhne, The Red Megaphone, and the Blue Blouse, there were a myriad other amateur agit-prop troupes which performed to combat fascist propaganda, to counter its politics of hatred and

terror, and to focus people's attention on the economic issues. These troupes would travel to the countryside, housing estates, and factories to expose the anti-people nature of Nazi politics and to mobilise support for socialist revolution.

It was during this period that Brecht grew politically more conscious and involved. He had from the very beginning possessed a deep and almost natural concern for ordinary people and their daily struggles for existence. In the new climate, he had no hesitation in committing himself wholeheartedly to the fight against fascism. He wrote:

*In the earthquakes to come,
I very much hope
I shall keep my cigar alight*

Brecht was attracted to socialist politics during this period and made a systematic study of Marxism. In one of his first plays, Drums in the Night, which he had written while living in Munich during the Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919, he touched rather unfavourably on the theme of the Spartacist uprising. His hero was a soldier, who on returning from the war, learns that his girl is engaged to someone else. He participates, albeit drunkenly and from the fringes, in the workers' revolution.

At this stage, Brecht's own awareness of the socialist movement was, like that of the hero of Drums, largely from outside of it. The play, therefore, reflected a lack of sympathy for the workers' revolt. Looking back at it a couple of years before his death, he found the play ideologically objectionable. He felt that he had trivialised a major social revolt by treating it as a mere backdrop for his drunken hero's actions.

Towards 'epic theatre'

In developing the theory of what he called "epic theatre" he has proposed a distinct view of culture: that is, culture as an instrument of social change. "It is precisely theatre, art

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and culture which have to form an “ideological superstructure” for a solid, practical rearrangement of our age’s way of life,” he wrote in 1927.

His new plays—*Man is Man*, *Threepenny Opera*, *Happy End*, *The Mother*, and *St Joan of the Stockyards* – fully reflected this awareness and sought to encourage such thinking as would be oriented towards a radical reordering of social conditions. *St. Joan of the Stockyards* was Brecht’s response to the economic depression that had overtaken the capitalist world. Its scenes recall the business cycle through prosperity, overproduction, crisis, stagnation, and finally, the regeneration of the cycle.

This kind of writing, which subverted the Nazi thinking by foregrounding the economic question, was anathema to the National Socialists. In a more direct response to Hitler, in 1931, Brecht had begun a political allegory, *Roundheads and Peakheads*, satirising the Nazi scapegoat policy. Set in an imaginary country, *Yahoo*, with a majority of *Roundheads* and a minority of *Peakheads*, the play tries to substitute racial doctrines with the realities of class struggle.

The primacy of the economic or class question, over and above race, religion or morality, is the recurrent motif of Brecht’s drama. It was there in his poetry of the late 1920s and the early 1930s too. In a ballad called *Song of the S. A. Man*, for example, he makes an ordinary *Brownshirt* realise the mistake of joining the Nazi militia because the man presented to him by the fascists as his enemy is actually his “brother in hunger.”

Brecht was living at a time when insecurity and fear dominated the environment. He was not only living in dangerous times but as a left-wing writer ranged against the Nazis was also living dangerously. That he knew the danger was evident from a poem of the early 1930s in which the omi-

nous refrain is “Cover your tracks.”

What made life even more dangerous for him was the fact that his wife, prominent stage actress *Helene Weigel*, was half-Jewish. One of the favourite items in the Nazi arsenal of lies claimed that the Jews were actively promoting prostitution, seduction and inter-racial marriages to contaminate the “purity” of the “master” race. This, obviously, is the prototype for the current myth of “love jihad”, the imagined Muslim conspiracy to become a majority in India by producing more children, as fabricated and popularised by *Hindutva* forces in India.

Escape into exile

The year 1933 in German history is comparable to 2014 in India. Things came to a head in 1933 when Hitler seized power.

There was large scale repression, persecution, intimidation of artists, writers and cultural workers. Among the prominent casualties right at the outset was the *Bauhaus*, a highly influential school of art and design, and *Die Weltbühne* (*The World Stage*) a journal which was the rallying point for a large number of politically disaffected left-wing intellectuals.

