

# frontier

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## 'Bond' and Business

**E**LECTION IN INDIA MEANS BUSINESS. IT IS REALLY BIG business that matters in the economy as political parties that are not basically cadre-based, would recruit foot-soldiers in large numbers to manage their affairs. Musclemen find their importance during election season and a large number of unemployed youth, including highly educated youth, get some kind of job to keep them busy even for a short period. After all it is a better option for 'an IIT engineer to do something for the country than driving a cab'! So the on-going 7-phase poll stretching over three months is not bad for them. Funding of political parties by business houses is not new in Indian politics. It dates back to British days. With changing times and technological up-gradation in campaigning electoral expenses are increasing in leaps and bounds. It is an open secret in Indian election drama that ruling elites resort to corrupt practices to collect money. No political party is raising the issue of recent judgement by the apex court declaring electoral bond scheme (EBS) unconstitutional, in election meetings. Their shadow-boxing is over some secondary or localised issues while larger issues affecting millions in a situation of massive unemployment, inflation, price rise and jobless growth remain unaddressed. They define development in a language that is almost Hebrew to most people. Parties cannot dig their own grave by opposing EBS—all are benefitted from it, regional as also national parties.

For a very long period Congress was the sole beneficiary of company funding. But they are in stiff competition with new entrants in parliamentary game, rather gambling. This parliamentary race that sometimes turns ugly is all about how to loot the exchequer in the name of people.

A former secretary to the government of India who was instrumental in the formulation of the EBS was candid enough to admit the bitter truth: 'we don't have exact estimates but my sense is that the electoral bonds didn't find more than 5-10 percent of the total or more than 10 percent of the total election expenditure which is much more. So there is an enormous amount of black money which is in the system'. The parties that talk of eradicating black money are lying; it goes to the coffers of all political parties, big or small. Even the virulent critics of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are not demanding scrapping of EBS.

How Gandhi and in the process his party—Congress Party—was entertained by some leading business tycoons of yester years is well recorded. Gandhi had

close personal relationships and accepted financial contributions from Ambalal Sarabhai, Jamnalal Bajaj and Ghanshyam Das Birla. The Tatas reportedly used to finance both Congress and Rajagopalichari's Swatantra Party. These days high-tech propaganda in elections requires money, huge money and black money foots the bill. Even left parties no longer depend on small donations. They too have changed their style of functioning and collecting money from dubi-

ous sources.

Now the Companies Act 1956 has provisions of corporate donations in Section 239A. In 1969, the Indira Gandhi government deleted Section 239A, thereby imposing ban on corporate funding to political parties, in an apparent bid to deprive her adversaries—the old guards of Syndicate—of funds. But the ban was finally lifted by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1985. And the arrangement continued till 2013 with-

out any hindrance. Finally came the EBS and it is likely to stay in one form or another despite the adverse supreme court order.

What political parties officially show as their income and electoral expenses represents only a very small fraction of the total amount involved in this big business called Election. Without a social upheaval black money will rule the roost and nothing will change for the better in the coming days. □□□ 12-05-2024

## COMMENT

### And Now Rafah

MAY 6, 2024. THE ISRAELI WAR-planes dropped leaflets ordering hundreds of thousands Palestinians in eastern Rafah—the vast majority of whom are internally displaced persons, many already forced to relocate several times—to evacuate the area. Less than 15 hours later, without time for families to evacuate the area, Israel began its aerial bombardment of Rafah. Alarmingly, this latest evacuation order includes areas of Karem Abu Salem and Rafah crossings, the latter being the lifeline for more than two million Palestinians, as well as Abu Yousef Al-Najjar Hospital, the main medical facility in the entire Rafah Governorate.

The population of the Rafah Governorate has increased almost six-fold from 275,000 residents to over 1.5 million in the past seven months. Now housing roughly three quarters of Gaza's population, parts of Rafah (Al-Shaboura, Tal Al-Sultan, and the Al-Zohour neighbourhoods) are considered the last alleged "safe zones" in Gaza. However, Israel has repeatedly bombed Rafah since issuing previous evacuation orders demanding Palestinians to flee there.

Reports are emerging that the Israeli Occupying Forces have pur-

chased thousands of tents to accommodate persons that will be displaced as a result of the ground invasion of Rafah.

People have nowhere to go, as nowhere is safe in the entirety of the Gaza Strip.

An invasion of Rafah would be unlike anything people have witnessed so far. Israel, in plans reminiscent of Srebrenica, will continue with its practice to separate out men from women and children while walking through the so-called 'safe routes', and by reports of Israel's intentions to prevent Palestinian men from leaving Rafah.

Israeli ground invasion into Rafah would precipitate the utter collapse of the already precarious humanitarian aid infrastructure. This vital lifeline, systematically obstructed by Israel, operates primarily through the border crossings situated in the south eastern areas of Rafah.

This perilous situation heightens the risk of a man-made famine in southern Gaza, echoing the "full-blown famine" that ravaged northern Gaza, as per the assessment of the World Food Programme.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has twice stated the need to prevent genocide, an obligation

of all signatory States to the Genocide Convention which is persistently violated by States that continue to arm and financially support Israel's settler-colonial, apartheid, and genocidal regime. States must immediately halt all military support for Israel and make clear that attacks on Rafah must be met with a unified, tangible response. This should include a two-way arms embargo, economic sanctions, including freezing the assets of all Israeli government and army officials, as well as travel bans and divestment from all Israeli activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT).

The international community as a whole must actively and meaningfully work towards ending Israel's illegal occupation and dismantling the settler-colonial apartheid regime against the Palestinian people. The process of emptying Gaza and destroying Palestinian life and culture therein is a manifestation of the ongoing Nakba. Just as the international community stood by then, it stands by now. Echoes of condemnation from world leaders have the same effect as silence. What is needed is action. □□□

*[Contributd by Shawaen Jabarin, Issam Younis and Raji Sourani]*

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## NOTE

## 'Manipur'—One Year Later

**FACAM writes:**

**M**AY 3, 2024. IT HAS BEEN a year since the genocidal violence in Manipur started, and it has continued to intensify across the year. As of 1st May 2024, there have been 185 people killed in the violence initiated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with more than 200 villages burnt and more than 41,000 people displaced from Manipur. The struggle in Manipur is centered on the lands of the tribal peasantry, with the ruling BJP government both at the centre and in the state pushing for the ability of the valley-based landowning sections to purchase the forest lands in the hills, instigating violence between the Kuki-Zo, Naga peasantry, and the Meiteis. Various reports surfaced where the Indian army and paramilitary arms and ammunition were "stolen" which were later found to have been arming the militias controlled by the party in power. The root cause of the conflict is how to exploit mineral resources of the region. Manipur is rich in limestone, chromite, nickel, copper, azurite, magnetite, and various platinum group elements which are predominantly found in Hundung, Phungyar, and Mailiang villages in Ukhrul district, as well as in Toupokpi, Chakpikarong, Pallel, Nungphura, Nungpal, SajikTampak, and Haikot villages in Tengnoupal and Chandel districts. 80% of these resources fall in areas inhabited by tribal communities practising Christianity, who are particularly the Kuki-Zo and Nagas in Manipur, while the Meiteis who largely practise Hinduism are the main base of the ruling saffron dispensation. The Kuki-Zo and Naga peasants who inhabit these resource-rich forest and hill areas must therefore be displaced. At the

same time, Manipur has never found itself completely integrated with even the erstwhile British Raj, let alone the Indian state born in 1947, and has seen movements for national liberation being attacked in the guise of the on-going conflict which the state has promoted by utilising ethnic divide.

