

frontier

Vol. 57 : No. 13

ISSN 0016-2094

September 22-28, 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]

Doctors' Agitation: Then & Now

WHAT STARTED AS A LOCALISED STREET PROTEST BY the civic society, somewhat sporadically, against the horrific rape and murder of a post-graduate trainee doctor at R G Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata in response to a "Reclaim the Night" March call in social media, a month ago, shows no sign of abating. With every passing day more and more people from different walks of life are joining the 'we demand justice' movement in their own way to voice their agony and anguish against the system. Even Kolkata's rickshaw-pullers joined the march with their carts. People of all ages turned out in their hundreds of thousands to show they will not be deterred from seeking an end to the authority's profound injustice done to a young doctor who was on duty and that too in a government hospital. The junior doctors' agitation has made the political parties, left and right alike, irrelevant and ensured the fact that ordinary people—not politicians with the dubious distinction of being called opportunist—can force the government to sit across the table. How doctors in government hospitals work in oppressive conditions beggars description. They are to cope with gruelling shifts, abuse from the public and subpar security everyday because of poor infrastructure and inadequate government budget on health.

Forty years ago, more precisely in 1983 junior doctors launched a massive movement under the banner of All Bengal Junior Doctors' Federation demanding in the main better working conditions and improved healthcare delivery service. They had some basic demands as well as some immediate demands to address the chronic problems hospitals and doctors were facing to keep the medical establishments going. Actually they prepared their charter of demands on the basis of a survey on medical colleges and hospitals done by Medical College Students Union and Democratic Students Association in 1979. The CPM-led Left Front government refused to recognise the junior doctors' organisation. Ironically, today they are talking in so many voices about the plight of junior doctors who are fighting for a cause, while organising rallies and sit-ins supporting the agitators. The hospital scenario has not changed much since the 1980s. The left rulers too unleashed a reign of terror on the protesting junior doctors while victimising the leading figures. Then they floated an organisation of their own under the name and style of Junior Doctors' Council to break the movement from within. The Marxists know this tactics better than anyone else. The 1983 strike by junior doctors

will remain a path-breaking milestone in medical annals of Bengal. These junior doctors are the backbone of government hospitals. They matter in a big way even in Britain where their strike hit the headlines internationally very recently when they resorted to strike for reasonable pay rise. At the end they won.

As writers, actors, poets and professional came out today to protest injustice, they came out in large numbers and took to the streets in those days too to support the agitating junior doctors. Poet Birendra Chattopadhyaya wrote a fine poem in

support of the agitation in the Bengali magazine 'Kabikantha'. Every people's movement enriches progressive literature of the time. This time too new slogans, artistic composition and street dramas are emerging. The ruling marxist left of yester years like the current rightist dispensation was equally insensitive and adamant to the cause junior doctors were fighting for and didn't hesitate to terrorise the protesters.

At the time of writing junior doctors were still on sit-in at the gate of health department building, to press their 5-point charter of demands,

the most important being the safety at work place, despite the Supreme Court's directive that they must join duty by 5 pm of September 10. They continued their stir after 5 pm virtually ignoring the court directive. For one thing protesters are totally disappointed with the proceedings at the apex court but they are more worried about the rider associated with the ruling that the government would be free to take disciplinary action against the strikers if they fail to return to work by the deadline fixed by the court. □□□

10-09-2024

COMMENT

'No' to Death Penalty

WEST BENGAL GOVERNMENT proposed a new anti-rape bill that introduces capital punishment for those convicted of rape if the victim either dies or is left in a vegetative state and The West Bengal Legislative Assembly has passed this Bill titled 'Aparajita Woman and Child (West Bengal Criminal Laws Amendment) Bill, 2024'. BJP MLAs also supported the bill as major opposition party in West Bengal. This legislation comes after tragic rape and murder of a post-graduate trainee [PGT] doctor at Kolkata's RG Kar Medical College and Hospital.

A horrific crime has occurred, deeply rattling the nation's conscience. A 31-year-old doctor was brutally raped and killed in her working place—the RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, a state-run institution, on 9th August, '24. This incident pointed towards the negligence of the State Health department, police investigation, and crippled administration of West Bengal Government. Then all too familiar corruption! The persons in authority, managing the health service are involved in it. To protest against

this heinous crime and corrupted system, every citizen of West Bengal is moving out to the street and raising their voice for justice for more than a month. Under these circumstances, West Bengal Government announced this anti-rape Bill to divert public attention. Junior doctors are continuing their agitation by organising sit-ins and candle-light march while refusing to join duty unless their demands are met. Their demands include among other things resignation of police Commissioner for his deliberate inaction to check vandalism that seems to have altered the crime-place and justice for the brutal rape and murder of their colleague.

The death penalty is not a definitive answer to crime, as it fails to address the root causes and complexities of criminal behaviour. There are no conclusive empirical studies that show the death penalty deters crime. It is unacceptable for a civilised society that killers need to be killed as it perpetuates the cycle of violence. Article 21 of Indian Constitution and Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(UDHR) both state that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person and *death penalty* violets both. A total of 112 countries have abolished the death penalty for all crimes, while 9 others have done so for common law offences. Additionally, 23 nations are in the process of abolishing capital punishment. However, 55 countries, including India, continue to retain the death penalty.

One cannot reject that the struggle for women's emancipation which again cannot be separated from the struggle against the hierarchical patriarchy in India. It is unfortunate that laws, courts, parliaments, ministries are happy to embrace this flawed system.

In Nirvaya rape and murder case, Justice Verma Committee pointed out that—"in the larger interests of society, and having regard to the current thinking in favour of abolition of the death penalty, and also to avoid the argument of any sentencing arbitrariness, we are not inclined to recommend the death penalty." But, ruling political parties are arguing on encounter, death penalty to derive political mileage from the tragedy. Gandhi's famous quote "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind" is a lesson for all that

violence cannot be the solution for another violence. The politics of revenge and state-sanctioned killings sustain cycles of violence—in truth violence begets violence. What is

necessary is reconciliation, not retribution. □□□

[Contributed by Kirity Roy. Mr Roy is Secretary, MASUM and National Convenor, Programme Against Custodial Torture & Impunity]

NOTE

Genocide is being 'Normalised'

Bharat Dogra writes:

FOR ALMOST 11 MONTHS the world has been seeing documented evidence from Gaza—in the form of videos or ground-based reports—of the most horrible killings of innocent persons including a large number of women and children. Nearly 52,000 people have been confirmed by health authorities to have been killed in this violence or are buried in rubble, over 90,000 have been injured or disabled. Most of the houses and essential infrastructure have been destroyed. Traumatized people, grieving the loss of dearest ones are carrying the injured and the sick with them, exposed to extreme hunger, almost famine like conditions, denied water and sanitation, facing many diseases, exhausted and tired beyond words, are being ordered time and again to move from one place to another on their own, but sometimes have been killed even in shelter places or on way to them, ultimately crammed in a small place in the most difficult conditions. There is also exposure to extreme pollution from shockingly large use of huge bombs and explosives. Medical facilities have been largely destroyed.

