

frontier

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India's Relations with Its Neighbours

INDIA HAS A CHEQUERED HISTORY OF LIVING WITH STRAINED relations with its neighbours since the days of Nehru. The hawks in Delhi, past and present, have developed a habit to think they have the birth right to act as a regional power, rather a big brother, albeit South Asian countries at no point of time recognised India's superior status.

India-Pakistan relations, however, have been calm since February 2021 when they brokered a deal to end cross-border violence along the contentious Line of Control (LoC). But the less publicised TRUCE proved brittle in 2024 when India's Jammu & Kashmir witnessed a surge in Pakistan-backed terrorist actions, dashing hope for lasting peace in the region. The pause in military activity was necessary for Pakistan as its army was heavily engaged with Afghanistan, Baloch insurgency and Pakistani Taliban in the western sector.

Right now India is grappling with several South Asian challenges from China's latest inroads in Nepal—India's traditional backyard—to serious tensions with Bangladesh after the ouster of Sheikh Hasina who is now in safe house enjoying hospitality of New Delhi. India is yet to react on the Bangladesh interim government's request for the extradition of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. For one thing Sheikh Hasina, however, retains legal right to challenge the request under Indian law.

With Myanmar's civil war intensified and the Arakan Army rebel group holding a huge territory bordering India's north-eastern states where Manipur is still burning because of continuing ethnic riots between Kukis and Meitis the region may be further destabilised as the possibility of spill-over of violence is very much real. Unless India and Bangladesh work together in minimising the Arakan effect as Myanmar shares a 170-mile border with Bangladesh, they are going to suffer. For India only favourable news comes from Sri Lanka where an ex-Marxist is now President who would like to improve bilateral ties with New Delhi, much to the dismay of China. Maybe Sri Lanka is an exception. The general atmosphere in the region is very much anti-Indian.

But it is China that matters most in India's foreign policy orientation despite an agreement to maintain tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control [LAC] in the Himalayas as the fresh disputes are arising after China's unilateral declaration of two new counties in Hotan Prefecture as parts of these regions fall in the Indian Union Territory of Ladakh. If

anything India has never accepted the Chinese position. In other words there is not much to cheer about the recent thaw in India-China relationship, though the exercise was hailed as a great step forward in diplomacy, both here and abroad. A new round of India-China cold war is in the making as Beijing has just approved the controversial mega dam project on the Yarlung Tsangpo River (Tibetan name for the Brahmaputra) in the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

The dam on the lower reaches of the Tsangpo is expected to be the world's largest hydroelectric plant and could generate three times the power [nearly 300 billion kilowatt-hours

(kWh) annually] of the Three Gorges Dam. This project was included in China's 14th five-year plan from 2021-2025.

The proposed dam has long been a source of friction between China and its downstream neighbours, with India and Bangladesh repeatedly raising objections about China's dam construction plan upstream of the Brahmaputra River, a critical source of fresh water for both countries. While New Delhi has limited options, better to say no options, to prevent China from building the DAM within its territory, but it would surely cast fresh uncertainty over bilateral relations which had been on the mend

after the LAC understanding last year. The Chinese side, however, said in 2023, the project could benefit China, India and Bangladesh, if the countries were to cooperate. But one thing is certain that it is going to ruin Tibet's fragile eco-system. And tragically enough the Tibetans have no democratic space to protest, even peacefully, against attacks on their lives and environment.

It is ultimately about trust, and it is no secret that given the prevailing super-charged situation, India and China don't trust each other. Nor does Bangladesh trust India. 'South Asian' drama continues to be a tragedy! □□□ 05-01-2025

COMMENT

What is Revolutionary Defeatism?

THE ONGOING WAR IN UKRAINE represents a flashpoint in global politics, capturing the attention of anarchists, socialists, and anti-war activists worldwide. As the bloodshed continues, accompanied by escalating rhetoric from all sides, progressives are faced with a critical question: how should they respond? Revolutionary defeatism—an idea born from the revolutionary movements of the early 20th century—offers a powerful framework for addressing imperialist wars like this one. It demands that people oppose all sides in conflicts between ruling classes and work instead toward dismantling the systems that perpetuate war, exploitation, and suffering.

Revolutionary defeatism emerged as a response to the horrors of World War I. Revolutionary socialists argued that workers and oppressed peoples should not support the war efforts of their governments, even when framed as “defensive” or “just”. Instead, they called on workers to oppose the war outright, disrupt their governments' ability to wage it, and

turn imperialist conflicts into revolutionary opportunities.

The war in Ukraine is often presented as a simple conflict between good and evil: Ukraine defending its sovereignty against Russian aggression. Western media outlets portray Ukrainian soldiers as heroic defenders of democracy, while Russian state propaganda paints its actions as a defence against NATO encroachment. Both narratives obscure the deeper dynamics at play: a clash between imperialist powers, with the Ukrainian people caught in the middle.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is undeniably an imperialist act. Vladimir Putin's government has long sought to maintain its influence over former Soviet states, and Ukraine—geopolitically significant and rich in resources—has been a key target. By framing the invasion as a defence of Russian-speaking populations and a response to NATO expansion, the Kremlin appeals to nationalism to justify its aggression.

But this war is not for the benefit of Russian-speaking Ukrainians or or-

dinary Russians. It is a war to secure the interests of the Russian ruling class, fought at the expense of working-class soldiers—many of whom are conscripts from marginalised regions like Dagestan and Buryatia. These young men are sent to die in a war they did not choose, while dissenting voices within Russia are silenced through repression.

On the other side, NATO and Western powers have eagerly supported Ukraine, flooding the country with weapons and military aid. While this is framed as support for Ukrainian sovereignty, it is clear that NATO's involvement is driven by its own imperialist interests. For decades, NATO has expanded its influence eastward, antagonising Russia and destabilising the region. Ukraine, as a buffer state, has become a battleground for this geopolitical rivalry.

The US and its allies profit immensely from this conflict. Arms manufacturers like Raytheon, Lockheed Martin and BAE System rake in billions as weapons flow into Ukraine, while Western governments use the war to justify increased military spending and crackdowns on dissent under the guise of national security. For them, Ukraine is not a

partner but a pawn—a convenient battleground to weaken Russia without risking their own troops. In Ukraine, revolutionary defeatism means challenging the narrative that victory can only come through militarisation and western support.

The war in Ukraine is not an isolated event. It is part of a broader system of global capitalism and

imperialism that perpetuates violence and inequality.

‘Revolutionary defeatism is not passive; it is a call to action’—to oppose war not by choosing sides. And the principles of revolutionary defeatism remain just as relevant today. □□□

[This is an abridged version of a contribution found on an anarchist blog from New Zealand—Aorearoa]

NOTE

RSS and its Fringe Organisations

Ram Puniyani writes:

AFTER RASHTRIASWAYAM Sevak Sangh (RSS) was formed it went on creating many organisations steeped in its ideology of Hindutva or Hindu Nationalism, a concept based on Aryan race, Brahminical values and the land from Sindhu to Seas. It has given birth to many organisations which are more than 100. Many other organisations have sprouted which may not be a formal part of Sangh Parivar, as known popularly, but are having the same ideology. These include many others like association of Sadhus and sants outside the VHP, the cow vigilantes and those out to initiate violence at the drop of hat in the name of Hinduism.