For the interests of corporatisation, the conflict is a necessary act as a means of arming local state-backed militias, an excuse for the increased presence of central paramilitary, army, and police in the region in the name of 'quelling the violence' and 'restoring order' as a method of militarisation which can thus make the process of looting natural resources easier, as witnessed by the large displacement of peasants.

Just like the Salwa Judum and their successors the District Reserve Guard and Bastar Fighter in Bastar where the Adivasi peasantry too is fighting for their lands, combating displacement, genocide, and a systemic war on people by the Indian state for the sake of corporate loot, state-backed private militias are running amok in the region. Just on 30th April and 1st May 2024, the Assam Rifles, part of the Central Armed Police Forces like the CRPF, conducted combing operations in the forest areas near the Kuki-Zo dominated villages of Leisanghpai and Sejang in Jiribum under the guise of capturing a purported militant. Right after the operation, the villages were found to be burnt to ashes. In the name of protecting the residents, these villages are being cleared of the residents, allowing way for the private militias to take control and raze villages to the ground, compelling the peasants to leave.

The Adivasi peasants dominated

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5th and 6th schedule areas in Bastar and Manipur, are seeing the most intense militarisation for the sake of corporate loot of natural resources, where the tribal peasants across the entirety of such resource-rich regions have been struggling against militarisation and corporatisation to save their jal-jungle-jamin, as well as for their dignity and democratic rights. □□□

[Forum Against Corporatisation and Militarisation (FACM) is an umbrella platform of 16 mass organisations]

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## MODI'S SELF-RELIANCE

**'We are all Opportunists'****Sumit Bhaduri**

**I**NSTEAD OF BEING SENSITIVE & inclusive, the Modi government has used state power to silence differences in opinions.

The year 2024 will be remembered as a milestone in the history of electoral democracies. Almost half the global population, including citizens of India and the US, the two largest democracies, would have exercised their voting rights by the end of this year.

Since science and technology (S&T) can contribute to democratic traditions and institutional strengths only when aligned well with a country's aspirations, evaluating the state of that alignment in today's India may help the common person make an informed choice before the next elections.

The survival of India's democracy for 75 years after it became an independent nation is a unique success story that all Indians can be proud of. No other former colony with India's religious, linguistic, and economic diversities has been able to practice democracy as successfully.

India has so far withstood the stress of transiting from the 'commanding heights of the public sector' economy to one of 'jobless growth' only due to people's inherent faith in democracy. However, S&T in India has not been immune to these profound changes. Therefore, the question to be asked before the next elections is how the present government has fulfilled the societal expectations of indigenous S&T capabilities.

A short but incomplete answer to this question may be found in the following quote from *Nature*, a widely read science journal. It said:

A country without science is like a car without an engine: it's not going anywhere.

The above statement may seem trite because science and technology (S&T) contribute to a country's defence capabilities, economic prosperity, and societal well-being. However, the analogy made before the arrival of COVID-19 makes sense only if it is remembered that the citizens are the passengers, and the rich and the powerful, including politicians, are in the driver's seat of the metaphoric car of democracy.

Safe cars must have safe drivers and common safety devices. The drivers must ensure that the cars have safety belts and airbags that work. No matter how powerful the engine is, it does not save the passengers from injury or death in an accident; only safety belts and airbags may do that. Like careful drivers, politicians and policymakers are expected to anticipate potential dangers and take measures for the health and well-being of common citizens. This requires the strengthening and full utilisation of the capabilities of S&T, including public health and the promotion of basic scientific literacy.

The global havoc played by COVID-19 made one thing clear: the safety belts and the airbags in many of the metaphoric cars were either missing or of poor quality. Officially, the pandemic killed 7 million people worldwide, while excess mortality data suggested the number could be much higher, close to 15 million.

There were two main reasons for the high mortality. First, it is well documented that even though a

pandemic was long expected, the levels of unpreparedness on the part of the politicians and the pharmaceutical companies were shocking. Secondly, the state of public health facilities was woeful in many countries.

In a real car, the engine can only convert energy into power. For the car to move, the power must be transmitted to the wheels by the other parts of the car that work in harmony with the engine.

Similarly, converting laboratory science into deliverable, safe technologies requires several steps and multiple players. The gap between small-scale laboratory science and large industrial technology is a matter of scale. Any technology on an industrial scale requires a lot more data than what is generated in the laboratory. The vaccine development programs against COVID-19, based on novel and known scientific strategies, were no exceptions.

After COVID-19 arrived, science did its bit commendably and in record time. However, converting that science to deliverable technologies was not quick enough because of the missing and malfunctioning parts. Scaled-up studies on testing methods and efficacies of vaccines that can be relied upon took time, as they always do, as did the setting up of the necessary infrastructure and the logistics for delivering vaccines to common citizens. The hidden and open disdain for science displayed by many drivers made the situation far worse.

Apart from killing and making people sick, the pandemic severely damaged the global and national economies. The fact that financial globalisation was in long-term trouble had been apparent from the 2008 Wall Street crash. Many politicians were aware of this. However, instead of addressing the complex

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economic realities, in their bid to stay in or grab power, they fell back on ideologies of cultural nationalism – a potent mix of religious or racial or other divisiveness in society and identity politics.

Barack Obama becoming President in 2008 and his opposition to the outsourcing of what he called ‘American jobs’ to India in 2012, the UK elections in 2015 followed by Brexit in 2016, and Donald Trump’s slogan ‘Make America great again’ (MAGA) that won him the election in 2016 are a few examples.

India was no exception. After the 2008 financial crash, ‘inclusive growth,’ an IMF-invented fashionable phrase, started making the rounds in political speeches. As the dividing line between deregulation and corruption disappeared, the ruling coalition of that time, the UPA, lost the general elections of 2014, and the NDA came to power with a massive majority.

The virtues of self-reliance or ‘atmanirbharata’ were rediscovered only after the arrival of COVID-19 and six years after the ruling party had come to power. In a speech at the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in 2020, the Prime Minister talked of the ‘five I s’ – intent, inclusion, investment, infrastructure, and innovation – that are supposedly needed to make India self-reliant.

What the Prime Minister did not say after being the ‘karma yogi’ at the helm of the state for six long years is more important than what he did say.

He did not mention inequality, probably the most important ‘I,’ which, in the Indian context, could lead to serious social unrest. As ‘jobless growth’ and ‘trickle-down’ economics openly turned into ‘Crony capitalism,’ the wealth of politicians and their corporate friends grew exponentially.