If it is accepted that such conditions can lead to the excess mortality of at least three times compared to the people killed directly in violence, (such assumptions have been made in the past for calculating war and conflict mortality by very credible studies) then it is likely that nearly 208,000 persons have died in

this genocidal operation (52,000 plus 156,000) in 11 months, a figure close to the widely quoted number of 186,000 estimated number of dead people in a Lancet report. Hence the mortality per month during the last 11 months is likely to be close to 19000 per month or 600 per day, while the number of those sustaining injuries is about half this number. All this is for a population of nearly 1.9 million. In other words, nearly one tenth of the population has perished due to the direct and indirect impacts of war and conflict in just 11 months.

In normal times if an incident happened of about 100 people, a majority consisting of women and children, getting killed or seriously injured and disabled in any part of world on any single day in very cruel and arbitrary ways by any armed forces, which also imposed very painful conditions on other remaining people such as denial of food, what would be expected is a huge world level outcry against such a massacre, this has been happening time and again in Gaza, has been almost routinised in the course of the actions of the armed forces of Israel, yet has failed to bring forth the kind of response that is needed—for example the world getting together to bring immediate peace, or at the very least, the main suppliers of weapons to Israel like the USA and Germany announcing an immediate stoppage of all weapons and military help to Israel.

AUTUMN NUMBER 2024

Will be out in the first week of October

This year our contributors include Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sumanta Banerjee, Marcello Musto, Arup Baisya, Vinod Mubayi, Harsh Thakor, Olivia Banerjee, Pranjali Bandhu, Ranabir Samaddar, Himanshu Roy, Arup Kumar Sen, Atanu Chakravarty, Paranjay Guha Thakurta, Ritaiyoti Bandyopadhyay, Amit Bhattacharya, Asok Chattopadhyay, Abhijit Guha, T Vijayendra, Sujoy Prasad Bhattacharya, Farooque Chowdhury, Ranganayakamma, Nityananda Ghosh, Chaman Lal, I M Sharma, Jayanta Bhattacharya, Anup K Sinha, Sohini Sengupta, Manas Bakshi, Joydip Ghosal, Christopher Harding, Sunil Ray.....

“Genocide, something the world vowed would never happen again after the Holocaust, is being normalized.

“What Israeli soldiers are doing can be done in other countries as well. People seem to be sleepwalking into a new age of barbarity.”

The so-called international community will daily make a statement of some peace efforts and of their commitment to peace, and then hasten to arm the Israeli forces further.

In these extremely difficult times it is important to re-assert that despite all the great sufferings, the future agenda must be defined not by revenge or blind violence, but only on the basis of uniting more and more people with more and more commitment for a future of peace and justice. □□□

For Frontier Contact

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 HUMRA QURAISHI'S COLUMN

Of Beef and Lynching

Humra Quraishi

TELL ME HOW MANY MORE will get lynched, murdered, slaughtered on the beef alibi! It's just too shocking and disgusting to see how the goon brigades are calling the shots. Quite obviously they have the Hindutva backing and the go ahead nods. The situation gets just too lethal as the political cum state machinery is under the control of the Right-Wing rulers of the day.

Lynching and humiliating Muslims on the beef alibi is increasing by the day. Last week an elderly Muslim gentleman was hounded and humiliated by three men inside a running train in Maharashtra, on the alibi that he was carrying beef in a packet, though later, on investigation, it turned out to be not beef. And one cannot miss the underlying fact that the three accused men were on way for police recruitment! One can imagine the havoc they'd created if they have passed through those formal tests...This brings me to offload: Are there any lectures and talks and guidance sessions for cops on this basic factor—Not to target minority groups and communities and individuals on the myths and misconception spreading around...made to spread out and around!

Communal poisoning unleashed on a daily basis by those in power. Quite obviously it will have trickle-down effect. In the last one fortnight the chief minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma, has been coming out with anti-Muslim statements and getting away with all those blatantly communal unlashes! Shocking to hear the chief minister of a state come out with such statements but

then he is a BJP politician! So his utterances and speeches along the expected lines, in these dark turbulent times!

And though this week two stark incidents of lynch killings in Haryana, along the beef alibi but little hue and cry. A Muslim migrant worker from West Bengal, Sabir, was lynched to death and another worker, Asiruddin, seriously wounded, after the two were attacked by the Hindutva lot in Haryana's Charkha Dadri, on the alibi that they had eaten beef. And then a Hindu student, Aryan Mishra, was killed in Faridabad by the so called cow vigilante group members, on suspicion that he was a cow smuggler! He was mistaken to be Muslim!

See, how this communal madness is spreading out and peaking in the last ten years. Killing hundreds of innocents on the alibis along the communal strain! Communal attacks that took off from the barbaric lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq in Uttar Pradesh's Dadri have continued to spread out. Towards the outlying locales and villages of Delhi, Rajasthan, Haryana. Towards the interiors of Jharkhand, where a few years back, at least two Muslim cattle traders were killed and their bodies hung from trees! One of the victims was a 13-year-old boy. Yes, he was killed out there in the open, yet we sat all too quiet! No cries, not even from any of the Minority Commissions or from the Child Rights forums! I wonder why this silence!

One horrifying incident after another taking place in these years. In the autumn of 2016, in district Faridabad, on the outskirts of New Delhi, two young Muslim men were

not just thrashed but forced to eat cow dung and drink cow urine! Mind you, this incident didn't take place in some jungle land but barely 20 kilometres away from the capital city.

A few years back it was painful to see the plight of the four young Kashmiri students studying in Rajasthan's Mewar/Chittorgarh region. They were made to stand as though they had committed theft or some heinous crime. All that they did was to buy 300 grams of mutton from the local market. That was enough to trigger off rumours that it was beef, followed by the expected attacks on them! Mind you, this was not an isolated incident but one of the so many reported ones...

Summer of 2017 saw the blatant killing of the 16-year-old Mohammad Junaid on a train taking him and his brothers to their village in Haryana's Ballabgarh district. Killed in public view, by fellow train passengers, before 'beef eater' comments hurled on his fractured skull.

Today there is a systematic communal propaganda that only Muslims and Dalits and Christians relish beef or mutton! To relay that these communities kill and devour! Mind you, this propaganda that Muslims go devouring meaty chunks or sit stuffing meat balls has been gaining ground, to portray the Musalmaan as 'adamkhoods'/Cannibals!

Just go inside any meat store or shop, and butchers will tell you this exact fact—that is, the Indian Muslims are NOT the biggest buyers and consumers of meat in India. The meat industry is controlled by non-Muslims. I'm not talking of small-time 'qasais' but of the well-established suppliers /owners of this industry. And if one were talk to butchers and meat-suppliers and dairy-owners from across the coun-

try they would detail that age-old theory: if you force a man to go hungry he will either die and perish or snarl back! What, with hundreds sitting jobless there is every possibility of hunger related deaths going up the graph. Also, crime rate is sure to go up as frustration and hunger levels are mounting. The 'beef scare' alibi has been also impacting the

socio-economic patterns. In these recent years, when I'd attended marriage festivities of two middle-class Muslim families, there was no trace of a single meat dish. Pure vegetarian fare. Why? The hosts were taking all possible precautions. "Who will prove to the goondas that it's mutton or chicken. Didn't want anyone from the Hindutva brigades to

disrupt the shaadi." So this is the sorry state of affairs! Double standards here too! Right-Wing politicians from the North East can talk very openly about their beef eating and beef cooking traditions but hapless daily wagers and students and even the elderly are attacked if not killed on mere suspicion of carrying or cooking beef! □□□

"LET THE COMMONERS OF THE WORLD UNITE"

Anatomy of Recent Upheaval in Bengal

Amartya Banerjee

NOT ONE BUT TWO unprecedented civic movements evolved within two months across the two states of Bengal, though they are actually separated by an international border, namely the states of Bangladesh and West Bengal respectively—the latter being a part of the union republic of India. There are similarities and dissimilarities between them, but what intrigued the author is apparently the sudden accumulation of these two events and also the striking semblance between the previous events those led to these separate eruptions. Both the regions have their own specific political characteristics, but there remains a broader agreement between how the class-based outbursts happened in the regions and under what circumstances they reached such unimaginable magnitudes to even challenge the concerned seats of power.