For Cow vigilantes, Modi had given a statement that murder in the name of cow is not acceptable, and just a few hours later a Muslim man was done to death on this issue. Apart from this phenomenon video is going viral where two men dressed as Santa Claus are being beaten up by hooligans at the Kankaria Carnival in Ahmedabad. This probably is the first year where people dressed as Santa Claus are being hauled up. Bajrang Dal has also issued warnings to Hindus for their attending Christmas parties.

Recently people also saw the

claims on mosques that there was such a temple so it must be dug up a la Babri Masjid style. Seeing the spate of such made-up claims, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat himself said that it is not desirable to keep looking for Shivling under every mosque. It is amazing that the claim is made, and dispute created in Kashi where a fountain-looking structure is claimed to be a Shivling and demand for converting the mosque into a temple boosted. After the Sambhal claims, the violence followed.

Probably shaken by this and the feeling that the Supreme Leader of the supra political outfit felt it will bring loss of face for ‘RSS Combine’ and so he gave a sane looking call, “The Ram Temple was about faith, and Hindus wanted it built. But raising disputes about new sites out of hate is unacceptable,” he said. “Some people think they can become leaders of Hindus by creating new controversies. How is this allowed?”

Strangely enough most of the fringe organisations of Hindutva politics are coming forward to oppose it. One knows that RSS is a strict disciplinarian organisation, and its members do not violate the commands of its leader. So who are these Senas, Dharma Sansads springing up by a dozen and going

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against the appeal of Bhagwat?

To cap it all, RSS's unofficial mouth piece Organizer itself came forward to articulate the fringe elements' demands. It also claims that temple restorations are for national identity and to seek civilisational justice.

How come the hate is so pervasive that it is crossing the limits set by its own leaders? The likes of Bhagwat and Modi are witnessing right in front of their eyes that the Genie can be unleashed from the bottle, but to put it back is a task, which is close to impossible. □□□

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 HUMRA QURAIISHI'S COLUMN

'He Lost from South Delhi'

Humra Quraishi

AS KHUSHWANT SINGH and I put together his book 'Absolute Khushwant' (Penguin, 2010), where he spoke and I wrote, he spoke in great detail about the various personalities and politicians he'd met all through his life. When he spoke about Dr Manmohan Singh he, of course, focused on his calibre as an economist, his outstanding contribution, bringing the country's economy on the path of economic progress. Khushwant had also highlighted Dr Manmohan Singh's simplicity and integrity.

Let me quote these relevant paragraphs on Dr Manmohan Singh from this book: "...He is also very humble and simple. He grew up in a small village in a family of very modest means and struggled to get an education. Initially his ambition was only to be a college professor, find a small flat and settle in Chandigarh. Then chance changed the course of his life and took him to Cambridge and Oxford, the UN and the highest positions in India's financial institutions; and now he is prime minister. But he remained grounded."

Khushwant detailed much more, "I really got to know him at the election he lost from South Delhi. This was in 1999. I was surprised and impressed because his son-in-law, whom my family knew, came to borrow some money—just two lakhs—to hire taxis that were needed for the campaigning. That they didn't even have that much to spare! I gave the money, in cash... Only days after he lost the elections, Manmohan Singh called me himself and asked for an appointment. He came to see me with a packet. 'I

haven't used the money,' he said and handed me the packet with all the cash I had given his son-in-law.

'BOLLYWOOD' and FARMERS

Where are the Bollywood stars who played the role of farmers! I do realize they were make-believe portrayals, more along the fairy tale strain. What, with them singing and dancing in and around lush green fields and meadows and forests, if not bathing in the various streams and rivers and village ponds!

As those countless filmi characters gained popularity because of their farmer roles, so they ought to come up with a word or two on today's farmers and their ongoing struggles and plight. Yes, if particular Bollywood stars could go up the graph by the farmer portrayals in the village and rural locales, then this is the time to stand up in solidarity with the farmers of the country.

Today several actors and actresses own farms and farm lands, yet they do not speak out about the ground realities that the farmers face. Strange and bizarre, the way they flaunt their farms and yet keep shut about the farmer's long standing demands and dues and the struggles they face, leading to suicides and deaths and a life riddled with challenges and financial strains. Ironical, the farmer who feeds us is himself facing acute hardships, struggling to make two ends meet; coping with the burden of loans, battling sarkari onslaughts.

Yes, it's more than disappointing that none of the Bollywood stars have come forward and spoken out. Why? Is this because they have little time or the required inclination or

are they more than worried about the reactions of the political rulers of the day and the machinery under their control!

I'm stating this because though many prominent poets, academics and intellectuals of the country did speak out against the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, but Bollywood had even then more than disappointed. Few dared to speak out against the communal killings and carnage. Why didn't the big names and surnames and bigger banners of Bollywood take on the political rulers of Gujarat? Their answer was as stark as this: If we had reached out to the dying and near-dying victims of the pogrom, we would have been in the 'bad books' of the government and our films would be targeted and we would have been ruined!

The grim fact is this: Bollywood's top actors, directors and producers rarely come up with any possible criticism of any of the upheavals, big or small, taking place in the country. Probably they want to safeguard their careers! Writ large the communally surcharged disasters spreading out in the country but Bollywood's creamy top layer sits too quiet!

Thankfully there existed sensitive-passionate poets who wrote from their heart and soul, unbothered by the politicians and political aftermath.

Do ponder on this particular verse of Sahir Ludhianvi:

*If there is a reason for my angry songs, it is this
That when I see the hungry farmers
The poor, the oppressed, the destitute, the helpless
My heart cannot participate in assemblies of pleasure
Even if I wish, I cannot write dreamy songs of love.*

01-01-2025

A PIONEER

Suniti Kumar Ghosh: His Contributions to Indian Historical Studies—III (The Role of the Big Bourgeoisie)

Amit Bhattacharyya

AFTER THE FALL OF RANGOON and the Japanese occupation of Burma, when the Japanese invasion of India seemed imminent, the Indian Big bourgeoisie, like the Congress leadership, was a divided house.

According to Ghosh, one section including WalchandHirachand, the Gangalbhais, Lalbhais, and Sarabhais, sure of victory of Axis powers, preferred a change of masters and waited to welcome the Japanese.

The second section, consisting of Thakurdas, CowasjiJehangir and many other millowners did not lose faith in the ultimate British victory and remained loyalists.

There seems a third section which included the Birlas and Tatas who, while not enthusiastic about precipitating any conflict with the raj and serving British imperialist interests to the best of their ability, enriching themselves in the process, contributed liberally to the Congress funds and offered secret help. G.D. Birla's letter of 14 July 1942 to Mahadev Desai was far from optimistic as regards "Bapu's movement". Rather, it painted the darker aspects of the political situation in India, which were not conducive to the success of the struggle. A memorandum submitted in late July or early August to the Viceroy, which was sponsored by Thakurdas and signed, among others, by J.R.D. Tata and Birla, said that as businessmen their interest lay "in peace, harmony, goodwill and order throughout the country". It further stated: "We have always believed in creating a firm and solid

foundation for building up a permanent friendship between England and India, and throughout our public career most of us have endeavoured to work for this object" (Birla to Mahadev Dasai, *Bapu* V, pp.316-7, cited in Ghosh, *ibid*, p.238).

Quite correctly did Suniti Kumar Ghosh observe: "At the crossroads of history, the question before the Indian big bourgeoisie and their political frontsmen was not one of achieving freedom from imperialist domination but of choosing between rival imperialist masters" (*Ibid*, p.238).