In the three years from 2015 to 2018, with the NDA government at the centre, the total wealth of all the MLAs increased by about 13 times. Economic inequalities, already at an unprecedentedly high level, skyrocketed, with the top 1 per cent holding around 22.6 per cent of the country’s national income. The number of dollar billionaires in India was 90 in 2015. In 2023 alone, i.e. in one single year, it added 94 new ones, second only to the US.

The Prime Minister did not debunk the public versus private sector myth on innovation. He did not point out that ‘Atmanirbharata’ and innovations that benefit society have had a long history in India. India’s capabilities in nuclear and space technology today, the ‘Green Revolution’ that made the country self-sufficient in food production, and India-specific patent laws that made out-of-patent drugs cheap and available are all stellar examples of S&T-driven innovations delivered by what in economics is called an entrepreneurial state.

He did not say that ‘profit’ on capital, like dynasty rule, is not a birthright. Profit must be a reward sanctioned by society for long-term investment in research and development (R&D) that delivers innovations.

When the time came to fight COVID-19, the nation, as in the past, had to fall back upon the commendable S&T and managerial skills available within the nation. That experience again showed that the absorption of evidence-based knowledge, a ‘do it yourself’ approach, is at the heart of self-reliance and all S&T-driven innovations.

‘Intent’ is not enough. Such an approach demands action and long-term ‘investment’ in research and development that deliver ‘innovations.’ Without such an approach,

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‘inclusion’ will remain as fictitious as it has been for the last 25 years.

To return to the question of how the present government has fulfilled the societal expectations from S&T, it must be remembered that a car goes where the driver takes it after consultation with the passengers. In a democracy, the consultation process is done through elections.

Rather than being sensitive and inclusive about the consultation process, the Modi government has used state power to silence differences in opinions. To grab power, they have relied on corporates with no appetite for innovation. Recently, a politician from the ruling party was unusually candid when he said:

‘We are neither rightist nor leftist. We are all opportunists.’

The problem with opportunism is that it cannot think beyond the short term and corrodes democracy, self-reliance, and S&T from the inside. A short-sighted driver who cannot see what lies ahead will likely drive the car into an abyss. □□□

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## A DEATH SENTENCE TO 'SHOMPENS'

## The Great Nicobar Project

*Sumit Mukherjee*

**G**REAT NICOBAR, THE largest island in Nicobar archipelago, spanning 910 sq km, has become a focal point of contention and opposition since India's planning commission, 'NITI Aayog', proposed a major development project for the island during the peak of the pandemic in 2020. This initiative has sparked widespread protests and criticism, particularly concerning the formulation, evaluation and approval of a large-scale infrastructure and tourism endeavour that would encroach upon 166 sq km of the ancestral lands of the indigenous Shompens and Nicobarase tribes bypassing all of their rights thereof. Extreme vulnerability of the Island revolves around its dual identity: a haven for rich biodiversity and indigenous communities, yet strategically positioned on the international sea route in southern Bay of Bengal with respect to Indian polity.

It's practically a choice between some 250 Shompen and 1000 Nicobarase indigenous souls striving after the 2004 Tsunami havoc and Rs 75,000 crore 'Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island in Andaman and Nicobar Islands' project by Government of India. Soon 8.5 lakh trees from 15 percent or 130 sq km of the prime evergreen tropical forest including 650 and 330 species of terrestrial and marine flora and fauna with several endemic like Nicobar Shrew, Nicobar Megapode etc and also 12 to 20 hectares of mangrove cover will be replaced by an international Cargo Terminal, a 22 sq km green field airport, gas and solar power plants and two mega coastal cities con-

nected by a long express highway along the east coast.

Historically, the Great Nicobar Island was the land of Shompen and Nicobarase Tribes. Around 853 square km of Great Nicobar was designated as a tribal reserve under the Andaman and Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation, 1956. This means that the land is meant for exclusive use of the community and others cannot access the area without express permission from the administration.

Colonisation of mainlanders began in 1969 by the Government of India with 337 ex-serviceman families were settled on the south-eastern coast of Great Nicobar Island de-reserving 45.30 sq km from tribal reserve within reserve forest area. There are 72 villages as per the Census records of 2011 out of which only 30 are inhabited and 42 uninhabited after the tsunami havoc in 2004. The island is entirely rural having a total population of 8046, of which 1214 (14.50%) are Scheduled Tribe people. There are two national parks and one wild life sanctuary which are declared as Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve under UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves in 2013. Hence any encroachment in protected forests and disturbing the rights of the indigenous people are hugely contradictory within the different institutions of the same government.

These two tribal communities have around 250 and 1000 souls striving after the 2004 tsunami havoc in the island and that the nomadic Shompens are declared as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in constitutional parlance.

They are shy, non-violent, gatherer hunter people living in small bands depending fully on the nature excepting in few cases, accepting limited free ration items. Language of the Sentinel is only understood by the neighbouring coast dweller Nicobarase with whom the former exchange resources. Excepting few instances of orchard plantation they are forager in the forest and hence need a large resource zone to migrate as per availability of food. It is feared that any contact with the outsiders may prove fatal to this isolated small population from the present day disease pathogens and modern culture, as experienced in case of the Great Andamanese and the Onge in other parts of the archipelago.

On the other hand coast dweller Nicobarase people have lost most of their coconut plantation, coral reef fishing and piggeries after Tsunami 2004 and now in the process of reviving and rebuilding their traditional economy and society. A good number of villagers are waiting to return to their old village or resettlement sites in the coastal zone.

In fact there will be some 650 thousand non-local people who will inhabit the island by 2050 as per NITI Aayog plan estimates causing an increase of 76 times from the present. Being located in active plate-tectonic zone, acute scarcity of fresh water and limited green power options the very sustainability of the project is under deep doubts.

Wherever and whenever the project confronted so far with any such existing acts, rules, notifications, like Andaman and Nicobar Islands Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation 1956, Scheduled Tribes & Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (RoFR) Act, 2006 and the Shompen Policy 2015 be implemented in letter and spirit, Coastal

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Regulation Zone 1991, Biosphere Reserve scheme 1986, India's National Marine Turtle Action Plan 2021 on Galathea Bay, etc the NITI Aayog deployed measures like de-notification, deregulation, de-reservation, diversion, etc strategies to let the project launch at any cost.

The whole of Galathia Wildlife Sanctuary, nesting ground for highly endangered Giant Leatherback Turtle and Megapode bird, has been denotified and will be converted to the international transshipment terminal and the international green field airport during first phase of the project already in progress. Additional 4.21 sq km of land is to be acquired for the port and airport. The 12 km wide buffer zone of the Galathia National Park has been denotified. Thus the forest habitat of the Shompens i.e. the core area of the Biosphere will be in direct contact with the project area with obvious long term detrimental impacts. Further about 71 sq km of the Biosphere Reserve area will be scooped out in the north-eastern part of the project. The traditional tribal land of 12 Nicobarese villages along the southeast and southwest coasts are also being denotified and grabbed by the project authority. In fact it was a long brewed plan implemented in a hurry to deprive them of their thousand- year- old dwelling lands taking the advantage of the tsunami rehabilitation programme.