Definitely these can be termed as mass movements with strong civilian support, which evolved as spontaneous and decisive outbursts in certain contexts, but both lacked in delivering their ultimate goals—falling short only against the opportunistic forces which were playing around and indeed overpowered this spontaneity with their shrewd understanding of politics and organisation. In one case

the government toppled and a troubled state has emerged, rift with violence and undercurrents of anti-democratic and despotic forces in action, i.e. what one witnessed with Bangladesh. On the other hand, the government still stays in power (thanks for being only a constituent member state in a federal structure), in West Bengal—however the authority and support of the ruling party waned seriously amongst the people, leaving the room for further accumulated (and unattended) grievances in the minds of the general population, which may lead to sudden and serious outbursts yet again in near future, leading to near-anarchic states of matter that will further facilitate divisive forces to rise and grab power in their aggression. Yes of course it is about the BJP in West Bengal and Jai in Bangladesh, the two politically divisive forces bidding for their opportune moments to arrive.

But on what grounds did the outbursts emerge, fundamentally from the middle-class of the society which in general, inherently tends to stay out of such turmoil and disturbances? The answer lies in the past and in the political developments of both the states, where two mass-leaders emerged to reign supremacy in the elections and yet they succeeded to erode fundamental democratic te-

nets in strikingly similar ways when compared between them. Both Sheikh Hasina and Mamata Banerjee have their long history of sufferings and both are revered for their fire-brand politics in their respective regions. But somehow, for some reasons after coming to power in their respective states both looked forward to decisively crush the parliamentary opposition in every manner possible to establish themselves as the 'one and only' alternatives to the people. This led to the crushing of the parliamentary oppositions in both the states and allowed the created vacuums to be filled by certain 'opponents' initially considered to be weak and insignificant in terms of organisational power, but those, in time emerged as more volatile, more despotic and significantly harmful components for the future.

Both the Left (read, the CPIM in West Bengal) and BNP (in Bangladesh) have their own pasts to deal with and such can be easily used against them to erode their support from the minds of the people. Both Hasina and Mamata Banerjee tried rigorously to ensure this and also resorted to un-parliamentary methods like direct suppression through administration and other improper ways like illegal horse-trading after elections, to further eliminate any presence of such forces of opposition on the grounds for the people. Once this process of elimination reached a certain success point, both knowingly allowed the

'lesser oppositions' like the JeI or the BJP, (uncannily both turn out to be former allies to Hasina and Mamata respectively), to fill up the vacuums for the necessary parliamentary opposition in both the states, knowingly or unknowingly initiating a devil of a system that will eventually spiral out of control towards anarchy and despotic competition between the forces concerned. Now, once with significant times in power, the initial plague of financial corruption started to infiltrate the incumbent establishments, both of them tried and also succeeded to present themselves as the 'Lesser Evils' compared to the openly religious and fundamental forces of the JeI and the BJP, and this approach as well, unfortunately for the common people, started to yield dividends.

The CPIM in West Bengal further resorted to direct personal attacks to Mamata Banerjee and her party, and heavily defended their stakes mostly on social-media platforms with ultra-urbanised gimmicks to stay afloat politically, and even tried to propose a suicidal strategy to replace the 'Lesser Evils' with the 'Lesser Opponents' to open up a short-cut path to success, which abysmally went against them. However, the plague of corruption continued to decompose the establish-

ments from within and consequently the divisive forces of the JeI and the BJP respectively, started to gain further political grounds being the only ones with actual organisational powers in the fields of action as the forces of 'opposition'. Again, both the 'supreme' leaders played the same move. They resorted to appeasement politics to combat the fundamentalists, again suicidal attempts of serious magnitudes—in this sorry state of affairs in the regions. One cannot combat the JeI by making Madrasah degrees equivalent to University certificates or by legalising Sharia in a state of dominant Islamic population ravaged by disparity and discrimination. One should not fight the BJP by dragging the latter into a competition where the objective is to promote oneself as the bigger Hindu as compared to the other. In that competition, the idea of Hinduism will definitely be replaced forcibly with the idea of Hindutva politics, which is significantly different and yet which has helped the fundamental BJP to gain larger political grounds over India, however unfortunate or unbelievable the fact seems to be.

This is how, the JeI and the BJP in both the states of Bengal established themselves as the primary forces of opposition with significant organisational abilities and they could manoeuvre their efforts to strategically control, overturn and hijack mass-based common people's movements, which are honest and spontaneous but lack in the shrewdness of strategic operation or detailed organisational preparation. The mass revolted in both the states out of long-term revulsions. The 'Quota Movement' or the 'Rape of Tilottama', acted as only the triggering events where the floodgates of mass emotion breached for a final time after the people have suffered ruthlessly under decade-long suppression from inept, corrupt and pseudo-

despotic governments. In the absence of properly organised political opposition that could have strategised and organised such outbursts in proper ways to channelise them towards effective cycles to overturn the governments in established democratic ways, the outbursts came as spontaneous, sporadic yet with unprecedented magnitude those rocked the core of administrations which were not prepared for such sudden, ad-hoc uprisings.

These are the classic examples of direct outbursts where the mass themselves have emerged as the opposition, but are unprepared as the opportunistic predators of politics (like the JeI or the BJP) hunt in the dark, waiting for the opportune moments to go for the jugulars of the movements and bring the unbound Prometheus under control, but then it will indeed be the darker times. The pseudo-despots have created the anarchy, to arrange the breeding grounds for perfect fascism to evolve. In this context where can somebody look for hope? For the masses those have emerged victorious after the long nights of suppression and sufferings, it's indeed the best of times, it's indeed the worst of times, and it's the time of wisdom and foolishness altogether—but somewhere the lights are breaking through.

It's a hope that all the political players and the stakeholders concerned, should take their own lessons from these movements, as the masses continue to organise themselves—as they must have also learnt from these experiences, and soon they may emerge as players with upgraded understandings to challenge the present states of power with prudence unprecedented, combined with honesty and spontaneity that all have witnessed, and that may usher in an altogether new age in democracy.

"Let the Commoners of the world Unite".