A note prepared by the GOI's Intelligence Bureau entitled "Congress and 'Big Business'," dt. 28 February 1944, contains reports from chiefs of intelligence and police of various parts of India that the congress was receiving financial help from Indian big business. It also states: that "when Herbert Mathews, a *New York Times* correspondent, visited Ahmedabad in March 1943,

"the local millionaires deplored what had been happening in the country and pointed out that their object in life being to make money, like most Indian businessmen, they were keeping one foot in the Congress camp, which they expected to see running the country, and another in the British camp, which is running it now and gives them fat orders" (Cited in Ghosh, p.240).

According to this note, "in the course of the statements made to the police after his arrest, Jaya Prakash Narayan said: "...in fact, I hate their (the Birlas') dual policy. On one side they claim to be nationalists while on the other they

have all the military contracts" (*TOP*, IV, pp.765-71).

When the calculations of this section of the big bourgeoisie went wrong, they tried quickly to re-establish the old relations with the raj. Interestingly, "perhaps to expiate their 'sin' of 1942", the Ahmedabad mill-owners celebrated the victory of the British and their Allies by offering a "Victory Bonus" to workers in 1945 (*Eastern Economist*, 21 September, 1945, p.433). Actually, as S.K. Ghosh correctly observed, the Indian big bourgeoisie was "then eager not only to serve British capital as before but to hitch its fortune to the more resplendent star of US monopoly capital" (*Ibid*, p.240).

Gandhi and His Charisma

There is no doubt that Gandhi was a charismatic leader; he could attract, influence and inspire devotion among people. However, charisma, as Ghosh points out, does not presuppose that the policies of a leader possessed of it necessarily serve the interests of the people. Hitler enjoyed charisma among the Germans for some time. But few could agree that their policies were right. In fact, a complex of factors contribute to a leader's charisma.

Ghosh first dwells on the limits within which Gandhi's charisma worked. First, Gandhi's charisma failed to work on the Muslims. Second, a large section of the scheduled castes and tribes remained untouched by his charismatic influence. Third, his ability to influence and inspire the politically inclined youth of India was very much limited. Fourth, towards the end of his life, his charisma ceased to work on

For **Frontier Contact**

DHYANBINDU

COLLEGE SQUARE

his close associates who had cherished implicit faith in him before.

There were, in his opinion, three main factors which contributed to the making of Gandhi's charisma.

A) A Superb Cocktail of Religion and Politics:

Gandhi's charisma among the Hindus owed much to his capacity to make a cocktail of religion and politics. "His continual references to God, to 'inner voice' and to the religious scriptures and epics, his claims that his steps were guided by God (that for instance his fasts were undertaken at the call of God), his *ashramas* and his ascetic's robe swayed the Hindu masses powerfully... His harking back to a mythical past, the Ram Rajya, had an immense appeal to the backward-looking Hindus, especially the peasantry emmeshed in feudal ties..." (S.K. Ghosh, II, Appendix, p.363).

When Rabindranath Tagore met Romain Rolland and his two friends in June 1926, Tagore dwelt on Gandhi's "variations and contradictions, the compromises he has accepted and that sort of secret bad faith which makes him prove himself by sophistries that the decisions he takes are those demanded by virtue and the divine law even when the contrary is true and he must be aware of the fact" (Romain Rolland's Diary, 29 June 1926 in *Romain Rolland and Gandhi Correspondence*—emphasis added. Cited in Ghosh, II, p.363).

Besides his *ashramas* and ascetic garb, the prayer meetings Gandhi held every day, "where he blended prayers and politics, were a powerful weapon of his with which he swayed the mass mind" (*Ibid*, p.363). Kanji Dwarkadas said that Gandhi "was exploiting for political purposes these public prayers to keep and continue his hold on ignorant and superstitious people" (Kanji Dwarkadas, *India's Fight for Freedom, 1913-*

1937, Bombay, 1966, cited in Ghosh, *ibid*.)

Subhas Chandra Bose observed that in the land where the "Spiritual man has always wielded the largest influence", Gandhi "came to be looked upon by the mass of the people as a Mahatma before he became the undisputed political leader of India" (Subhas Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, p.207, cited in Ghosh, *ibid*).

David Petrie, Director of the Intelligence Bureau, Government of India, from 1924 to 1931 said that the appeal of Gandhi as a leader to the masses "was semi-divine" and "his influence was far more religious than political" (David Petrie, *Communism in India 1924-1927*, p.289, cited in Ghosh, *ibid*).

According to Ghosh, "Gandhi did his best to turn the gaze of the people backward, to revive the obscurantist ideas and faiths of the past and to blunt the power of reason. When it suited him he talked of the "sinfulness" of foreign cloth or of the Bihar earthquake in 1934 as having been caused by the caste Hindus' sin of untouchability. His "moral" outpourings on modern civilization, industry, medicine, etc. had their appeal in a colonial and semi-feudal society, who groaning under the impact of a bastard civilization felt yearnings for the supposed pristine glory of a vanished age. Gandhi knew how credulous the masses were. "If one makes a fuss of eating and drinking and wears a *langoti*", said Gandhi, "one can easily acquire the title of Mahatma in this country" Again he said: "in ou VIII, p.29, cited in Ghosh, Vol. I, p.364),

In this connection, Ravinder Kumar commented: "More significantly, the religious idiom of Gandhi's politics widened the gulf between the two major communities of the sub-continent, and was probably one of the reasons behind its division

into the two states of India and Pakistan in 1947". (Ravinder Kumar, Introduction to *Essays on Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919*, cited in Ghosh II, p.364.

B) Deification of Gandhi

S.K. Ghosh avers that systematic efforts were made by interested classes and individuals to deify Gandhi—not without his knowledge. During the Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928 (See Ghosh's *India and the Raj*, Vol. I, pp.286-9) which opposed the government's enhancement of land revenue "affecting a small but dominant landed class", Vallabh Patel and others including Gandhi "deliberately used a religious idiom in their speeches and writings". Those reluctant to join Satyagraha were warned that "it would be difficult... for them to face God after death on account of their unholy actions". Support of the various social groups was sought "on caste and religious grounds". The tribal people of the Bardoli taluk many of whom serfs of their landowners and who constituted nearly half of the said taluk, were told that their gods Siliya and Simalia, who had grown old, had sent Gandhi, "their new god", to look after them. (See Ghanasyamdas Shah, "Traditional Society and Political Mobilization: The Experience of Bardoli Satyagraha (1920-1928)", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (NS), No.8, 1974—emphasis added, cited in Ghosh, *ibid*, p.365).

The following was one of the verses of a Gujarati song: "Oh Englishman, the God Gandhiji came in the end and your days have been numbered" (David Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat*, p.244, cited in Ghosh, II, p.365).

This deification of Gandhi was not confined to Gujarat; it spread to Gorakhpur, Bihar and other areas and the news were published in such papers and journals as *Pioneer*, *Swadeshetc*. Ghosh points out that

Pandit R.S.Shukla, the then Prime Minister of the Central Provinces and Berar, made it obligatory by an order issued in September 1938 to use the word 'Mahatma' before Gandhi's name in all official papers. 'Gandhi-worship' was also prevalent in some places of that province. (CWG, LXVII, p.410).