Experts also wonder how the 130 sq km of virgin tropical evergreen forest will be relocated in mainland India as promised in the EIA report. Neither there is any contiguous land available there nor can the artificial plantation replicate the same biodiversity ecosystem elsewhere.

Last hope in despair : the National Green Tribunal (NGT), India's apex green court, has ruled that it would not "interfere" with the forest and environment clearances flouting

all norms through recommendation of a High Power Committee formed only with the GoI's 'own' experts (Hindustan Times: April 14, 2023).

Serious criticisms and protests poured in from several social scientists, environmental activists, bureaucrats, local tribal groups etc and even from other government institutions against the procedural lapses, hazy reports, suggested compensatory measures and critical fallout on the tribal communities.

Prof P K Mishra, President, Indian Anthropological Association, has pointed out that the Environmental Impact Assessment Report, prepared by Hyderabad based Vimta Labs, is full of inaccuracies and inadequacies along with faulty understanding of the tribal societies. The United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has pointed out the project will have direct impact on Andamanese, the Jarawas, the Onges, the Shompens, and the Sentinelese (PVTGs) and sought answers from the Government of India on the steps being taken to protect them and the compliance with the existing laws and policies to protect these groups (Frontline: July 22, 2022).

Prof Pankaj Sekhsaria, who has been researching and writing on issues of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for over two decades, quoted Prof Janki Andharia of TISS, Mumbai warning "The meaning of 'making a structure earthquake proof'[as in EIA report] needs to be revisited in this context. This cannot be the same as waterproofing a house because a post-facto disaster response plan will not prevent a disaster from happening in the first place."(Frontline: Jan 12, 2023). Prof Sharad Lele, a former member of the environment ministry and tribal ministry committee on the Forest Rights Act feared the mega project and the proposal to increase the

island's population amounts to "a planned destruction of the Adivasi culture and lives".

A group of 70 former civil servants wrote to President of India mentioning the project highly detrimental to the foraging tribes and will virtually destroy the delicate ecosystem and vulnerable people (Scroll: May 02, 2023) . In a letter dated November 15, 2023 to Bhupender Yadav, holding MOEFCC, Sri E A S Sarma, former Secretary to the Government of India, questioned the granting of clearances for the project without consulting the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (Frontline: July 22, 2022). An open letter seeking immediate withdrawal of the project is placed before the President of India by 39 scholars from 13 countries saying "If the project goes ahead, even in a limited form, we believe it will be a death sentence for the Shompen, tantamount to the international crime of genocide." (The Guardian: Feb. 07, 2024)

The Tribal Council of Little and Great Nicobar Islands had withdrawn NOC in November 2022, which was given in August 2022 for diversion of forest land, half of which is tribal reserve. The Council members apprised EAC that they were not informed that their tribal areas (including specific pre-Tsunami villages) would be de-notified and that the transshipment port and township accommodation for non-islanders, built on areas where their traditional settlements used to be. They were also not told that "the forests and foreshore reefs in that area will be destroyed and sea will be reclaimed."

The Tribal Council Chairman Mr Barnabas Manju expressed their serious concerns, "We are originally completely dependent on forests and would want to go back to foraging and tending to plantations in our land. Most importantly, losing access to our lands will be very dam-

aging for our future generations and our Shompen brothers. We are not against development projects but we want complete access and ownership to our lands as it is, in a forested condition.” (Hindustan Times, 14 April 2023)

Despite huge criticisms and protests by environmentalists, anthropologists, bureaucrats and academicians from world over Andaman Nicobar Integrated Island Development Corporation—ANIIDCO, the nodal agency of the project had decided to go ahead with the Terms of Reference (TOR) for Environmen-

tal Impact Assessment Studies last year. All those calls for caution have gone unheeded and the first phase of the project has been launched despite the damage it will cause to these defenceless tribal people. On the contrary all non-islanders were denied entry to Great Nicobar Island by ‘un-official rule’ during launch of the first phase last year.

This ‘mega holistic development’ project is certainly going to cost the undisturbed delicate ecological harmony of the island with its innocent indigenous dwindling societies. From the above discussion along with com-

ments of the concerned experts it seems the NITI Aayog has become the lone holdout against the collective views on the project with its wilful blindness. How can the citizens of India ‘consciously’ put the lives of the Shompen and the Nicobarese, who are co-citizens, towards definite extinction for whatever benefit mainland people earn and also putting a larger number of people and huge amount of national wealth in peril. □□□

*[The author is President, Foundation of Practising Geographers, Kolkata]*

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## SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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# Territorialisation of Space

*Bhabani Shankar Nayak*

**T**HE TERRITORIALISATION of land has not only resulted in a world structured around the concept of land as private property but has also facilitated the formation of territories at various levels, leading to the segregation of private spaces based on gender, property ownership, and subsequently on the grounds of class, race, caste, tribe, and other forms of marginalisation. This process has unfolded through the establishment of private and public spheres, a dynamic that emerged with the advent of agricultural societies based on land as private property. In such societies, the private sphere was predominantly designated for women, while the public sphere was created for men. Remarkably, this societal framework still reverberates across different regions of the globe today. Examples abound to illustrate the enduring impact of this phenomenon.

In Western Europe and America, racialised ghettos stand as stark reminders of spatial segregation. Likewise, in the UK, the phenomenon of postcode poverty underscores how

territorialisation manifests even within relatively affluent nations. In India, the division of geographical space and residential properties along caste and religious lines vividly demonstrates how the territorialisation of land and private property intertwines with broader societal and economic divisions. In this interconnected narrative, the territorialisation of land, private property, and space evolves in tandem. The higher classes, castes, and propertied individuals wield significant influence over various spheres of life, controlling resources and shaping the very fabric of the planet.

The gendered division of labour and discrimination, racialised capitalism, caste-based ghettos, and class-based shanty towns and slums all stem directly from the territorialisation of space predicated on property ownership, with land retaining a pivotal role in these dynamics. The gendered division of labour, for instance, is deeply entrenched in societies where land ownership dictates social norms and economic structures. Women often find themselves relegated to domes-

tic roles, constrained by traditional expectations rooted in property ownership patterns. Similarly, racialised capitalism perpetuates inequalities by exploiting marginalised communities, relegating them to inferior living conditions and limited economic opportunities, all within the framework of property ownership delineated by historic racial boundaries.

Caste-based ghettos and class-based shanty towns and slums further illustrate how territorialisation perpetuates social stratification. In these contexts, land ownership serves as a stark marker of privilege, with marginalised groups relegated to marginalised spaces, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion. In essence, the territorialisation of space based on property ownership creates and perpetuates systems of inequality, where access to resources, opportunities, and basic rights is intricately linked to one's position within the property ownership hierarchy. Until these underlying structures are addressed, the consequences of territorialisation will continue to shape and perpetuate societal divisions, political marginalisation, and economic injustices.

The territorialisation of space poses significant challenges for working people, affecting their accessibil-



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ity to, availability of, and distribution networks for essential resources. These challenges are often shaped by the principles of purchasing power within the market. All kinds of markets themselves are stratified based on the purchasing power of individuals, delineating who frequents which streets for shopping and thereby defining their social status, economic influence, and political standing within society. In this paradigm, individuals become characterised by the commodities they consume, leading to a society where material possessions serve as markers of individualistic identity.