All publications and productions of Brecht’s work in Germany were also interrupted. It is said that his name was prominently there on the Nazi hit list. Knowing that he could no longer avoid persecution, he escaped just in time into exile in Scandinavia.

Many writers and artists, when faced with Nazi intimidation, despaired and some even committed suicide, the most tragic case being that of *Walter Benjamin*. But Brecht was not a man to despair. He was a fighter. He did not believe in giving up. He never stopped looking for solutions to problems. He had hoped that even in difficult times he would be able to keep his cigar alight. And he did.

He continued to expose fascism and wrote about how Nazi rule was inimical to humanity and democ-

racy, how it was trying to destroy all decent human values, and poison all forms of human relationships. In *The Irresistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, through a fable modelled on the actual events of Hitler’s life he satirised the meteoric rise of a gangster from a fixer to that of a dictator just because he was not stopped in time.

During his Scandinavian exile, he also wrote *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (translated into English as *The Private Life of the Master Race*), which is a collection of 27 sketches, or scenes, each presenting a specific situation – familial and personal (as in *The Jewish Wife* and *The Chalk Cross*) or public (as in ‘*In Search of Justice*’) – to show the distortions, perversions, and falsehoods that had crept into human social existence as a direct consequence of the Nazi rule.

The determining and unifying themes of these 27 sketches, as *Walter Benjamin* has observed, can be summed up in *Kafka*’s sentence: “The lie is transformed into a world order.” Each of these sketches, *Benjamin* says, “demonstrates one thing, how ineluctably the rule of terror, which parades before the nations as the *Third Reich*, makes all relationships between human beings subject to the law of the lie.”

In *Schweik in the Second World War*, he used the little man’s ability to survive and to continue to give trouble to the great men (those with power) as an expression of subversive humour. *Schweik*’s indestructibility, he argued, “makes him the inexhaustible object of abuse, and at the same time the fruitful soil of liberation.”

Similarly, his decision to include a set of poems for children in a collection of serious poems on subjects related to fascism and war was part of a strategy to assert optimism in the face of a grim situation, to show that life goes on despite Hitler and that there will always be children. □□□

[*Javed Malick* is an academic and well-known theatre scholar. Courtesy: *The Wire*.]

NEW WAVE

Bangladeshi Cinema is Coming of Age

Ishita Sengupta

WHEN A DRIVER OF A refrigerated van in Dhaka finds a murdered female journalist in his vehicle, his life turns upside down. He soon receives a call from a stranger and gets entangled in a mess. By the time he navigates through it with his best friend, he loses more than he had bargained for.

“*Taqdeer*” (“Predestination”), an eight-episode thriller web series directed by Bangladeshi filmmaker Syed Ahmed Shawki and released in 2020 on the Bengali streaming service Hoichoi, became the first web series in the country to find both popular and critical reception. Social media was abuzz for weeks, and people were sharing fan theories on Facebook. Shawki was surprised when major media outlets published reviews, since film criticism has not been a thriving discipline in Bangladesh. Such a level of interest in a web series was unprecedented in a country where the primary mode of storytelling since the 1990s had been television.

Shawki returned in 2022 with “*Karagar*” (“Prison”), another web series, which centered on a mysterious mute convict who surfaces inside a prison cell that had been locked since 1971, the year that Bangladesh gained independence. The intrigue around the convict intensifies when he conveys through gestures that he was imprisoned for killing Mir Jafar, the erstwhile ruler of Bengal, who was known for betraying his people and aiding the British in the 18th century. As the show tied together three strands of history—pre-colonial India, the Liberation War and present-day

Bangladesh—it provided something fresh to viewers and created a buzz.

In 2020, as people were confined in homes because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a seismic shift was taking place in Bangladeshi cinema. In September that year, Hoichoi, which operates out of India and has a considerable market in Bangladesh, announced 25 new titles from both sides of the border. Stories ranged from social dramas and spy thrillers to adaptations of popular Bangladeshi novels and Shakespeare plays. A year later, the streaming service Chorki was founded in Bangladesh, and several new shows and anthologies were released on the platform. A host of Bangladeshi films started making waves on the international film festival circuit, putting the country’s cinema on the world map. Until then, Bangladeshi cinema had been limited to a few theatrical releases every year and an abundance of television dramas that were either jaded romances or slapstick comedies.