In present-day Koraput in Orissa, Ghosh argues, rumours were spread early in July 1938 that Mr. Gandhi will visit the area soon and those do not produce congress tickets will suffer from ailments! An official Congress publication stated: "The Congress had built up an organization and acquired a hold over these backward tribes[in Koraput] by making attractive promises... they also played on their superstition, and in some places Mr Gandhi was deified and temple ritual took place at the Congress office" (GOI, Home Poll, File 18/7/1938, cited in Biswamoy Pati, 'Storm over Malkangiri' in G.Pandeyed, *Indian Nation in 1942*, p.193: for more references, see Ghosh, p.374).

And soon after 8 August 1942, a circular was issued in the name of the congress reproducing Gandhi's message to the people on the eve of his arrest. It was entitled *Six Commandments of Gandhi Baba*. (Congress Responsibilities for the Disturbances 1942-43, pp.80-81, in GOI, Home Poll, File no,18/7/1938, cited in Biswamoy Pati, *op.cit.*).

Exercises in

Gandhi's Image Building

Suniti Ghosh observes that myths about Gandhi which have no semblance of truth were consciously built up and propagated by his associates. Let us cite the statements coming from two of them. Nehru wrote: "Crushed in the dark misery of the present, she [India] had tried to find relief in helpless muttering and in vague dreams of the past and the future, but he [Gandhi] came and

gave hope to her mind and strength to her much-battered body, and the future became an alluring vision" (Nehru, *An Autobiography*, p.254)

Ghosh holds that Nehru here deliberately falsified the history of the anti-colonial struggle before the advent of Gandhi on the political scene. Those struggles were not diversionary ones like those in which Nehru participated under the leadership of Gandhi. The reality is that it Gandhi's mission to shackle all anti-government and anti-feudal struggles, not to organize or lead them. "The future that Gandhi was striving for—self-government within the British empire and the preservation of the social status quo—was indeed 'an alluring vision' to the Nehrus and the Birlas"(ibid, p.366).

Much-hyped Gandhi's

Visit to Noakhali

Let us now turn to the much-hyped Gandhi visit in 1946 to Noakhali—a region torn by communal clashes. Rajendra Prasad wrote: "Gandhi went to Noakhali[in 1946], The result was that the Hindus recovered their courage and morale. The Muslims who, to begin with, suspected his *bona fides*, began slowly to be affected by his presence and his speeches and saw the error of their ways. That was one of the marvels of non-violence in action" (R. Prasad, *At the Feet of Mahatma Gandhi*, p.299, cited in Ghosh, p.366).

"No doubt, this was a marvel of untruth", Ghosh responds. "The Muslims, who at first flocked to Gandhi's meetings, soon boycotted them and put every conceivable pressure on him to leave Noakhali and how could the apostle of non-violence restore a sense of security to the minds of Hindus when he himself moved about under the best possible armed protection provided by the Bengal government?" (Ghosh, *ibid*, p.367). The fact is that ordinary Muslims were not responsible

for the communal riots, and the section which was actually involved in such acts was led by a gangster—Mian Ghulam Sarwar—who had unsuccessfully contested the 1946 Assembly election backed by Congress funds (Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi The Last Phase I*, p.240, cited in Ghosh, p.367). Ghosh, in this connection, brings our attention to the fact that the Muslims of the neighbouring district of Tripura (Comilla) organized themselves—not under the influence of Gandhi—and successfully prevented the gangsters from spreading the riots in the district. (*ibid*, p.367).

Ghosh provides us another interesting and breathtaking sample of image building so essential for the success of Congress politics. According to Gandhi's biographer and disciple, Tendulkar, After reading the first volume of Marx's *Capital* in the Aga Khan Palace at the age of seventy four, Gandhi commented: "I would have written it better as assuming, of course, I had the leisure for study Marx has put in". In this context what Frances Gunther wrote to Nehru is quite interesting: "Essentially ignorant—his ideas on science, food, sex, education, back to the village, etc. are crack potted and assigned by another man would arouse nothing but a yawn" (Gunther to Nehru, March 1938, JN Papers, cited in B.N. Pandey, *op.cit.*, p.224 and Ghosh, p.367).

In Suniti Ghosh's opinion, the charisma around Gandhi was the product of his astuteness and the ability to utilize people's religious superstitions and beliefs. There were some other factors. Edgar Snow was not wrong when he said: "Nobody else in India could play *this dual role of saint for the masses and champion of big business, which was the secret of Gandhi's power*" (cited in Ghosh, p.369). Ghosh adds

that a negative factor that sustained Gandhi's charisma was the weakness of the working class and the Communist Party of India.

Epilogue: In this path-breaking work, Suniti Kumar Ghosh has refrained from touching, as he writes at the end, one aspect of Gandhi, i.e, his personal life. He has done it deliberately. That part is related to Gandhi's personal life. This part has "invited severe criticism, even condemnation, from his former 'yes-men' and others". However, he has given the sources that will throw light this part. Anyone who is interested to in knowing Gandhi, the man may consult the following sources: CWG, LXVII, 61, 69, 104-5, 117, 166, 416; LXX, 81-2, 95, 312-5; LXXIX, 212-3, 215-6, 238; LXXXI, 82-3; LXXXVI, 452-3, 465-6; LXXXVI, 89-92, 108, passim; also Nirmal Kumar Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, 133-4, 154, 158, 174, 179, 184; and Ved Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles*,

Penguin Books, 1977 for Sushila Nayar's statement.

[Even though Suniti Kumar Ghosh opted not to talk about Gandhi's personal life, I would quote in full the relevant portion of an article captioned "On Gandhi" written by Saroj Datta, his close comrade-in-arms. It published in *Deshabrat* on 6 June 1970. This portion was rendered into English for me on my request by Suniti Kumar Ghosh himself long time ago. Saroj Datta was butchered after being arrested by the police in Kolkata on 5 August 1971]

"I do not propose to dwell here on the tactics with which Gandhi sought to preserve the decadent culture that had its roots in medieval religious superstitions and that is the best aid to colonial rule. Nor do I intend to offer an elaborate account of the manoeuvres by which, in the name of religious and social reforms he deflected time and again the revolutionary struggles of the people

from their objective. Today I would not enter into an analysis of the moral character of this imposter of an ascetic nor into the sensational accounts of this libertine's practices in the name of brahmacharya (continence), which the orthodox Gandhian, Professor Nirmal Bose, has given in his memoirs and of which, in an excess of reverence, he has given a Freudian interpretation. Even though I may not tough on such questions, facts will gush out of the dark cavern since the boulder that was placed at the mouth of it has been removed by the revolutionary youth and students. These facts will shatter many long-cherished illusions of the people and make these bastards of the father of the nation tremble in fear. Now it is for the revolutionary intellectuals to undertake the task of research, to carry forward the struggle in the realm of culture that the revolutionary youth and students have taken the historic initiative to begin". □□□ [Concluded]

HATHRAS AND R G KAR

State Violence and Civil Society

Bhaskar Majumder

IF THE HATHRAS INCIDENT REPRESENTS a planned failure of the core state, how can the case of R G Kar be seen as a success? The former involved the rape and murder of a girl in the significant state of Uttar Pradesh, while the latter pertains to the murder and alleged rape of a doctor on duty in the progressive state of West Bengal. Each case highlighted the dysfunction of the core state, which engages agencies to investigate instances of rape and murder of young girls in India, often leading to ambiguous outcomes or conclusions that undermine the nation. The R G Kar case is particularly significant in the history of murder and alleged rape in

India because it was institutional, if not institution-sponsored; it involved a victim who was on duty at a premier hospital in Kolkata. In each of these cases, the state has failed the nation.