□□□

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Published from:
INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION
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News.purbasha@gmail.com

JUSTICE FOR 'R G KAR'

Let the Establishment be Shaken

Pradosh Nath

YES, THIS WRITER WAS IN Kolkata, and joined the sea of protesters at midnight of 14 August on the street. There were people of all age groups, including toddlers on the shoulders of their parents. There were people struggling to walk in fast pace not to miss the heat that was evaporating from the condensed emotions of the public who gathered in millions. 'Justice for R G Kar'—the slogan encapsulated the emotions. Next day onwards, people from all different walks and shades of life were out in good numbers demanding 'Justice for R G Kar'. Not many of the known faces from different political dispensations were seen in that night, or they were there, but their faces were lost in the depth of the sea of protestors on street. It was not difficult to feel that it was the latent angst for 'Justice' that was sparked with R G Kar and resonated across the country and beyond.

Such spontaneous public protest against most gruesome rape and killing of a doctor is like proverbial low hanging fruit for political parties in race for grabbing the political mileage. Ruling party leaders and cadres led by the chief minister (who also happens to hold the home and health portfolios), were out on the street demanding 'Justice for R G Kar'. The chief minister was seen vouching for the sincerity and efficiency of Kolkata police for quickly identifying and arresting the 'main' accused. While demanding exemplary punishment of the arrested accused, chief minister was also upset (or happy!!) that through the intervention of the Kolkata High Court the case was handed over to the

CBI. Chief Minister urged the public to push CBI for quick conclusion of the investigation. The main opposition party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its outfits were all out on streets and TV channels, asking for the resignation of the chief minister, and interrogation and investigation on possible role of the chief minister for her proximity and indulgence towards the then principal and his close associates of R G Kar hospital. Voices were also raised against the dubious role played by the CP and other officials of Kolkata police.

Other tiny political outfits were also flexing verbose (not having much muscle left) mostly on the TV screen, occasionally also on the streets. There are also super intellectuals, who generally cover up their docile-selves using critical analyses of the people's movements through the lenses of latest insights from Marxian and post-Marxian studies. One of them had raised a fundamental allegation – where were these people when Babri Masjid was vandalised, or numerous atrocities on Dalits happened in UP, Maharashtra etc states? This writer is equally upset with the public for not raising their voice on those occasions. However, on TV screen the spokespersons of different political parties were heard raising similar allegations against each other. The R G Kar case sets an interesting example when the CM of the state is on the street with party cadres seeking 'Justice for R G Kar', and accusing opposition parties for fishing in troubled water. Oppositions are also asking for the 'Justice' along with resignation of the CM and actions against those who are respon-

sible for law and order for messing up the investigation.

It is now clear that the gruesome crime is not a lone act of a pervert criminal. Although the motive behind this heinous crime is yet to be unearthed, there are indications about the possible planned murder that has been staged as stray crime. There are suspicions that crime happened somewhere else in the building and later shifted to the fourth floor seminar room, what is now known as the crime scene, for making any easy evidence far too difficult to obtain. It is also suspected that the goons vandalising the hospital in the midnight, chasing away the police, who was begging for life and shelter, was not a stray incident of hooliganism. That they climbed and vandalised the 3rd floor, instead of 4th (shown as the crime scene) was not by any mistake or whims. Suspicion is that the 3rd floor is the original crime scene, and vandalism of it has been planned to destroy any evidence if left out.

Add to it the mounting allegations of nefarious activities in the behest of the Principal, who, a doctor, has been seen flaunting bouncers taking care of his safety. He is so powerful that in earlier occasions, when ordered transfer from R G Kar for indulging in corrupt practices, he has been transferred back in no time. Facing the wrath of the colleagues after the murder and rape of the young doctor inside the hospital, the principal resigned but only to join within hours as principal of another city hospital. If anything the CM is also holding the health portfolio.

The well-oiled nefarious activities in the hospital, the principal as the alleged mastermind, the brutal rape and murder of a young doctor—are they linked? Is the state administration party to the alleged corrupt

practices in the hospital? Why the principal is so privileged that the state administration is out to protect him? Is there an all-out effort to cover-up?

People suspect that, left to Kolkata police, the case would have been closed by this time with punishment of the 'main' accused arrested, and also with the claim of speedy justice to the victim. But for the students, and massive public support behind them, the nexus perpetrating nefarious activities would not have been exposed. Common people also suspect that R G Kar

Hospital is not the only such case; the whole health administration is infested with corruption, as it has been seen in the cases of other ministries. Many of such cases in different medical colleges and hospitals are coming in to light.

Protest and public outcry for justice that followed the R G Kar incident has a cascading effect questioning the vested interests that run the medical and health administration, rampant malpractices, unethical activities that define the edifice of the hospital and health management across the state. Will CBI

unearth the head and tail of the crime? There are not many bright spots in the CBI performance records, after all CBI is an important part of the establishment.

As the criminologist and victimologist, Kumaravelu Chokalingam said in a recent interview, 'Indians by and large, simply do not trust the system; the idea that justice will prevail is usually met with disbelief, a shrug or a laugh'. Public outcry for justice is to keep the establishment in toes. Raped and killed, the doctor will not get justice until and unless the establishment is shaken. □□□

REUTERS REPORT

Crimes against Women

TMC

IN JUNE 2018, THE THOMPSON Reuters Foundation published a 'global poll' which claimed India was the world's 'most dangerous country for women.' It said, 'sexual violence against women was rife', and women were 'being forced into slave labour,' making the conditions worse than in war-torn Afghanistan and Syria. India moved to the top of the poll as 'not enough was being done to tackle the danger women faced.'

Instead of carefully considering the merits of the report and taking systemic measures to tackle the problem, the government of India refuted the Reuters poll results as 'unreliable', 'flawed,' and 'clearly inaccurate' because it was based on 'responses to simply six questions' which were 'inherently subjective opinions' from just five hundred respondents.

The report also triggered a plethora of reactions from India's politicians, media and civil society. The Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), which had earlier used a Thompson Reuters Foundation report (published

in 2011, placing India as the fourth most dangerous country in the world) to criticise the then government's performance, rubbished the Reuters report as an 'agenda' to 'brand' India as a dangerous place for women.

Shashi Tharoor, a Member of Parliament from the Congress Party who had earlier served in the United Nations, brushed it aside as a 'sweeping statement' which was a 'bit difficult to swallow' and said he was 'astonished that Afghanistan and Syria fared better than India.'

According to government data, between 2007 and 2016, crimes against women increased by 83 per cent—with four rape cases reported every hour. In 2018, speaking to the Thompson Reuters Foundation, Manjunath Gangadhar, an official at the Karnataka state government, said:

India has shown utter disregard and disrespect for women...rape, marital rapes, sexual assault and harassment, female infanticide has gone unabated.

After the brutal gang rape and

murder of Nirbhaya, the government proposed stricter legislation for sexual harassment and crimes against women. After Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, the government devised schemes such as 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao,' meaning 'Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child.' However, such policy schemes were no more than vehicles for political propaganda. According to a Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women, about 80 percent of funds meant for the *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* were spent on media campaigns.

Unfortunately, crimes against women have not decreased. On the contrary, the data reveals a dramatic increase in crimes against women. According to data published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), there were over 371,503 cases of crimes against women (including cruelty, kidnapping and abduction, assault with intent to outrage modesty, and rape) in 2020. A year later, in 2021, that number increased to 428,278 cases, and in 2022, the number increased to 445,256 cases of crimes against women.