Cinema in Bangladesh has been undergoing a change, but the process started some time ago, said Mahmudul Hossain, author of “*The Other National: Cinema in Bangladesh*.” He was referring to the small but numerous attempts filmmakers made in the last decade. It was not that Bangladesh did not have the talent, but it was missing the right infrastructure to support it.

In the last three years, streaming services have brought to the fore stories from Bangladesh that tackled pressing themes like sexual abuse, public dissatisfaction with political powers, everyday struggles, and

middle-class aspirations. Anindo Banerjee, who is the head of content at Chorki but was with Hoichoi till last year and greenlighted several of these shows, said that whenever a filmmaker pitched him a show, he always asked if it could be set anywhere else other than Bangladesh. “If they say ‘yes,’ then my counterargument is why should we make it here. The more local you go, the more global you reach,” he said.

For instance, Mohammad Touqir Islam’s debut work “*Shaaticup*” (“Remain Hidden”), the eight-episode series revolving around a stolen drug shipment, made waves for exactly this reason. All the actors are from the city of Rajshahi, where the series is set, and speak the local dialect, which is unusual in mainstream Bangladeshi cinema. “*Mohanagar*” (“Metropolis”), directed by Ashfaque Nipun, portrayed a corrupt police officer as a protagonist—an on-screen first for Bangladesh. It prompted the police to summon Nipun, who had to spend hours explaining himself. “By the end, even the cops were tired because they had other important work,” the filmmaker told *New Lines*.

Streaming platforms provide opportunities to show social realities that are difficult to portray on television. For instance, the 2022 detective show “*Kaiser*” alluded only loosely to same-sex relationships as a subplot.

“On TV, there were a lot of constraints regarding the stories one can or cannot tell,” explained Shawki, “because the advertisers pay for the content.”

But since streaming is a subscription-based model, they had to keep audience interest in mind. He also took inspiration from shows made in the West. “If you look at their shows like ‘*The Sopranos*’ or

'The Wire,' both hinging on drug mafias, the narrative is from a perspective that [did not have] a place on television before. Suddenly the focus was on the outlaws. When I was making 'Taqdeer,' this was clear in my mind."

In 2016, Abdullah Mohammad Saad was one of the few filmmakers to put Bangladeshi cinema on the world map when his debut film "Live from Dhaka"—which centered on an emotionally troubled man wanting to leave the country—won awards for best director and best performance at the Singapore International Film Festival.

In the last few years, the number has only risen. There is a burgeoning presence of Bangladeshi filmmakers across international festivals like Cannes, Rotterdam and Busan who are asserting their individuality with culturally rooted stories. Their participation at these events is not limited to showcasing their work; they are also bringing home multiple awards.

This recent streak started in 2020, when Rezwan Shahriar Sumit's debut work, "Nonajoler Kabbo" ("The Salt in Our Waters"), screened at the BFI London Film Festival and was later nominated for the prestigious Ingmar Bergman Award at Sweden's Gothenburg Film Festival. The film followed a young sculptor's move to a coastal village in Bangladesh, where the locals interpret his art as a form of idolatry, creating tension between the two.

In 2021, "Rehana Maryam Noor," Saad's second film—which focused on a woman doctor's single-minded focus to seek justice for a sexual abuse survivor—was selected for the prestigious Un Certain Regard section at Cannes. A year later, Nuhash Humayun's short horror film "Moshari" became the first Bangladeshi film to qualify for the Oscars. A dystopian take on climate

change, it followed two sisters protecting themselves from a blood-sucking creature with a mosquito net.

The success of the film led to Jordan Peele and Riz Ahmed attaching their names as executive producers to the project, resulting in the filmmaker receiving a lot of streaming offers. But Humayun decided instead to release it free on YouTube. "I did not make 'Moshari' to make money out of it," he told New Lines. Humayun's recent works "Pett Kata Shaw," a four-episode anthology based on South Asian ghost stories and short film "Foreigners Only," which again used horror to make a point about colourism, also caught global attention.