On August 9, 2024, a young lady doctor on duty in Kolkata's R G Kar Hospital was brutally murdered and allegedly raped and the responsibility of enquiry was entrusted to the notoriously credible CBI. The CBI made every effort to find the culprits, but after 90 days of dedicated investigation, they were unsuccessful. It appears that the accused were granted bail by the court, which could not enforce the law due to a lack of sufficient evidence. This

outcome was difficult for the civil society of West Bengal to accept, leading to renewed protests. This situation reminds people of the heinous crime in Hathras, where a young girl was raped and murdered, and her body was cremated in the absence of her parents or guardians. The civil society did not question the core state in this matter.

Many innocent people in India still have faith in state agencies like the CBI. What might have happened if the CBI had not been given the responsibility to identify the culprits? The outcome probably would not have differed much, as the crime could have gone unaddressed, or another agency would have taken over, engaging in routine work without a genuine commitment to justice.

The underlying issue is the core state's unwillingness to prioritise the safety of girls and society as a whole.

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Why is this the case? The simple answer lies in the fact that the core state operates as a legal entity, while society functions as a moral one, and these two entities often diverge. Furthermore, the core state tends to maintain the status quo, whereas civil society advocates for change. As a result, routine work often lacks a true commitment to social issues.

It is a naïve statement that a system is what citizens make it. The people of India live in a system that they did not make; they were thrown into it for unquestioned acceptance. This is because of India's robust civilisation where the system is not one but multiple as understood by the social non-state groups. The system is made by the state through agencies and institutions. Most innocent people do not understand the intricacies of the functioning or non-functioning of these agencies and institutions. The state is the super institution that makes rules for the imposition of innocent people. Innocent people abide by the rules or pay the price for their violations.

What happens when state agencies violate the rules? First, the Supreme Court may reprimand officials from these agencies for failing to reach logical conclusions. Second, civil society may criticise the functioning of these agencies, although this often has little impact on their operations. Third, some officials may be caught red-handed and suspended by competent agencies, such as the Enforcement Directorate (ED), due to unethical practices. However, this does not necessarily affect the credibility of the agency itself. All of these scenarios involve components of the state, which holds significant power. Next, one must address the issue of state violence, which can be understood as a violation of human rights—specifically, the victim's right to receive timely justice.

State violence is not readily visible other than in the international domain like the imposition of war on another sovereign state. In the case of national state sovereignty, the violence may be understood by provocative speeches by the members of the dominant ruling polity that engage people of conflicting interests in ethnic conflicts, riots, lynching, genocide, gang rape and all that. The state is a unit for conflict resolution. So at a point it tries, or shows to try, to resolve conflicts. Some innocent people die and most of the people forget the initial conditions that led to violence. Innocent people live in survival instinct—'roji-roti'. So they live as a consequence of the system rather than becoming the cause of its formulation.

Returning to the main issue: Was the CBI's failure to submit the charge sheet in the R G Kar murder case intentional, or was it influenced by another authority? What role did the state government play in this situation? It seems that the state government did not oppose the CBI's involvement in the case, likely because civil society in West Bengal expressed concerns about the investigation that could be conducted by the state police. Did the state government anticipate that the CBI's failure would be inevitable? After 100 days following the murder, civil society in West Bengal began to question both the willingness and the capability of the CBI to uncover the truth and deliver justice for the victim. However, it remains unclear why an agency like the CBI would choose to undermine its own credibility.

The state does not wage war on the nation or its people; however, it can certainly hide the coercion it imposes on them. The problem lies in the complex misconceptions that arise from the interchangeable use of terms like "state," "nation," "country," and

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“civilisation.” The political authority that governs the state is not synonymous with the nation or the country. Therefore, the civil society that has increasingly begun to question the actions and methods of the state or its agencies should not be interpreted as anti-national or seditious. The state exists for the nation, rather than the other way around, as the people are

the ones who formed the state, particularly within the European context of the last five centuries. The power of the nation is ethical and informal; it cannot impose its will on the state. In contrast, the power of the state is formal.

If innocent people understand their right to know the truth, they will begin to demand justice. This

demand can either weaken the state or provoke a more violent response. The first scenario could lead to a fragile state, while the second could escalate violence. If both outcomes are undesirable, the core state must take proactive measures to ensure justice for innocent individuals. □□□ [Bhaskar Majumder, Prof. (Retd.), G.B.Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad-211019]

MUJIB VS ZIAUR

Rewriting Textbooks on 1971 Liberation War

Arjun Sengupta

TEXTBOOKS IN BANGLADESH will now state that Ziaur Rahman—not ‘Bangabandhu’ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—declared the country’s independence in 1971, The Daily Star reported on Wednesday [January 1]. The new textbooks have also removed Mujib’s title of ‘Father of the Nation’.

“The new textbooks for the 2025 academic year will state that ‘on March 26, 1971, Ziaur Rahman declared the independence of Bangladesh, and on March 27, he made another declaration of independence on behalf of Bangabandhu,’” Prof A K M Reazul Hassan, chairman of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board, told The Daily Star.

Ziaur was the founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and husband of current BNP chief Khaleda Zia. Mujib, father of recently deposed Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, led the Bangladesh liberation struggle.

This is not the first time that Bangladesh textbooks have undergone such changes.

The legacies of Mujib and Ziaur have always been politically contested, and the question of who proclaimed the independence of Bangladesh disputed. While the Awami League, the party which

steered the Bangladesh liberation struggle under Mujib, claims that it was ‘Bangabandhu’ who made the declaration, the BNP credits its founder Ziaur.

This has meant that official history has varied depending on the dispensation in Dhaka. In 1978, during Ziaur’s reign as Bangladesh President, official history was changed for the first time to proclaim Ziaur as the person who made the declaration of independence.

Since then, official histories have been rewritten multiple times, including most recently after Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2009. In 2010, the third volume of ‘Bangladesh Independence War: Documents’, published in 1978, presenting Ziaur as the proclaimer of independence, was declared null and void by the Bangladesh Supreme Court.

Hasina was removed on the back of a popular agitation last August. The BNP and other anti-Awami parties hold significant sway in the interim government, under whom Mujib and his legacy has been targeted. In fact, one of the defining images from August 5, the day Hasina fled to Delhi, was that of protesters desecrating a statue of Mujib in Dhaka. Protesters also torched and vandalised Mujib’s resi-

dence (which was converted into a memorial by Hasina in 2001), where he and most of his family were killed in a 1975 coup.

On a cursory perusal of various contemporary sources, the claim that Ziaur, not Mujib, proclaimed the independence of Bangladesh does not seem to have much factual basis. While Ziaur did make a proclamation on behalf of ‘Bangabandhu’ on March 27, 1971, Mujib most definitely issued the first proclamation a day before, just before being arrested by Pakistani authorities.

The US Defense Intelligence Agency’s (DIA’s) now-unclassified report to the White House on March 26, 1971 stated: “Pakistan was thrust into civil war today when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman proclaimed the east wing of the two-part country to be ‘the sovereign independent People’s Republic of Bangla Desh’”.

The minutes of the Washington Special Actions Group Meeting on March 26, 1971, which was chaired by then US National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, also mention Mujib’s declaration. While telling Kissinger why the talks between Pakistan military dictator Yahya Khan and Mujib broke down, then Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Richard Helms said: “A clandestine radio broadcast has Mujibur Rahman declaring the independence of Bangla Desh.”