In commodity-conscious societies, where dead commodity defines people with life and consumerism reigns supreme, there is a heightened sense of orderliness and culture of compliance. In such a society, human beings behave like orderly objects in the markets. Individuals conform to market-led societal norms dictated by consumption patterns, making such societies easier to govern. Consequently, the territorialisation of space emerges as both a strategy and a tool of governance, wielded without necessarily instigating revolutionary consciousness or significant social and political upheavals. This dynamic underscores the intricate relationship between space, consumption, and governance, wherein the organization of physical space and access to resources serve as mechanisms of control and social stratification. Until there is a shift away from the commodification of human existence and a re-evaluation of societal values, the territorialisation of space will continue to perpetuate systems of inequality and reinforce existing exploitative power structures dominated by propertied class.

The territorialisation of space fosters a regressive consciousness rooted in the ideals of 'me,' 'mine,'

and 'mine' only. This mindset, entrenched in notions of individual ownership and exclusive possession, promotes a narrow worldview focused solely on personal gain and preservation of one's territory. At its core, this regressive consciousness prioritises the protection of individual interests above collective well-being, leading to a fragmentation of communities and a breakdown of social cohesion. Rather than fostering collaboration and mutual support, it breeds competition and distrust among individuals and groups vying for control over limited resources and spaces.

Moreover, this mindset perpetuates a cycle of scarcity mentality, wherein individuals perceive resources as finite and hoard them out of fear of scarcity, further exacerbating inequalities and depriving others of access to essential goods and opportunities. Ultimately, the regressive consciousness spawned by territorialisation of space impedes progress towards a more inclusive and equitable society, as it reinforces divisions and hampers efforts to address systemic injustices. To counteract this, it is imperative to cultivate a collective consciousness that prioritises cooperation, solidarity, empathy, and shared responsibility for the well-being of all members of society and the planet.

The fencing of space driven by territorialisation has a profound effect on human consciousness, narrowing its scope and eroding the inherent and integral relationship between individuals and both their fellow human beings and the natural world. This separation is not incidental but rather central to the survival of capitalism as a system, which thrives on the principles of private property and profit. By delineating boundaries, destroying collective foundations of society and human lives, and enclosing spaces,

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territorialisation reinforces a sense of individualism and isolation, severing the ties that bind communities together and disconnecting individuals from the ecosystems in which they exist. This isolation serves the interests of capitalism by atomising society, making it easier to exploit human beings and nature for profit.

The emphasis on private property inherent in territorialisation perpetuates a mindset of ownership

and control, where the accumulation of wealth and possessions becomes the primary measure of success and status. This mindset fosters competition rather than cooperation, exacerbating inequalities and undermining collective efforts to address pressing social and environmental challenges. In this way, the fencing of space and the separation it engenders not only diminish human consciousness but also perpetuates

the conditions that sustain capitalism.

In search of alternatives, it is essential to challenge the notion of private property as sacrosanct and to foster a deeper sense of connection and interdependence among individuals and with the natural world. Only by transcending the boundaries imposed by territorialisation can people cultivate a more just, equitable, and sustainable society. □□□

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## BEYOND ELECTIONS

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### Futility of 'INDIA'

*Harsh Thakor*

**A** PARLIAMENTARY UNITED front like Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) under leadership of the Congress will not check the wave of fascism, because most of the parties harbour fascist inclinations and show electoral opportunism. The history of fascism manifested that it takes a violent mass movement stirred by the direct influence of the ruling class. The working-class people rallied behind the Nazi forces not because they cherished the working conditions or facilities provided by Hitler, but due to the weakness of the progressive leadership to act on time.

The history of Congress and other ruling parties in India is more or less the same. The Congress never eradicated or even restricted flow of foreign finance penetration from imperialists. Under the regime of Congress, the first idol of Ram-Sita was installed inside Babri Masjid, and entry was restricted. Congress stormed into Nagaland to suppress their demand for nationhood. It paid no heed to the Sacchar Committee report in the interest of minorities; Congress introduced draconian laws like AFSPA, NSA, UAPA etc. It sold Indian agriculture to the WTO. This very Congress opened the gates of

Babri Masjid in 1986 to sponsor Rath Yatra and brick worship. This very party opened the gates to globalisation and liberalisation, which sold out India to corporates. It was Congress, which gradually dismantled the industrial sectors. It never effectively combated RSS-like organisations and morally and craftily tried to support the idea of Hindutva Nationality. Its half-hearted approach to abrogation of Article 370 was too clever by half. In truth many Congress leaders silently supported Modi's move to curtail Kashmir's autonomy. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has merely sharpened the path that Congress was treading in the past. It has also been a common phenomenon of opposition parties like Aam Aadmi Party or Janata Dal to pamper Hindu politics and indirectly support the programme of Hindutva and corporates. They actually react to the agenda set by the BJP. As for the official left, the less said the better. Tailism is the hall-mark of their political strategy. As a result they do hardly matter in shaping electoral outcomes.

Then there are also deviationist trends amongst Communist Revolutionaries.

CPI (Maoist)'s call for election boycott, without establishing alternative or parallel organs of democratic power or required revolutionary democratic consciousness makes little sense. Today revolutionary movement is not on an ascendancy, political slogans are inviting no powerful response from masses and the parliamentary system has still not been rendered futile by broad masses. In spite of great sacrifices and strides the people often become hapless spectators and give support to ruling class candidates even in areas where Maoists have some influence.

Subjective factor is lacking for the boycott tactics with the masses even in Maoist bases in Chattisgarh are unable to comprehend the sheer futility or bankruptcy of the parliamentary system and still repose faith in candidates of parliamentary parties.

No doubt the Maoist cadres function with ultimate sincerity to liberate the people, but still the armed squads stop people from voting, not from political consciousness but out of fear of extinguishing in crossfire. Even if disillusioned and propaganda of state misleading about voter turnouts, however disillusioned, the people's consciousness has not been escalated to exercise an active boycott with no effective agrarian revolutionary movement. Often such premature calls wean genuine democratic cadres away from mass movements.

The Maoist work is also confined to the plain areas; so in non-functioning regions the slogan of boycott would not render effectively. The call has hardly of any effect in urban areas or impact on workers in factories.

This writer recounts instances in Jharkhand and Orissa where Maoists after boycott slogan supported ruling class parties and how in Punjab in successive years from 1999, the boycott slogan was completely ineffective. Boycottists forget what even Lenin warned about the imperative

task of stirring revolutionary consciousness.

However well intentioned or exhibiting spirit of self-sacrifice to its limits the Maoists' boycott campaign does not sharpen revolutionary democratic struggle, with no proper campaign to genuinely educate the toilers.