As with the rest of South Asia, films have played a key role in imparting a sense of belonging and identity to Bangladeshis, who have been subjected to two waves of identity displacement—first during the 1947-Partition, when Bengal was divided to form East Pakistan, and then in 1971, when East Pakistan emerged as independent Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (BFDC), established in 1959 as the East Pakistan Film Development Corporation, became the biggest government-owned studio in the country and offered infrastructural and managerial assistance to filmmakers. But its technique was poor and the films were unprofessionally made.

In the 1980s, the quality of the films further deteriorated. Barring a few exceptions like Alamgir Kabir and Chashi Nazrul Islam, most commercial filmmakers freely plagiarised Hindi films from India. Chashi Nazrul Islam leaned on literary texts and made original works like "Devdas" (1982) and "Parineeta" (1986), respectively (both novels written by Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay).

As videocassette recorders (VCRs) allowed people to watch Hindi and foreign films at home and action films with pornographic clips (via a notorious practice known as "cut piece") were being made in Bangladesh, a large number of women and middle-class audiences lost interest in those movies. The number of cinemas fell from 1,235 in 1988 to 120 in the following two decades, and to about 60 during the pandemic.

During the 1980s, a few filmmakers including Tanvir Mokammel, Morshedul Islam and Tareque Masud were working outside the BFDC and making experimental short films on the War for Liberation in 1971, for which they became known as the first generation of independent filmmakers in Bangladesh. (Masud's 2002 feature film "Matir Moina" ("The Clay Bird"), set against the growing tension in East Pakistan, was the first Bangladeshi film to win the FIPRESCI prize in the Directors' Fortnight section at Cannes.)

In the 1990s, the declining popularity of the silver screen coincided with the rise of television. The educated middle class disillusioned with the hyper-real and plagiarised commercial films, found solace in TV, where finite dramas with a run time of 40 minutes or longer played on satellite channels. A prominent name that emerged during that time was the novelist, playwright and filmmaker Humayun Ahmed (Nuhash's father), whose works portrayed the middle class with faultless emotional acuity.

Acclaimed filmmakers like Mostofa Sarwar Farooki, Amitabh Reza Chowdhury and Nurul Alam Atique continued the practice of rendering urban themes on TV through the 2000s. Their craft was sophisticated, thematically engaging and technically superior. Since most of them made money from producing

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commercials on the side, they did not have to churn out content for TV programmes and could be selective with their projects, which helped retain the quality of the shows. One of Farooki's most famous television works, "Choruivati" ("The Picnic," 2002), which followed an engineering student caught in a love triangle, became a sensation, endearing him to a young audience struggling for validation.

Even though the filmmakers were able to make a name through TV, it was an abiding dream to make a feature film. Due to an unwritten rule at BFDC, which necessitated presence of a big star for a project to be greenlighted, it was hard for them to find funding. Farooki was among the first of his contemporaries to make a feature film—"Bachelor" in 2003—but he had to find producers elsewhere.

Farooki spent years showcasing his work at international film festivals, paving the way for the current generation to establish their own global presence. His 2009 film, "Third Person Singular Number," about a young girl struggling to find accommodation after her live-in partner ends up in jail, premiered at Rotterdam, and "Television"—a wry satire on religious extremism—was Bangladesh's official entry in the Oscars in 2012.

Farooki's success on the big screen and his modernist style emboldened an entire generation of young filmmakers. "Farooki was the first to break the barrier and arrive at a new language of filmmaking which was colloquial. He was telling stories which belonged to everyone. That was the inspiration for us," Nipun said.

Movie clubs in Bangladesh set up by film activists in the 1960s played an instrumental role in exposing young filmmakers to world cinema. "[Film clubs] became am-

bassadors for a resistance against formulaic film culture in the '80s," wrote the filmmaker and scholar Imran Firdaus.

Exposure to the works of auteurs like Krzysztof Kieslowski and Jean-Luc Godard at these clubs left an indelible imprint on Nipun. "We wanted to make films like that," Nipun said. This also intersected with the internet boom in the 2000s, which made world cinema easily accessible through piracy.