Five North Indian states have the highest crime rate against women – in absolute numbers. Uttar Pradesh

leads with crimes against women, with 65,743 cases of crimes against women, followed by Maharashtra (45,331), Rajasthan (45,058), West Bengal (34,738) and Madhya Pradesh (32,765). Together, these five states contributed to 2,23,635 cases — 50.2 per cent of the total cases lodged in India.

Worryingly, India's metropolitan cities have also witnessed a dramatic increase in crimes against women: Delhi, the national capital, recorded 14,158 cases; Mumbai recorded 6,176; Bengaluru recorded 3924 cases.

Many cases of sexual assault have been recorded across the country. Many have been reported in the press, causing outrage. But not much was done. Examples are aplenty. In Muzaffarnagar, a fourteen-year-old Dalit girl was kidnapped and raped. They chopped off her breasts, inserted a knife inside her private parts, and sliced her body with a sickle. In Kathua, Jammu and Kashmir, an

eight-year-old Muslim girl was gang-raped and murdered. In Unnao, a BJP leader and his henchmen gang-raped a thirteen-year-old girl, attacked her parents and fled. But soon, they were allowed to roam free on bail. Later, they intimidated and pressured her to withdraw the case against them. When she didn't, they set her house on fire. In 2024, seven men gang-raped and assaulted a Brazilian-Spanish woman while on a bike tour in Jharkhand's Dumka district. Now a doctor in Kolkata was raped and murdered. And this brutality triggered massive protest across the country and abroad.

Sexual violence is pervasive—even in the higher echelons of the society. The President of the Wrestling Federation of India—a politically powerful BJP leader—sexually harassed India's female Olympians. He groped them, touched their breasts and buttocks without consent, intimidated them and demanded sexual favours in exchange for professional help.

Yet, he escaped without much consequence. His son got a ticket to stand in the elections in his place, and one of his henchmen, a dummy, was elected as the president of the Wrestling Federation of India.

Ironically, India is a country where people worship women as goddesses. Yet it is also a country where women are abused, assaulted and raped. The problem is systemic and deep-rooted. The rape and murder of a female doctor in Kolkata is not an anomaly. It is part of a wider malaise, a systemic problem, and a reality that is perhaps deliberately ignored by India's policymakers, lawmakers and enforcement authorities.

Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "The day a woman can walk freely on the roads at night, that day we can say that India has achieved independence." Ironically, today, seventy-eight years after India declared independence, women are not safe in the country—a clear indication of the state of democracy in the country. □

PULLING OUT THE ROOTS...

When Women Reclaimed the Night

Mahasweta Samajdar

PEOPLE IN BENGAL ARE standing at an unprecedented juncture. Who has ever seen such an awakening? In the darkness of the night, on 14 August, 2024, women of all ages took to the streets. Beside them, people of the LGBTQ+ communities marched, armed with rainbow flags. Fallen back a little in this march were men who believed in the urgent need to secure women's rights and the long walk to reaching it. On this night, they could not remain at home, even when the call was against them—they could not leave the women of their household to walk alone, and joined the swelling crowd in the streets. From Cooch Behar to

Kakdwip, every corner of West Bengal saw a surge of rage and grief that night.

Everybody knows what started this. The horrifying rape and murder of the lady PGT doctor in RG Kar Medical College and Hospital, and the helpless reality of being brutalised in one's own workplace, had shaken one and all. People negotiated with this grief in their individual ways. Some trembled, imagining what could happen to their own child, someone else squared their shoulders, infuriated by this cruel end to a woman's dreams. For many, the humiliation and pain of sexual harassment were far too familiar.

Shortly after the incident, the

principal of the hospital, Sandip Ghosh, questioned why the PGT was at the scene of crime. His casual comment easily pushed away all the responsibility of this heinous incident from himself and the institution to the victim herself. The junior doctors rose in protest, demanding the resignation of Ghosh. The outrage escalated when Ghosh was appointed the principal of another medical college merely four hours after his resignation.

And so, when women gave the call to reclaim the night, this call echoed in every house and home. Trans-queer individuals also joined the call. The call transcended the boundaries of the metropolis and rang across the suburbs and the remote interiors, in towns and villages alike. It exceeded the limits of state and nation. In many cities abroad, slogans of "Justice for RG Kar!"

Human chains were formed in protest across the city. Protest marches and demonstrations took place daily—the chants of “We want justice!” ringing in every nook and cranny. The protests of the junior doctors saw a parallel manifestation in civil society. Various communities and fraternities—musicians, orators, senior doctors, actors and artisans, poets, writers, workers of private hospitals, residents of urban housings and collectives, school students, teachers, alumni, online app delivery workers, all joined the marches whenever, wherever they could. When players and supporters of the eternal arch-rival football teams, East Bengal and Mohun Bagan, set aside their enmity and took to the streets with the shared slogan of “We want justice for our sister”, and Mohammedan Sporting joined their protest, Kolkata witnessed a stunning rebellion.

Meanwhile, the responsibility of investigation was transferred from the Calcutta Police to the CBI. The Supreme Court initiated a suo motu case over the rape-and-murder and has held two hearings so far.

When the junior doctors demanded the resignation of the police commissioner, the police barricaded their path. The junior doctors therefore sat in protest there, insisting on their demands. The entire city rushed to the doctors’ aid. Washrooms nearby were kept open 24/7 for their use. Someone has already installed portable toilets. The doctors waited through the night, with a garlanded specimen of a human spine: after all, the police commissioner surely lacked that! As night gave way into morning, tea, biscuits and sandwiches were handed out to the protesting doctors by civilians. As the sun’s rays grew harsher and temperatures rose, plastic sheds were hung overhead. Kolkata refused to leave its protestors unfed and thirsty. By noon, there was a ready supply of Glucon-D, water, and meals for lunch. Everyone was at the ready, asking, ‘Is there anything more we can offer?’

Knowing that the lifeblood of the city of Kolkata is still strong instills some hope in us. Distilling the tears within, the protests grew all the more indomitable. Against this unstoppable force, the wall crumbled: after 22 hours of waiting, 22 junior doctors entered Lalbazar. They returned to their stage after presenting the Police Commissioner with a rose-decorated spine and handing over a memorandum for his resignation.

The women-trans-queers of the Reclaim the Night movement have arranged for numerous protests in the districts, suburbs and the metropolis. Residents in the houses lining the streets have chanted slogans in solidarity. Passengers in public transport have come down from buses and trams and joined the processions. The streets of the city are filled with poems, songs, plays, road pictures, slogans and posters.

With every passing moment, one can’t forget that the victim too possibly lost her life while protesting against systemic injustice. That her body was possibly left in plain sight to strike fear in the hearts of those who would dare to raise their voices in the future.

Public anger has been rising with the knowledge of how the victim’s parents were mistreated—how the news of her death was relayed to them through falsities and delays, how her cremation was forcibly completed with haste. Videos circulating on social media showed influential officials crowding around the dead body in defiance of the rules. It is all too easy to see how the evidence was destroyed—a fact that the CBI too has admitted before the Supreme Court.