On the other hands CPI(ML) factions like 'Red Star', 'Massline' or 'Class Struggle' are supporting the parliamentary process by backing the INDIA, without properly securing re-organised vanguard party,

with the Communist party being in scattered bits. This is capitulationist. Even if refraining from participating in elections, they are not projecting a genuine revolutionary alternative. Relatively the CPI (ML) New Democracy has projected a balanced perspective on mass movement but still reposed faith in INDIA.

Only correct approach is undertaking active political campaign, calling for building a democratic alternative, utilising contradictions of ruling class parties. □□□

*[Harsh Thakor is a freelance journalist]*

GAZA 2023, ANGOLA 1961

## October 7 in Historical Perspective

*Gilbert Achcar*

FOR HAVING STATED ON 24 October the rather obvious and banal truth that 7 October "did not happen in a vacuum", UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was accused by Israel of "justifying terrorism", while Israel's ambassador at the UN demanded his resignation. Pointing to the post-1967 occupation, Guterres had explained that "the Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their land steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence; their economy stifled; their people displaced and their homes demolished. Their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing".

He had also commented that "the grievances of the Palestinian people cannot justify the appalling attacks by Hamas. And those appalling attacks cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people." And yet, even Benny Gantz, Benjamin Netanyahu's political opponent and supposedly "moderate" member of Israel's post-7 October war cabinet, stated that the UN Secretary-General "condones

terror", adding that "terror apologists cannot speak on behalf of the world", thus tacitly approving the demand formulated by Israel's envoy.

In the aftermath of 7 October, Michel Cahen, a French specialist of the history of Portuguese-speaking Africa, drew people's attention to a historical episode that took place in Angola in 1961 and bears a striking resemblance to the ongoing events in the Middle East. In truth the parallel goes way beyond the moment of 7 October alone. Here is the record:

In 1961, on the background of a major progress of decolonisation on the African continent, resentment against die-hard Portuguese colonialism tremendously increased in Angola, especially after the neighbouring Republic of Congo (later to become the Democratic Republic of Congo) had achieved its independence from Belgian colonial rule in the previous year, prompting Portuguese colonial authorities to increase their repression of Angolan independentists. Anti-colonial armed struggle was progressing in Africa's

remaining colonial dominions, and Angola was no exception. One of its anti-colonial movements was the Union of Angola's Peoples (UPA), whose leader, Holden Roberto, had links with both the Algerian National Liberation Front—of which it will adopt the name later to become the National Liberation Front of Angola (FLNA)—and with the CIA.

On 15 March 1961, UPA fighters crossed the border from Congo into northern Angola, joined by many local natives. A ragtag mass of four to five thousand men, a few of them armed with rifles and most with machetes, went on the rampage, killing in unspeakably horrendous ways several hundreds, up to one thousand (there are no precise figures), white colonists—men, women, babies and children—along with many more Angolans of other ethnicities or mixed-race (*mestiços*). As Maria da Conceição Neto wrote sixty years later, "the images of slaughtered whites, *mestiços* and blacks would become the centrepiece of Portuguese propaganda to discredit the attackers as 'terrorists' and 'barbarians' without any political objective. To this day, these are the most widespread images about 'the 15th of March', immediately creating a barrier to understanding what has happened..."

The Portuguese government of far-right dictator António de Oliveira Salazar—who personally took the ministry of defence in hand for the purpose—launched a massive retaliatory campaign, including an extensive use of air forces. In a few months, tens of thousands (over 50,000 by the end of the year, according to Nkwelle Ekaney) were killed among the black population, with several villages burned and razed in a vast area. A major weapon used by the Portuguese air force in perpetrating this genocidal massacre was napalm, provided by the US administration of John F Kennedy.

Two more elements of the historical record are relevant here. First, The UPA/FLNA would carry on as a CIA-backed rival of the Soviet-backed People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). However, far-right Portugal was a founding member of NATO. Therefore, as Roberto himself later explained to a Swedish researcher:

'We could not receive assistance from the Western countries, because of NATO and the relations with Portugal. We had no support. The little support that we could count upon was from African and Arab countries, such as Tunisia. And Israel, which was very important for

us. The Israeli government helped us at that time.'

Second, Frantz Fanon—who had encouraged Roberto to launch armed struggle (see the biographies of Frantz Fanon by David Macey, pp. 386–7, and Adam Shatz, pp. 249–9)—commented on the Angolan events in the chapter entitled "Grandeur and weakness of spontaneity" of his famous 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 85) in the following terms:

'On March 15, 1961, we recall, the Angolan peasants in groups of two or three thousand attacked the Portuguese positions. Men, women, and children, armed and unarmed, courageously and enthusiastically hurled themselves en masse in wave after wave against the regions dominated by the colonists, the military, and the Portuguese flag. Villages and airports were surrounded and suffered numerous attacks, but thousands of Angolans were mowed down by colonialist machine gun fire. The leaders of the Angolan uprising soon realised that they would have to adopt different tactics if they really wanted to liberate their country. The Angolan leader, Roberto Holden, therefore, has recently reorganised the Angolan National Army using the model of other liberation wars and guerrilla warfare techniques.

Which of these two historical sequences is more similar to the Hamas-led anti-Israeli 7 October and the ensuing onslaught led by the Israeli far-right government: a Nazi-led anti-Jewish rampage followed by the destruction of European Jews perpetrated by the same Nazis, or the UPA-led anti-Portuguese rampage and the ensuing onslaught led by the Portuguese far-right government with the complicity of the United States? Were the UPA-led Angolans of 15 March primarily motivated by anti-white racism, or by hatred of Portuguese colonial oppression? Likewise, were the Hamas-led Palestinians of 7 October primarily motivated by antisemitism, or by hatred of Israeli colonial oppression? The answers to these questions should be obvious to anyone who is not blinded by anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab or anti-Muslim racism, and "narcissistic compassion" with whitened Israelis. □□□

[Source: Historical Materialism: Historical Materialism is a Marxist journal, appearing four times a year, based in London. Founded in 1997 it asserts that, notwithstanding the variety of its practical and theoretical articulations, Marxism constitutes the most fertile conceptual framework for analysing social phenomena, with an eye to their overhaul. Marx demanded the 'Merciless criticism of everything that exists': for us that includes Marxism itself.]

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## THE LIMITS OF STUDENT POWER

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### 'History is Speaking with Gusto'

*JVP*

IT IS PERHAPS THE BIGGEST student movement since Vietnam. Since April 17—when, in a serious escalation of repression, Columbia University brought the New York Police Department in to destroy a student solidarity encampment, similar encampments emerged on campuses from coast to coast [as well as in Canada, Europe, Asia and Australia]. In turn, university admin-

istrations, in coordination with police departments, responded with overwhelming force. At least 2,300 students, professors and solidarity activists have been arrested at nearly 50 schools across over a dozen states. In truth the crackdowns have concentrated student resolve and revitalized a solidarity movement frustrated by a lack of progress.

In a matter of days, dozens of

Gaza solidarity encampments have sprung up on over a hundred university campuses across the U S. It's the biggest student movement since the anti-war protests that swept U S universities in the 1960s.

As encampments are erected across the country, students have peacefully called for divestment from Israel's oppression of Palestinians. In response, many school administrations are inviting police onto campuses to violently crack down on students.