Most newspapers around the world on March 27, 1971, too reported Mujib’s proclamation of in-

dependence. According to the report by the New Delhi correspondent of The Associated Press, "... Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the nationalist leader of East Pakistan, was arrested only hours after he had proclaimed his region independent...".

Mujib had transmitted his message via telegram, according to Syed Badrul Ahsan's biography of 'Bangabandhu'. He likely sent the message around 12.30 am on March 26, 1971.

Ahsan wrote: "As the first sounds of gunfire were heard from the approach leading out of the cantonment, his elder daughter Hasina remembers, Mujib sent out a message through wireless proclaiming Bangladesh's independence..." (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: From Rebel to Founding Father, 2014).

The proclamation that was widely reported, however, was aired from the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (Free Bengal Radio Station) in Kalurghat, Chittagong (now

Chattogram) later that day. The text of Mujib's declaration was read out by Awami League member M A Hannan in Bengali in the afternoon of March 26, 1971.

Ziaur Rahman, then a mutinying major in the Pakistan Army, read out another declaration on March 27, 1971, which too was widely reported, although newspapers misidentified Ziaur as "Zia Khan".

At the heart of the contestation regarding who declared Bangladesh's freedom is what Mujib and Ziaur stand for in Bangladesh. Mujib won the 1973 elections with a massive mandate, although by most accounts, the process was mired by rigging and manipulation. He went on to ban Islamist parties, which he claimed supported Pakistan during the Liberation War, and sought to establish Bangladesh as a secular republic.

He was assassinated, along with most of his family, in 1975 during the first of multiple coups in inde-

pendent Bangladesh. This paved the way for the eventual rise of Ziaur Rahman, who went from being Bangladesh's military chief to President. Ziaur, too, would be killed during another coup in 1981, but during his years in power, he ended the clampdown on Islamist elements and most notably, removed 'secularism' from the Bangladesh Constitution in 1978.

This has till date remained the central contention between the political successors of Mujib and Ziaur, Hasina and Khaleda. Hasina governments have notably clamped down on Islamist elements, while under Khaleda, they have been emboldened and given space in high offices.

The decision by the current dispensation to highlight the contributions of Ziaur in Bangladesh's Liberation War over those of Mujib reflects the legacy they wish to associate with and the vision of Bangladesh they champion. □□□

[Source: *Indian Express*]

BACK FROM PETRAPOLE

Bangladesh and BJP's Game Plan

Rokibuz Zaman

EVERY FEW WEEKS, PROSENJIT Das visits Bangladesh, either to meet his relatives or on business.

For the 37-year-old resident of Shimultala, a village in Bangaon in West Bengal, close to the India-Bangladesh border, it simply means taking an auto to the immigration check-post and crossing over on foot. Das continued to travel this way even after August 5—when the Sheikh Hasina government fell in Dhaka.

"I was in Dhaka for 10 days till November 20," said Das. "I did not face any problems."

But the recent reports of attacks on minorities in Bangladesh, especially Hindus, have held him back.

"Someone like me, who goes to Bangladesh once a week, is now afraid to visit," said Das. "What if something happens to me?"

Das, like most other residents of this region in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district, has relatives across the border.

In 1971, millions of Bengali Hindus from Khulna and Jessore districts had crossed the border, fleeing the assault of the Pakistan army. They took the historic Jessore Road, which led out of Bangladesh to Bangaon and Kolkata. Das's family was among them.

The recent violence in the neighbouring country has Das worried, but news from his relatives in

the adjoining Jessore and Khulna districts has not been overtly alarming. "My relatives tell me that they have not faced many problems," Das said. "Once the government fell, people from madrassas even protected our temples. But now we hear about incidents of attacks on homes and temples in other parts of Bangladesh. So, we are naturally anxious."

According to Das, the turmoil is greater in Chattogram division, which borders Tripura and where the Hindu monk Chinmoy Krishna Das, arrested on sedition charges, heads a religious centre.

Many of border residents said that the Indian government must put diplomatic pressure on Bangladesh to protect its minorities.

"The government should be more vocal," said Das.

The turmoil in Bangladesh is not

just cause for personal anxiety, it is also roiling politics in this border region.

The Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] in Bengal has aggressively mobilised its workers on the issue to project itself as the “only party” that cares for “Hindu lives”.

In the last few weeks, BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari has held over 20 protests and rallies across the state on the state of minorities in Bangladesh, sometimes resorting to provocative rhetoric against the Mohammad Yunus-led interim government.

In truth the BJP’s offensive is shaping a growing demand from residents – that political parties across the spectrum speak up for Bangladesh’s minorities. The pressure appears to have worked; with Trinamool Congress leader and chief minister Mamata Banerjee demanding that the Indian government ask the United Nations peacekeeping forces to intervene in the neighbouring country.

Petrapole, less than 10 km from Bangaon, is a large land port along the India-Bangladesh border in North 24 Parganas district, about 80 km from Kolkata.

On December 5, it seemed business as usual. Trucks trundled past immigration counters, carrying cargos of cotton fabric, vehicles and motor parts. The number of people crossing the border was, however, relatively less.

One of those who arrived in India that afternoon to meet his relatives was Chaityana Sikdar, a resident of Jessore district in Bangladesh.

Sikdar, who is in his 50s, admitted that the situation back home was worrying. “But the attacks are not widespread,” he said. “Hindu homes and temples were attacked in some places, not all. Some have also used this turmoil for their personal agenda or to grab land.”

Nevertheless, the fear among the minorities was undeniable. “Many of them want to come to India permanently,” he said.

The two nations have made the situation worse by their belligerent statements.

In Petrapole and its surrounding areas, Bengali Hindu families are also worried about the impact of the unprecedented acrimony in India-Bangladesh relations on the border trade.

“The income of those who depend on the import-export business [through Petrapole] has become nil,” said Das. “From here, 5,000-7,000 people would go to Bangladesh for trade every day and the same number of people came to India. This business has stopped.”

Dhirtiman Pal, a customs clearing agent at Petrapole, said that the number of people travelling to Bangladesh is now less than 1,000 a day – a 10-fold drop. “Everything looks bleak. We don’t know when things will be normal.”

Bappa Saha, 40, who owns a transport business in Bangaon, said, “I used to earn Rs 40,000-Rs 50,000 a month, but it has come down to Rs 10,000 now because of the crisis,” Saha said. “If it continues, our livelihoods will be affected.”

The BJP has taken the lead in protests against the Bangladesh government, even as the Narendra Modi government engages diplomatically with the new dispensation.

On December 2, more than 1,000 monks from across West Bengal participated in a march at the Petrapole border under the banner

of the Akhil Bharatiya Sant Samiti. The march was led by Adhikari, who called for “Hindu unity” and urged “Hindus to wake up.”

“It was not a political call or event but the BJP was the driving force behind the protest,” said Ashok Kirtania, Bangaon Uttar MLA and a BJP leader from Matua community. “We are protesting in every ward and villages along the border.”

Many of the rallies saw sadhus and Hindu religious leaders take part. A human rights activist in the region flagged this as a worrying trend. “Sadhus and monks in West Bengal did not associate with political parties so openly earlier.”

However, BJP leaders are also facing questions from the people.

“I was asked by the people why the Indian government is not taking stronger steps despite being headed by the BJP, which is pro-Hindu,” Kirtania said. “We are trying to make them understand that there is a system and one can’t attack another free country.”