It is as if this death has awakened the society as a whole. This is an awakening that will not stop until the roots of injustice are uprooted. Since the state government is the target of the people’s anger, the BJP, the main opposition party in the state, has tried its best to harness this anger. But the agitating junior doctors and the trans-queers

who occupied the night are constantly reminding the society that the BJP has persistently endorsed and sheltered acts of injustice and oppression of women. Bilkis Bano, Unnao, Kathua, Hathras—in each of these cases, BJP has stood in support of the rapists. So in this time of treachery, BJP will not be spared even an inch of land.

People are seething with anger and waiting to see the end of injustice. On the poster for ‘Reclaim the Night’ organised on 4 September blazed the slogan, ‘O Judge, the masses who shall judge you have now awakened’. On the 4th, even as the number of centers for human chains kept increasing, and as the alumni of RG Kar were planning to occupy the streets from 11 pm, it was declared that the Supreme Court hearing scheduled to be held on 5th September had been postponed. But this did not stall the momentum of the movement. It only made clear that the fight will be a long one, but the people too will not stop until injustice is curbed.

On the night of the 4th, hundreds of human chains and nightly occupations spread across the state. The unmistakable message of this ubiquitous movement is that people are no longer afraid. One death has stripped off the fear from the eyes of the masses who, even weeks ago, were afraid to raise their voices. And now, the State is afraid. Hence the enforced brutality of state-sponsored lumpens, the police brutality, the threats towards protesting women.

But those who have once dared to take to the streets and to join the struggle for their rights, will not be pacified by the punishment of the perpetrators of the RG Kar incident. They have come down to uproot this entire cycle of evil. They have also set out to change society’s view of women and trans-queer persons.. They have transcended their personal limits—they will not be tamed. □□□

(Published in Ekak Matra, 5 September, 2024. Translated from Bengali by Sohini Sengupta)

REVIEW ARTICLE

'Social Sector Development' in NE India

Nityananda Ghosh

INDIA'S NORTH EAST, COMprising 8 states after inclusion of Sikkim, is unique in many ways because of its bio-diversity and rich cultural heritage. Then there are huge untapped mineral resources. But the region always hits the headline for wrong reasons—recurring ethnic violence, insurgency and glaring social and economic inequality. The book*, under review vividly describes the lifeline of north eastern people. NE states share international borders of more than 5,000 km with Bangladesh, China, Bhutan and Myanmar. All these states comprise less than 8 percent of India's geographical area but 3.6 percent of the total population of the country lives in the region. Assam is the most populated with a population of over 3.1 million while Sikkim the least populated. There are huge tribal population, both hill tribals and plain tribals. Interestingly enough, majority of those living in the plains of NE are Hindus. The majority of hill tribes living in the states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are Christians. Then there is a significant presence of Buddhist population in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Mizoram has the highest literacy rate of 91.58 percent, with female literacy rate of 91.58 percent. The book highlights problems and challenges faced by North Eastern states. The issues raised in the book were actually discussed in a seminar on "Social Development in North East India: Problems, Issues and Challenges", organised by Council for Social Development, New Delhi, on July 15-16, 2019. There are seven Sections with as many as 15 chapters dealing with different

***SOCIAL 'SECTOR DEVELOPMENT' IN NORTH EAST INDIA**

edited by Ashok Pankaj, Atul Sharma and Antora Borah and published by Aakar Books, Delhi 110091
www.aakarbooks.com, pb, Rs 795

aspects of social sector development.

Introduction written by Ashok Pankaj, Atul Sharma and Antora Borah is in chapter 1 of section one. Section two contains thought-provoking articles by Chandra Kumar Sarma [Contextualizing Social Development in North-east India] and Bimal Kumar Kar & Suli Yohama Ayemi [Demographic Changes in North-east India: Inter-temporal Variations in Population Growth and Composition]. All the sections present highly informative and penetrating pieces with a lot of data. Section vii with the single chapter [Chapter 15] has a very insightful article by Patricia Mukhim [Unique Challenges to Social Sector Development in North-east India: An Insider's Perspective]. Patricia has rightly pointed out that NE states have a poor record in gender equity in political representation.

All the papers submitted in the seminar and duly selected by the editors to prepare this volume are mainly based on secondary data sources. This volume provides interesting factsheets with 93 valuable tables from which one can get an idea of NE with different parameters and compare it with the rest of Indian states.

NE states consist of more than 200 tribes and the region has been witnessing waves of migration from all directions since pre-historic times. The people of NE India are ethnolinguistically divided into three

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groups: (a) Austro-Asiatic, (b) Tibeto-Chinese and (c) Indo-Aryan. The Austro-Asiatic group is formed by Mox-Khmer-speaking Khasis and Pyners of Meghalaya and the Mundari-speaking Mundas, Hos, Santhals, Oraons, Gonds etc. The Tibeto-Chinese group is broadly composed of Tibeto-Burmans like Monpa, Sherdukpen, Mising, Deori, Bodo, Garo and Naga tribes. Then the Nagas are not homogeneous; they are divided into several sub-groups like Ao, Angami, Lotha, Sumi etc. Also, there are Kuki-chin, Vaishnavite,

Meiti, Reang, Chakma etc. In truth NE is an ethnic cauldron. The Indo-Aryan group is mostly composed of Hindus and Muslims of non-tribal origin. There are Assamese and Bengali Hindus and Nepali speaking people. In terms of religion Hindus are 57.97 percent followed by Muslims 25.37 percent and Christians 17.39 percent.

In recent years political colour in NE state assemblies have been saffronised to a large extent. But no researcher has mentioned it or its impact on budgetary allocation.

Crores of rupees are sanctioned for development but how rampant corruption bypasses the targeted purpose has been overlooked by the contributors. Not that NE states were free from corruption and drug menace in earlier dispensations but of late the situation has gone from bad to worse. How corruption is hampering the social sector development in NE is a burning issue. The researchers had ample scope to throw light on it but they didn't. However, this book can be a data source material for future researchers. □□□

MAINTAINING A TRADITION

India-Pakistan Peace March

Sandeep Pandey

THE SOCIALIST PARTY (India) recently organised a India Pakistan Peace and Friendship March during 9 to 14 August, 2024 from Mansa to Atari-Wagha border in Amritsar District. Since the Modi government has come to power it has become difficult to cross the border otherwise it would have been a march going inside Pakistan as one was organised in 2005 between Delhi and Multan.

The march this year was on foot the first day, on vehicles the second day and again on foot for the last 3 days before terminating at Jalianwala Bagh in Amritsar on 13 August. On 14 August the marchers, about 30 of them, participated in a India Pakistan peace convention at Khalsa college which was being organised by Hind-Pak Dosti Manch for the 29th year consecutively. At midnight on 14-15 August they participated in the candle lighting ceremony at Atari-Wagha border where Pakistani friends come from the other side, a tradition started by late Kuldeep Nayyar 29 years back. Except that this year, probably because of happenings in Bangladesh in which the

Indian government alleges a role of ISI, the activists could not see each other across the border as they were stopped quite a distance away from the *zero line* on the Indian side.