As the current generation leaves its mark on the cultural legacy of the nation, film theorists have different ways of acknowledging it. Fahmidul Haq, a visiting professor at Bard College in New York, calls them the third generation of independent filmmakers who have come after the likes of Masud and Farooki. "Masud extensively depicted the Liberation War, but Farooki looked at the modern problems of Bangladesh. The present crop is looking at both," he shared.

For instance, in shows like "Karagar" and "Jaago Bahey," the Liberation War forms an easy subtext. But storytellers are also looking at the present as a casualty of the past. Yet in "Refugee," a thriller series created by Adnan Habib, Imtiaz Hossain and Saad, the non-Bengali speaking Bihari-Muslim minority in Bangladesh is given centre stage. This community migrated to East Pakistan from the Indian states of Bihar and West Bengal during the 1947-Partition and many of them maintained a pro-Pakistan stance during the War for Liberation. The contemporary show outlined their fringe existence (they only received citizenship in 2008) and the scars they accrued with time.

The Bangladesh film industry has always been close-knit. The second generation of filmmakers provides steadfast support to the new generation. Shawki said that whenever he

stumbles, he reaches out to seniors like Farooki or Chowdhury: "They read my scripts, offer suggestions and never take credit." Shawki has opened a production house in 2020 with fellow directors to extend support to budding filmmakers.

With challenges on the way, the streaming platforms might offer a higher budget than television but, in the global context, where they have to compete with giants like Netflix and Amazon Prime, it remains meagre. New draft legislation aims to bring streaming platforms under the scope of the Digital Security Act. It proposes a ban on content perceived as critical of the Bangladesh Liberation War and the country's cultural and social values.

It is not yet known how this will unfold, but in the evolving cultural history of Bangladesh, it fits a pattern in which artists have always been pitted against an unsympathetic system—except, this time, the filmmakers have formed a collective and feel stronger. "Streaming platforms have made us braver filmmakers. There is no way to go back now," Nipun said. □□□

[Ishita Sengupta is an independent film critic and culture writer based in India. The article was first published in New Lines Magazine, on January 30, 2024] This is an abridged version of the article.]

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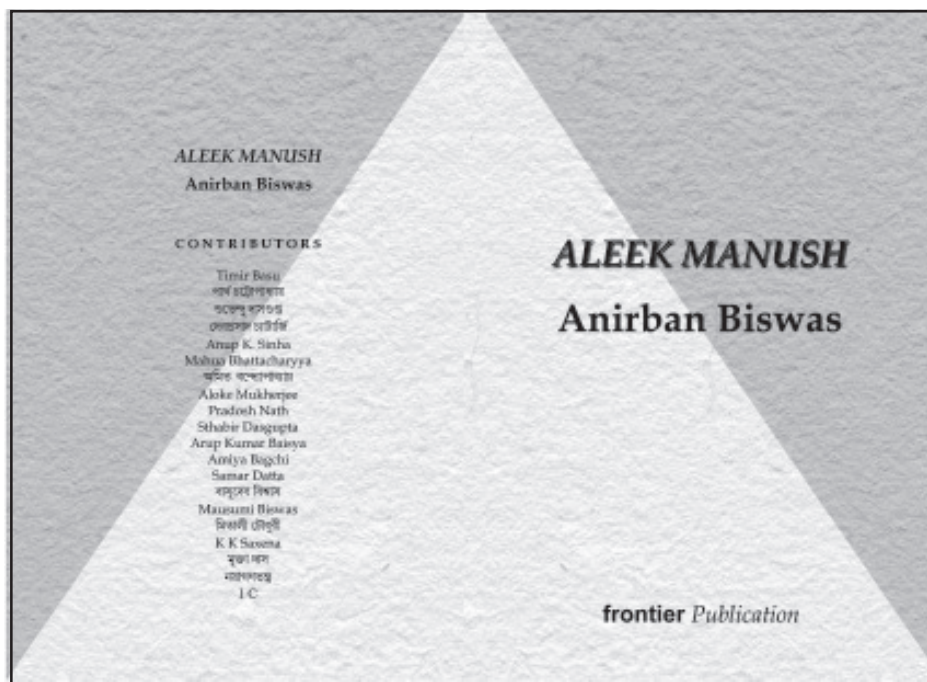
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