For over six months, tens of thousands of Jews and countless other

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people of conscience have fought to end the genocide Israel is committing against Palestinians in Gaza. They continue to demand that the Biden administration end its support for the Israeli military.

As the movement for a ceasefire grows, students across the country have organised in the thousands to demand that their universities cut ties with Israel's apartheid regime. Over 100 Gaza solidarity encampments have been established on campuses across the country, reclaiming the space as "liberated zones" and "popular universities for Gaza." Student chapters of Jewish Voice for Peace have been involved in organising at least 47 of these encampments.

At the University of Chicago, students established the "Popular University for Gaza" on the main quad of the University of Chicago campus. Painted boards bearing the messages "Disclose, divest, and repair" and "In solidarity with Gaza forever" have been erected around the encampment. At the University of Minnesota, after their pro-Palestine encampment was cleared and nine were arrested, hundreds of student protesters set up a new encampment, linking arms to protect it after fresh arrests were threatened.

In response to these peaceful student anti-war protests against genocide, many school administrations have invited police onto campus for violent crackdowns.

At Columbia University, negotiations broke down and the university began issuing fresh suspensions. In response, hundreds of Columbia students and professors occupied Hamilton Hall, one of the buildings occupied by anti-war student protesters in 1968. Faculty linked arms with students to protect protesters inside.

Students renamed the occupied building "Hind's Hall," after 6-year-old Hind Rajab, who was murdered

alongside her family by the Israeli military in Gaza. For hours, Hind was left to bleed out as Israeli forces fired on ambulances trying to reach her.

Meanwhile, the Columbia administration again called the cops on their own students. As student journalists were confined to Pulitzer Hall, and told they would be arrested if they left, hundreds of NYPD police clad in riot gear swarmed Columbia's campus to forcefully disperse the encampment and remove the students occupying Hind's Hall. Cops deployed an armoured vehicle to gain entry to Hind's Hall and brutalised the dozens of student protesters who were doing nothing but peacefully occupying a building on their own campus.

One video shows a protester being thrown down the stairs; another shows cops entering Hind's Hall with their guns drawn to confront the unarmed student protesters inside. Just a few miles away, dozens of cops were deployed in a simultaneous raid to crack down on protesters at CCNY, where police also used excessive force against peaceful students, arresting dozens. Across the city, hundreds of protesters were arrested.

On air, a student reporter for Columbia's radio station fought back tears at the news that Columbia President Minouche Shafik has requested the NYPD remain on campus for the remainder of the school year.

At UCLA, tens of thousands of dollars were crowd-funded to bus Zionist agitators to campus, where they surrounded student protesters. In one video, a woman waving an Israeli flag is seen shouting at students: "Go to Palestine. I hope they rape you."

Masked Zionist vigilantes from outside campus attempted to tear down the students' encampment. They beat students with bats, threw

bricks, sprayed mace, and shot fireworks at protesters, all while police stood by and watched. Later last night, UCLA student journalists who were walking on campus were followed and assaulted by Zionist counter-protesters.

As dozens of encampments are erected across the country, students peacefully calling for divestment from Israel's oppression of Palestinians are facing an increasingly violent crackdown by the state.

Police clad in riot gear have been called in to clear encampments by force, and over 1,000 students have been arrested in total. Videos taken of police raids have shown students and professors being thrown to the ground and handcuffed, shoved, beaten, and dragged by militarised police.

Across the country, cops are using pepper spray, rubber bullets, stun grenades, and tear gas on students, many of whom are still teenagers, at the behest of the university administrators who claim to care for their safety. At Arizona State University, videos showed cops removing the hijabs of female Muslim protesters. At Tulane, mounted police rode through the student encampment.

Pro-Israel agitators are also doing everything in their power to smear protesters and get encampments shut down by force. When a man waving an Israeli flag showed up to Northeastern University's Gaza solidarity encampment and shouted "kill the Jews," the university had 100 pro-Palestine student protesters arrested in response. The Northeastern administration justified the crackdown in a statement citing this anti-Semitic threat—neglecting to specify that it was a pro-Israel provocateur making that threat.

It's clear that the only violence happening on U S campuses is being perpetrated by the state and Zionist agitators. Yet the U S media

and pro-genocide politicians have gone to great lengths to portray peaceful, student anti-war demonstrations as violent, anti-Semitic mobs, in order to justify the increasingly brutal crackdown on the right to protest.

Attempts to smear the biggest student anti-war movement since Vietnam won't distract agitators from the urgent work at hand: ending the genocide in Gaza. Palestinians are digging with their hands to unearth the bodies of their loved ones wrapped in plastic and dumped in mass graves outside Nasser and Al-Shifa hospital, some of them with

their hands bound, others still connected to cannulas.

Movements continue to be inspired by these courageous students' steadfastness in the face of state violence and relentless attacks on their character.

After five consecutive days of demonstrations, students at Northwestern won a series of concessions from their university, including increased transparency around the school's investments. Back in New York, over 90 percent of Barnard students voted to divest from Israeli apartheid, and in Rhode Island, students successfully pressured Brown

University administrators to hold a vote on divestment.

Nearly seven months into the Israeli government's genocide, people are still fighting for a permanent ceasefire. As students across the country stand their ground and escalate their tactics under mounting state violence, it's critical that peace movements across the world keep the momentum.

The student movement is writing a new chapter of history. The protesters are building on decades of struggle for Palestine and pulling people into a radically new future.

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## CREATING AN ENEMY

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# Europe, Russia and NATO

*Bharat Dogra*

EUROPE'S PROBLEMS INCREASED when NATO started looking for an enemy that wasn't there. After the break-up of the Soviet Union there was a new situation in Europe as Russia was very willing to be an equal and very friendly partner in any new architecture of European security. Of course there were some problems such as the excessive number of nuclear weapons Russia possessed but these could be sorted out, in fact could be sorted out better if and when Russia was accommodated with self-respect within the European set-up.

This did not necessarily mean that Russia would also become a NATO member; in fact there was a stronger case for discontinuing NATO just as the Warsaw Pact had been discontinued. However even if NATO was to continue and even if Russia was not to be accepted as a NATO member, there were still possibilities of finding a place of self-respect and equality for Russia in any planning for comprehensive European partnership and unity. In terms of peace,

stability and economic prosperity this would have been the win-win path ahead for Europe if Russia and other neighbouring countries, earlier parts of the Soviet Union such as Ukraine and Belarus, were all included in a comprehensive European partnership.

Unfortunately, despite the initial very friendly and accommodative dialogue between Gorbachev, his close colleagues and their western counterparts, this concept of comprehensive European unity and partnership could not move ahead and in particular a decision appears to have been taken to take in any other East European country but not Russia. This decision to leave out the country with the most area and resources forever out of a European partnership obviously lacked rationale and economic as well as strategic sense but appears to have been accepted nevertheless as a given, as something not to be questioned.

Such a decision to forever regard Russia as a country outside of European partnership appears to have been driven by a highly unjustified

and non-rational urge to find an enemy when one did not exist. Russia in the 1990s was clearly not an enemy either of Western Europe or of the USA. In fact it was very eager to court friendship and partnership.