The objectives of the peace and friendship march were to open the borders allowing people to travel across without the requirement of visa or passport, to make South Asia a nuclear weapons free zone, reduce defence budgets on both sides, to resolve all issues between India and Pakistan bilaterally through dialogue, including the issue of Jammu and Kashmir with the consent of people of the region. In addition, a popular demand in Punjab is that the requirement of passport and a fee of \$20 to visit the *Kartarpur Sahib* should be done away with.

While it may be anathema to talk about peace and friendship between India and Pakistan in the rest of the country, in Punjab it is quite natural because of the shared culture across the border. This was best reflected in the response of mothers of Arshad Nadeem and Neeraj Chopra after they worn the gold and

silver medals, respectively, in the recent Paris Olympics. Both of them said that the other was their own son. This was a remarkable coincidence of sentiments. Before even the forces which always engage in one-upmanship could have chance at rabble rousing the embers were doused by Punjabi familial sentiments. Remember that Haryana, where Neeraj Chopra comes from, was part of undivided Punjab at the time of partition. Neeraj Chopra's mother sent *Ghewar* worth Rs 2,000 for the participants of India Pakistan Peace Convention at Khalsa College on 14 August, 2024 to express her solidarity.

This one example also exhibits that because of shared history, geography, religion, language, culture the fraternal feeling is natural. The entire north India speaks a language which can be understood in Pakistan and vice versa. The feeling of enmity has been cultivated by the two States, more precisely the deep States because a certain politics which believes in two nation theory has to be sustained.

The question is why should an artificial thought be sustained? In the beating the retreat evening ceremony at Atari-Wagha a hype is created on both sides so that jingoistic slogans are raised by the as-

sembled people in favour of their respective nations. Students of IIT Gandhinagar have submitted a proposal to the Prime Minister's office in 2017 that this ceremony could well be converted into a friendship and peace ceremony where citizens of both countries are allowed to mingle with each other for a couple of hours every evening and exchange songs, cuisine, sports, or whatever they feel like. It is a political decision which both countries have to take just like Narendra Modi decided one day on his way back from Afghanistan to descend in Pakistan and participate in a family ceremony of Nawaz Sharif. Until the borders are opened up the two governments must think about this as a concrete confidence building measure.

Narendra Modi advises Russia in the context of war against Ukraine that it is not an age of war. Recently he has told the same thing to Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his visit to Ukraine and has advised him to sit down with Vladimir Putin to resolve the outstanding issues. He invested in personal friendship with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping only to be deceived when Chinese Army killed 20 Indian soldiers, a first casualty in a long time, and captured 4000 square kms of Indian territory

which the Indian government has not admitted till date. If he had exhibited the same energy in building peace and friendship with Pakistan much more pleasant results could have been had. For example, as a return gesture to Pakistan opening up Kartarpur corridor for Indian citizens, India could have contemplated opening up a corridor to Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti dargah at Ajmer for the Pakistani citizens. This one decision would have won him laurels in Pakistan like Atal Bihari Vajpayee when the Lahore-Delhi bus service was inaugurated. Additionally there would have been concrete gains for the economy, something which is very dear to Mr Modi. Business people on two sides are eagerly waiting for trade to open up between the two countries.

It is a pity that India and Pakistan have to play cricket in a third country. Aspiring talented Pakistani youth is being kept away from Bollywood and Indian artists do not get a chance to perform in Pakistan. Students from either country cannot go to the other to study and patients cannot go to get medical treatment. In a globalising world this arrangement is really absurd.

Coming to the problem of terrorism, for which India blames Paki-

stan, the biggest roadblock in normalisation of relationship between the two countries, Pakistan has suffered more from terrorism than India. Recall terrorists opening gunfire on children in Peshawar school killing 134 children. The problem of terrorism will have to be jointly tackled by the two governments and for this there must be dialogue, which has been completely stopped for the last ten years. What Modi advises to Putin and Zelensky, he should practise it himself. Because of Indian and Pakistani intransigence, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has also come to a standstill. While India under Modi has promoted BIMSTEC, BRICS, QUAD, G 20 and even attends meetings of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, it has chosen to deliberately ignore SAARC. Question is why? Does SAARC have no role at all? India is ready to cooperate with far off countries but not with its immediate neighbours. That is why the persons in power in New Delhi had no idea of what was cooking in Bangladesh. Nepal has progressively moved away from India as have most other neighbours. It is time to reverse the isolationist foreign policy. □□□

[Sandeep Pandey is General Secretary, Socialist Party -India. e-mail: ashaashram@yahoo.com]

LETTERS

Medieval Barbarism

People want justice for brutal murder and rape of a PGT-Doctor in the R G KAR Medical College Hospital when she was on duty..People wonder how College Hospital authorities can evade their responsibility. At the time of writing their activities seem very mysterious. Junior Doctors are continuing their movement including cease work. As a result, the health services and basic medical facilities virtually remain suspended. The poor who cannot

afford private health care are in a helpless situation. Junior Doctors and their senior colleagues are demanding suspension of the then Principal Dr Sandip Ghosh, removal of Mr Vineet Goel, Police Commissioner of Kolkata, providing adequate security and safety of doctors, nurses and health personnel in the hospital. Meanwhile Chief Minister Miss Mamata Banerjee declared 'she is fully supporting the Junior Doctors' movement'. If she really supports the agitating doctors she could have

shown her willingness by accepting a few demands of the protesters. Instead she is issuing implied threatening to the doctors who are protesting for justice.

R G Kar Medical College and Hospital rape & murder case is not an ordinary incident; it didn't occur in house, roads or elsewhere. After all this is a hospital run by the State Government. In the eyes of common people R G Kar Medical College and Hospital administration, Health Department and Bengal Police—all are responsible for it. Had it been a Private Hospital, all the Di-

rectors of the hospital would have been arrested by this time. But nothing of that sort has happened. In truth the authorities circulated fabricated stories to mislead his parents and the public. Kolkata Police arrested one civic. Volunteer. Now CBI is investigating as per a court order. But CBI says they find difficulties in investigation due to alteration of crime scene. Nothing concrete has emerged from the court-monitored CBI investigation other than arrest of ex-principal of RG Kar.

In Kerala a student leader Rajan died in police custody and the then chief minister Karunakaran resigned along with the cabinet taking moral responsibility. But the present chief minister of West Bengal is in no mood to take responsibility for the barbaric rape and murder, not to speak of quitting the post.

Surya Kashyap, Kolkata **Where is Demographic Dividend?**

By 2030, one out of every five working-age people on Earth will be Indian.

That astonishing projection is one reason why so many economists see the nation as the next big global growth engine. At the most elemental level, there are only two ways to grow an economy—add workers or boost output per worker—and India has more scope to do both in the years ahead than anywhere else. But delivering on the human potential will be a monumental challenge: India will need to create at least 115 million new jobs by 2030, according to a report by investment bank Natixis, a task it describes as “Herculean”.

Challenges include overcoming deeply engrained antipathy toward women participating in the workforce—that rate is just 33%, roughly half that of Ghana, which has a similar per-capita GDP. India also

needs to shift more workers into the formal sector, which is now only about 10% of the labour force. With the BHP having lost its parliamentary majority in elections this year, Modi has his work cut out for him.