The massive rally led by BJP-RSS near the border saw Hindus take part in sizeable numbers, said residents.

A Petrapole resident, who works as an auto-rickshaw driver, said the BJP leaders at the rally stirred up animosity against Muslims living in Bengal. “They urged us not to talk with Muslims, not to interact with them,” he said, asking not to be identified. “The protest was not about Bangladeshi Hindus. The BJP’s aim was different. They want to create Hindu-Muslim riots here.”

A Petrapole-based government teacher from the Hindu community, who requested anonymity, said the history of the region’s residents – many of whom faced communal persecution in then East Pakistan – have always made them receptive to the BJP.

“Hindus who were forced to mi-

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grate from Bangladesh in different times form the vote bank of the BJP here,” the teacher said. “But the idea of Hindu persecution in Bangladesh is now drawing even the so-called secular Hindu families towards the BJP.”

Saha admitted that the BJP was playing up the attacks on Hindus for its political gain. “But we also can’t say they are doing a bad thing,” he said. “There is a need for a protest too. It is the BJP which is aggressively talking and protesting about Hindu interests in Bangladesh.”

The rhetoric about protecting Hindu interests, said political observers as well as residents, is forcing the BJP’s rivals to react.

Das, for instance, said the ruling Trinamool Congress must also register its protest. “It was necessary for Mamata Banerjee to speak up, as a

chief minister of the neighbouring state,” said Das.

Shubonkor Das, who runs a hotel in Bongaon, pointed out: “Mamata Banerjee was under pressure and she only spoke when Suvendu came to Petropole on December 2.”

Guha predicted that the turmoil in Bangladesh would only add to Hindu consolidation in the BJP’s favour. “The Hindu consolidation can be countered if Muslim leaders of the Trinamool Congress and Muslim members of the civil society speak out against the Hindu massacre in Bangladesh,” Guha said.

He added: “But there is no automatic correlation between Hindu consolidation and poll results because in West Bengal electoral success depends to a large extent on organisational might. The BJP can-

not match Trinamool Congress’s organisation.”

Even as they urge political parties to dial up the pressure against the alleged violence against Hindus, the residents of this border region are also wary of the conflict dragging out.

“Diplomatically, both the governments should speak, but the statements should not incite or disturb the harmony,” said Shubonkor Das.

Saha, the transporter, said the crisis in Bangladesh following the takeover by the Mohammad Yunus government is being used by vested interest groups to play “Hindu-Muslim politics”. “And, neither Hindus nor the Muslims understand this. They are giving priorities to their own religion and heading towards a fight,” he said. □□□

[Source: Scroll.in]

CSI STATEMENT

The fall of Aleppo

[Following is a statement issued by Dr John Eibner, President of Christian Solidarity International (CSI), on the fall of Aleppo to jihadist forces on November 29, 2024]

AL-QAIDA’S JIHADIST OFFshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) has captured Aleppo. The jihadists’ offensive against the once prosperous, religiously diverse city resembles the Islamic State’s sudden conquest of Mosul in 2014.

Christians, Alawites, Shiites and non-observant Sunnis are living in fear. They know that HTS is driven by a religious ideology that aims to subjugate and suppress “infidels.” They recall the brutal religious persecution that Sunni supremacist militants brought to them in the aftermath of the so-called “Arab Spring” uprising.

Executions, torture, sexual violence, and arbitrary detentions have been characteristic of HTS rule, according to the UN’s Commission of Inquiry on Syria. I have seen myself

the widespread desecration of churches and have heard the testimonies of many Christians and others in Aleppo who lived through the horrors of the city’s occupation by HTS and allied jihadist militias in 2012-2016.

The fall of Aleppo to Sunni jihadists has significance that transcends the city, Syria and the Middle East itself. It is the latest violent drama in global power struggle that Pope Francis has rightly, since 2014, called World War III “fought piecemeal.”

Washington and its allies have maintained close relations with HTS and its jihadist associates. In 2014, Joe Biden, then the vice president, admitted that Washington’s regional partners – Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – had “poured millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons

of weapons into ... al-Qaida and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world” to overthrow the Syrian government.

President Trump’s special representative for Syria, Ambassador James Jeffrey, acknowledged in 2021 that HTS had been functioning covertly as an “asset” of Washington’s Middle East policy, despite its designation as a terrorist organization.

The degradation of the Syrian state has been the common objective of the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations since the “Arab Spring” uprisings opened a new era of violent instability in the Middle East. Jihadi proxies like HTS have been principal instruments of this policy. They are used and rewarded on condition they do not act against American geopolitical interests. Washington’s support for the Afghani *mujahideen* against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan established a model for the use of jihadist armies against adversaries. Draconian economic sanctions have been another de-

structive tool in Washington's toolbox for destabilizing the Syrian state.

The Syrian government's main backers, Russia and Iran, are now under enormous pressure on the Ukrainian and Lebanese fronts, respectively, of this global struggle. HTS has now received the green light from its international patrons to go on the offensive against

Aleppo. The silence of the Biden administration and members of the incoming Trump administration is telling of the attitude of Washington's foreign policy establishment.

Shortly before election day, President-Elect Trump warned: "Christians around the World will not be safe if Kamala Harris is President of the United States." He went on to claim: "When

I am President, I will protect persecuted Christians. I will work to stop the violence and ethnic cleansing."

The incoming president now has a golden opportunity to fulfill his pledge. Christians and others who value religious freedom and other fundamental human rights should insist that this pre-election pledge is honored. □□□

John Eibner, November 30, 2024

A TRIBUTE

Shyam Benegal

(1934–2024)

Harsh Thakor

SHYAM BENEGAL, WHO christened a new era in Hindi cinema with the 'parallel movement' in the 1970s and 1980s, died on Monday, December 23, after battling chronic kidney disease. He was 90.

Shyam Benegal ranks amongst the pioneers of the art movement in Hindi cinema. Few directors explored such realms in manifesting feudal or social oppression or displayed mastery at such a scale in exploring characters. Social reality was concurrent theme in movies of Benegal, who was a product of the mass uprisings of the people. Khalid Mohammad produced documentary 'The Master: Shyam Benegal,' intended to pay a tribute to Benegal's greatness.

Born in Tirumalagiri, now in Telangana, Benegal grew amidst the background of cinema around him. His father was a still photographer who also made short films. He was also a second cousin of film legend Guru Dutt. Benegal did his masters in economics from Hyderabad's Osmania University. The young Benegal soon moved to Mumbai looking for work and initially thought about assisting Guru Dutt but gave up on that as he had his own ideas.

Next, he took up a job as copy-writer at an advertising agency. After

a while, his agency shifted him to the film department noting his potential towards the medium where he began making ad films until becoming a full-time filmmaker. He then made documentaries for the Films Division of India before lighting the first spark of his feature film debut with *Ankur*.

In the late 1940s Shyam Benegal as a college student in Hyderabad, was a close observer of the Telangana peasant uprising against the oppressive feudal lords. Many of his friends who supported the movement languished in jail, an event that shaped ideological structure of Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975) and *Manthan* (1976), which comprised a trilogy. All navigating the transition taking place from the feudal systems that prevailed and continue to do so.

At a time when Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Manmohan Desai were lighting the silver screen with romances and comedies, Benegal invoked brand of social realism into cinema, illustrating the caste and class defects that were beginning to penetrate and plague the very roots of Indian society.