However the USA and NATO had other ideas. As NATO had been founded on the idea of promising defence mainly of western European countries under the leadership of the USA against a powerful enemy, the concept of an enemy had to be maintained if the justification of a military alliance led by the USA was to retain some relevance. Hence Russia was converted into an enemy even when it had ceased to be an enemy. In other words, Russia has to be somehow seen as an enemy to continue to justify that European countries remain in a military alliance that for all practical purposes is dominated by the USA.

In the 1990s at a time when Russia was looking most eagerly for support and partnership, the response of the USA-led West was to promote the leadership of a person like Yeltsin in Russia who would collude in western plunder of the country. The situation in Russia deteriorated so rapidly that even life expectancy decreased significantly, although nor-

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mally such changes do not take place in such a short span.

This led Russia to start moving away from further dependency on the west and again find its strength in an independent path. Within the next decade 2000-2010 Russia was able to get its act together, check the decline and start achieving significant improvement in development indicators. This too was not liked by the western powers. Now they started increasing problems for Russia in the form of fast eastward expansion of NATO, in breach of the assurances extended earlier to Gorbachev and in violation even of the sound advice of peace extended by many leading western diplomats and statespersons. In the decade of 2010s western efforts to create problems for Russia increased further, centering more on

engineering a coup in Ukraine to make it permanently hostile to Russia, to strengthening neo-Nazi elements in Ukraine just because they were the most inclined to be hostile to Russia and instigating violence and injustice against Russian language speaking of Ukraine. The results of such short-sighted policies are there for all to see today as the country which the western countries claim to 'help' the most has actually been ruined the most.

All this time Russia and its leadership have been irrationally demonised by western leadership and western media. Hence it may surprise several people to know that during 2000-2021 several human development indicators in Russia improved very significantly. Child mortality in Russia declined from 20 in

year 2000 to 5.1 in 2021 (compared to 6.2 for USA) while the maternal mortality rate declined from 52 to 14 (compared to 21 for USA) during the same period.

What is the way forward? The peace movement in Europe has a very important role in the present-day conditions. It must work in co-operation with the peace movement in the USA for pushing USA towards less aggressive policies, as well as for creating a wider European partnership in which all the willing European countries are included as equal partners, committed to progressing with peace and environment protection. □□□

*[The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Planet in Peril, Protecting Earth for Children, A Day in 2071, Man over Machine and Earth without Borders.]*

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## LETTERS

### 'Durbar' Marks May Day

Durbar Mahila Samanyaya Committee (DMSC), Kolkata observed International Workers' Day on 30th April. International Workers' Day or Labour Day is a celebration of labourers worldwide promoted by the international labour movement and observed every year on 1st May or the first Monday in May. DMSC has been observing this auspicious day for the last 29 years for the recognition of sex workers' rights. They have chosen April 30 to mark May Day as a protest as their long-standing demand to be recognised as worker as per law is yet to be met.

Ms Bishakha Laskar, secretary DMSC addressed the occasion. The programme was organised by Durbar Abinashi clinic at Abinash Kabiraj Street, Sonagachi, Kolkata. The sex workers of Sonagachi have come a long way with the direct inspiration and guidance of Durbar Mahila Samanyaya Committee. Nowadays unwilling adult women and minor girls are not allowed in this profession. At present only willing ladies

give their physical labour for some time to entertain the customers to earn money to run their family. They don't have any security. So Durbar Mahila Samanyaya Committee is vocal for their social security and they demand that there should not be any police harassment or criminal case against consensual sex between the sex worker and the customer. The organisation is also demanding that there should be anti-trafficking bill in which their opinion should be taken into account and the organisation should get recognition in this regard.

People from different walks of life, especially from the rights group, trade union groups and lawyers attended the meeting and they were supportive to their demand. Shatabdi Das of Jadavpur University mentioned about the wage as it is the most important factor in workers' life. Mrs Rama Debnath, one of the senior members of Durbar's movement pointed out the Supreme Court's verdict about sex workers' rights. She explained how DMSC is

currently working with several groups of unorganised labourers. In truth sex workers too belong to the category of unorganised workers. Durbar's cultural wing 'Komol Gandhar' performed a dance drama 'Ami sei meye' in tune with the spirit of May Day.

**Dipa Joardar, Kolkata**

### Methane Bomb

My name is Hussein, and my 21-year-old boy Ali is dead due to toxic gas flaring on BP oil fields in Iraq.

Gas flaring releases cancer-causing fumes like benzene that trigger a slow, painful death for innocent people and it emits tonnes of methane, heating up the planet earth.

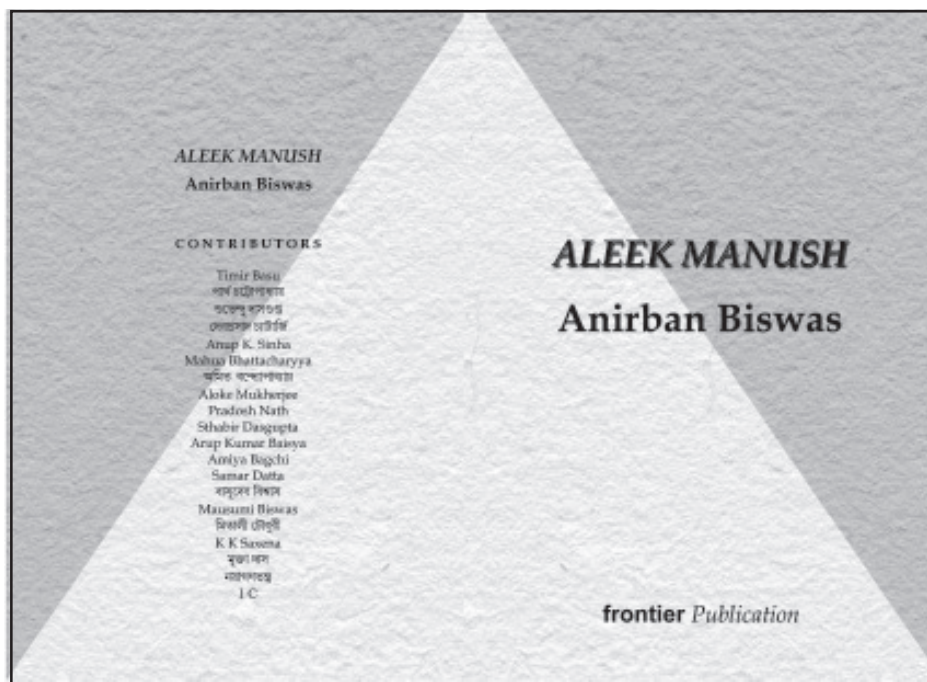
I just told BP I'm going to sue them if they don't stop gas flaring—and if people all across the world join my call, we can turn this into a perfect storm to make BP fear for their reputation.

Will you help me stop this methane bomb and save other children like my Ali?

**Hussein Julood  
Hameed Almuwardha  
with the *Avaaz* team**

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## ALEEK MANUSH

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