In what should be a sobering reminder to India bulls, a recent visit to a job fair in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, saw hundreds of young men and women lined up in the summer heat, nervously shuffling application papers. Their goal? A one-year contract job paying about 15,000 rupees (\$178) a month.

Yet, the odds are against them. Since the start of Modi’s term to the end of March 2022, some 220 million people applied for federal jobs; just 722,000 were recruited, government data shows.

“This demographic dividend could easily become a demographic curse if the labour market gap is not handled well”. The greater the delay in job creation today, the more employment needs to be created in the future.

The overall jobless rate averaged 8.05% for the year through March, up from 7.56% in the prior 12-month period, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, which produces the country’s most-cited unemployment figures. For those aged 20 to 24, it was 42.8%. International Labour Organisation data show very little in the way of gains this century.

M S **Against Death Penalty**

PUDR opposes the passage of The Aparajita Woman and Child (West Bengal Criminal Laws Amendment) Bill, 2024, which amends the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, in their application to West Bengal. The Bill enhances punishments for sexual offences, in-

troduces death penalty as the maximum sentence under the majority of the provisions, and fixes mandatory death penalty for rape which results in the death of the woman or causes her to be in a vegetative state. Following the public outrage against the rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata on 9 August, and the mishandling of the case investigation by the police, on 2 September the state legislative assembly passed the Aparajita Bill with an object of “creating a safer environment for women and children” on the belief that “maximising the punishment for sexual offences will deter such deplorable acts”. The BNS while replacing the Indian Penal Code, had already increased the number of offences punishable by death from 11 to 15. Aparajita Bill increases the number to 18 along with the introduction of mandatory capital punishment for rape resulting in death/vegetative state, disregarding the fact that mandatory death penalty in India has been struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1983 in *Mithu vs State of Punjab*.

PUDR has long opposed the death penalty as a form of punishment due to the inherent possibility of miscarriage of justice and the irreversibility of errors. If deterrence is an argument in favour of the death penalty, the statistics reveal the contrary and only highlight the deficiencies and maladies of a justice system where the possibility of an innocent being sent to the gallows is ever-present.

Joseph Mathai
Paramjeet Singh
(Secretaries, PUDR)

“Democracy Disgraced”

Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankar condemned the Kolkata doctor rape & murder incident. He said ‘A place where women don’t find themselves

safe cannot be a civilised society, that democracy is disgraced today, the fear in the minds of our girls and women is a cause of national concern. How can there be rape and murder in a hospital when the woman doctor is in service of humanity, saving the lives of others?"

People don't forget that this gentleman had his lips sealed when the horrific incident of Manipur, under a double-engine government, took place wherein two women were publicly paraded naked and then raped. People don't forget that right when honourable Vice-President was airing his outrage over the heinous Kolkata crime from a podium, two of the three accused (by the "survivor" herself) in the BHU gang-rape case have returned home on bail and have been duly garlanded too.

Of course, the independent women's protests and especially the groundbreaking "Reclaim the Night" campaign over the brutal rape and murder in the R G Kar College and Hospital must be supported and strengthened to ensure justice for the victim, and even more importantly, a rational and viable national policy towards ensuring freedom and security for women—evolved on the basis of broad-based discussions involving the stakeholders i.e. the agitating women in particular.

But the saffron hoods trying to capture power by whipping up violence and mayhem in the state, as the necessary peg for invoking Article 356, must be ruthlessly exposed for what they really are.

Sukla Sen

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a multifaceted personality. In 1927, she became a member of the Indian National Congress and was voted on to the All India Congress Committee the following year. Meanwhile,

in 1926, she contested the Madras provincial election, thus becoming the first woman in India to fight a legislative election. When the Salt Satyagraha took the country by storm, Kamaladevi enthusiastically participated in it. By this time, impressed by socialist ideas, she became a founding member of the Congress Socialist Party, a socialist group within the Congress. In 1936, she served as the President of the Congress Socialist Party. Kamaladevi was a democratic socialist. In her work, *Socialism and Society*, she writes, "In democratic socialism, the ideal is to evolve only such techniques and institutions as will smooth out the frictions with a minimum of coercion, overt or implicit, and a maximum of collective participation." She argued that decentralisation can play a useful role in economic planning by ensuring social participation. Kamaladevi was also a founding member of the Women's Indian Association, headquartered at Adayar, Madras.

In independent India, Kamaladevi took on new responsibilities. She was instrumental in building the Faridabad Township with fifty thousand refugees from Pakistan. Her next big contribution came in the fields of art, handicraft, and handloom. She was the first chairperson of the All India Handicraft Board. Under her leadership, the board made every effort to connect with craft centres across India. The Board established Regional Design Centres in Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, and Calcutta to help craftsmen improve their product designs. The Board also started cottage industries emporia around the country to market and exhibit handicraft and handloom products. The National Crafts Museum in New Delhi was the result of Kamaladevi's abiding interest. She is also credited for the setting up of a theatre crafts mu-

seum in Delhi from her own private funds. In addition to these, she wrote many scholarly books on traditional crafts. For her invaluable contribution to Indian handicrafts, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay is popularly known as Hastakala Mata.

Visakh S.M.

Tale of a Blind School

Eighty years ago, the Poona School and Home for the Blind was founded by the late Dr S R Machave, an ophthalmologist, with just six children. Today, the school not only provides education but most importantly, it also feeds every single child in their care.

Mr Krishna, currently in-charge, has been with the school for 15 years. Before this, he served in the Indian Air Force for 21 years, participating in the Kargil War. His journey with the school began through a friend, Keshav Rai, who introduced him to this noble cause.

The school caters to children aged 5 to 18, providing them with education, lodging, boarding, and food—all free of cost. "We are more than just a school. We are a home and a future for these kids", he says. The school is working on expanding its education to include classes 9 and 10, so the children don't have to seek education outside.

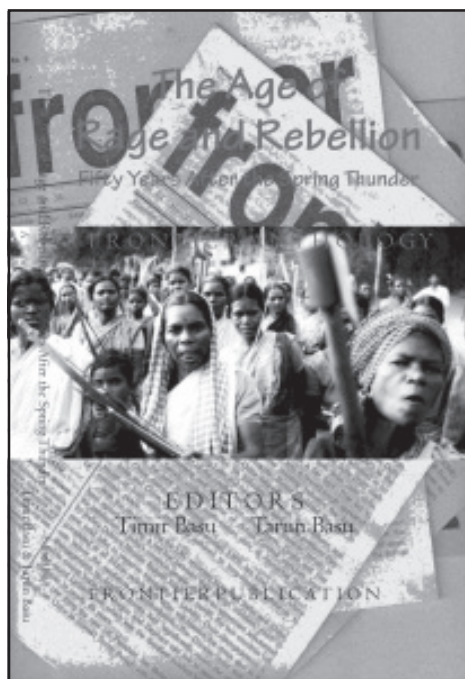
The impact of the school is profound. Many alumni have gone on to achieve great success. One is a chartered accountant, and another is a banker with HSBC. These successful alumni often return as guest speakers to inspire current students.

The school operates in one of the poorest regions, where many parents are labourers who can barely afford to feed their children. Due to malnutrition, many children are born blind. Initially, parents are reluctant to send their children, but once they see the positive changes, they are grateful.

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