His filmmaking drew inspirations from Satyajit Ray and Vittorio de Sica, but the creations were entirely his own making.

No director better utilised mantle of sex to illustrate expression of power.

Benegal's career was characterised with high versatility ranging from the dark echelons of tragedy, to the most hilarious films.

Benegal's films, till his very last explore how power structures triggered the abuse of those marginalised on basis of their class, caste, religion and gender.

In his, almost seven-decade career, Benegal navigated diverse arenas diverse mediums, and diverse issues, ranging from rural distress and feminist concerns to satires and biopics.

His best films were *Ankur*, *Mandi*, *Nishant*, *Bhumika* and *Manthan*.

Benegal's debut film *Ankur*, (1974) manifests the intertwining of caste, class and gender in both rural and urban settings and the subversions to the power equations. Revolving around the central conflict of a village landlord's son's affair with a Dalit woman, the social drama portrayed the plaguing of casteism, uneven balance of power and perils of alcoholism.

A bold critique of feudal oppression, *Nishant* [1975] explores the abuse of power and the spontaneous revolt. Based on the screenplay by popular playwright Vijay Tendulkar, the movie was an illustrative exploration of feudalism in Telangana. Starring Girish Karnad, Shabana Azmi, Amrish Puri and Anant Nag, the movie held a mirror

up to the sexual exploitation of women and the abuse of power by the rural elite.

Manthan (1976) revolves around a young veterinary doctor, who inspired poor villagers being exploited to take control of the dairy products they were selling, which generates a huge national movement. Soul searching to witness the transformation in thought process of the Harijans to integrate with the cooperatives who at first paid a blind eye and lucid illustration of the psyche of Indian villagers and oppressive machinations of the village hierarchy.

Bhumika (1977) is based on the life of an actress who wishes to carve out her independent path but is still exploited by various men at different junctures of her life, presenting a depressing portrayal of the dominance of male abuse in spite of the financial independence and public success of a woman.

Mandi (1983) nullifies prejudices against sex workers and normalises

the concept of sex work as any other work without portraying the women either as victims of exploitation, or as 'prostitutes with hearts of gold,' *Mandi* projects them as characters with agency that arbitrarily choose and enjoy the work they do while labelling self-serving NGO workers and politicians. Narrating a tale of a brothel located in the centre of a city, Benegal produces a grimly satirical exploration of societal hypocrisy and a bold revolt against societal norms.

Other notable films of Benegal were *Kalyug*, (1981) a modern-day adaptation of the epic Mahabarata, dealing with the inevitable war between two business families; trilogy of *Manmo*, (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996) and *Zubeida*. (2008), *Well done Abba*, (2010) a hilarious drama set against a rural backdrop, and *Welcome to Sajnapur*, (2008) another hilarious drama.

Mammow was based on the Babri Masjid demolition, the Bombay

blasts and the subsequent communal riots that broke out. Set in background amidst days after Partition, Mammo depicted a Muslim family without portraying them as either victims or villains but just as ordinary citizens dealing with life post-partition. One of the most realistic and grounded narratives of the alienation and victimisation of Muslims.

His repertoire encompassed documentaries, films, and epic television shows, including *Bharat Ek Khoj*, an adaptation of Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*, and *Samvidhaan*, a 10-part show on the making of the Constitution.

His biopics include *The Making of the Mahatma* and *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero*. The director's most recent work was the 2023 biographical *Mujib: The Making of a Nation*. ooo

[Harsh Thakor is a freelance journalist. Thanks information from Samrath Goyal in Hindustan Times, Frontline and the Hindu.]

LETTERS

Syria—a Catastrophe

The Baath Party lifted Syria out of poverty in the 1960s into an independent, low income but strong state sector economy. Most of this fell apart owing to brutal sanctions of 15v yrs and a war imposed on them by Imperialist powers to destroy any resistance to Israel

Already using the past tense, Syria was the most decent bastion of a patriotic and secular regime in the region, respectful of religious communities, promoting the rights of women and children, and those rights to free education and health care claimed since the 1950s by Arab socialisms. Damascus is and always has been a pillar of civilization, sophistication, and clean people in the region, so the loss of Syria will be a catastrophe for the Levant. The fall of Assad will imply the immolation or flight of the last Chris-

tianity with real social, political, and cultural influence, but also of those layers of Syrian society that we can unhesitatingly recognize as equal or even superior to functional elites. Washington and Tel Aviv's strategy of implementing an Islamic state in the heart of the Middle East to divide and rule will have tragic consequences for all and it won't be long before it ricochets in Europe. At the next terrorist attack, people will definitely remember these words.

A Syrian living in Europe

"The Great Betrayal...."

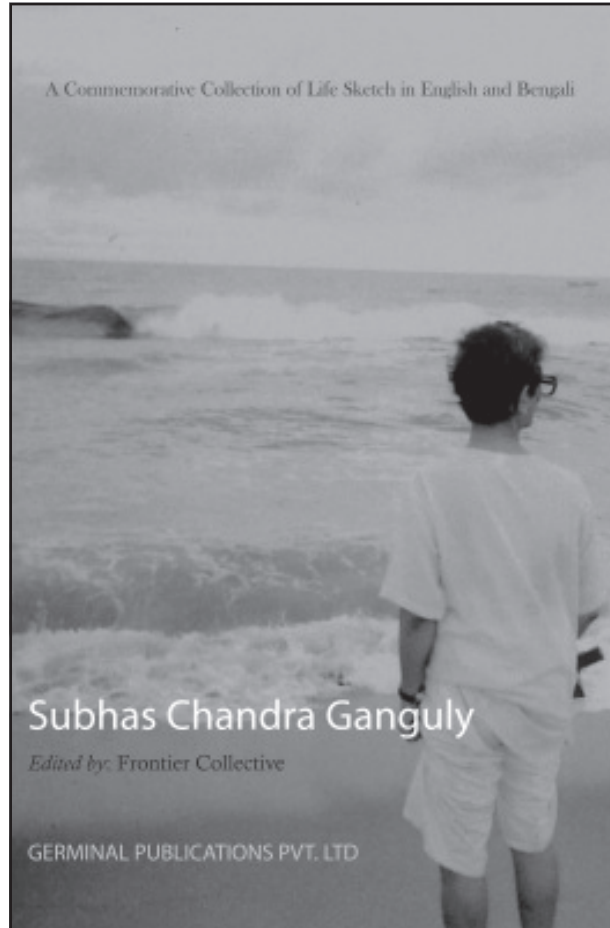
Sumanta Banerjee's article "The Great Betrayal of the ideal of Communism by Stalin Mao and their Political Heirs" that has appeared in the Autumn No of *Frontier* Vol 57, No. 15 - 18, Oct 6 - Nov 2, 2024 is in bad taste as his pontification on the 'failure' of the Great Revolutions

of Russia and China and his dark portraits of Stalin and Mao awfully lacks any substantial back-up material to prove his case. He seems to be one who puts his faith in the 'Western Marxists' who have the tendency to fetishise the 'purity' of the basic tenets of Marxism and Communism laid out by Marx and Engels. In truth there could be no pure revolution excepting in Plato's Cave. Mao said that the revolution is not a dinner party and one can add that it would have ups and downs and what is needed is a thorough study with a historical and philosophical perspective to understand why a revolution went wrong or how it could not stand up to the promises made without denigrating the great leaders that led them and thousands and thousands of men and women who martyred themselves to keep the revolution move forward.

S V Rajadurai

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