

# frontier

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## *'Peace Talk is Academic'*

**Y**ET ANOTHER ANNIVERSARY OF RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR IS round the corner. US President Donald Trump, the self-proclaimed deal-maker, did not as promised on campaign trail, manage to broker an end to the war in Ukraine on day one of his return to the White House. During his first week in office, Trump and the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine continued to stake out their negotiating positions ahead of a widely anticipated US-led push to stop the conflict. At the time of writing Russian forces are slowly but steadily tightening the noose around the eastern Ukrainian city of Pokrovsk, a logistical hub whose main supply lines are under threat almost three years after the war started. Russia outguns and outnumbers Ukraine. As things are it arguably has the upper-hand in the battlefield at a huge human cost, of course. Russia is said to have suffered around 427,000 troops killed or injured (about 40 per square mile). Whether Russia can continue its current level of military spending is open to question, but the Kremlin strategists think they will be able to do it just long enough that Ukraine's resistance crumbles and its European backers lose interest.

America's military-industrial complex is the main beneficiary in this proxy war led by Nato in disguise, while Zelensky being the pawn in this great gamble will surely go down in history as the 'worst enemy' of Ukrainians despite his stubborn resistance to Russian offensive. Right now the Ukrainian military is struggling with desertions and low morale.

Trump's 24-hour utopia has just vanished. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Trump said he had reached out to President Xi during a phone call and described China as having "a great deal of power over the [Russia-Ukraine] situation". Ironically, there is a grain of black humour when the man who vowed to end the war within 24 hours asks China to step in. China, in reality, proposed a 12-point peace plan when the war was just one year old. But neither Moscow nor Kyiv would like to endorse the Chinese idea of peace. Last year Beijing again in collaboration with Brazil launched the Group of Friends for peace on the Ukrainian crisis, which includes several other countries. However, the warring parties were not interested in it. Zelensky even called the China- Brazil peace initiative "destructive" for his country. At a time when Russia and Ukraine believe they must keep fighting to redefine the frontline border to their mutual advantage, Trump's proposals will not work, albeit US President has some advantages to threaten both Russia and

Ukraine if they don't agree to a ceasefire. As Russia wants to take back Kursk which is now under Ukraine's occupation, and has full control over four Ukrainian regions in the east, Zelensky is bent on joining NATO or some sort of collective security guarantee, even at the cost of losing some territory. To liberate Kursk Russia has deployed North Korean troops and Russians are slowly taking back territory in Kursk as well.

Both America and Russia admit that China is a factor in having lasting peace in the region. Last year

at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok Putin described Brazil, China and India as trusted partners and repeatedly thanked China for its balanced position on the conflict. To some extent the same is true of India. Much depends on Kyiv and its European supporters whether they would like to give peace a chance or continue their undeclared campaign of weakening Russia economically and militarily forever.

Unlike the Vietnam era global mass upsurge against war, anti-war movement is hardly making any news

anywhere in the world. Progressives do not organise masses against unjust war. Communists are swayed by nationalism and refuse to go against their ruling classes. Only anarchists, in some isolated pockets of Europe, issue statements urging workers to oppose war efforts of their rulers by way of stopping defence production and paralysing port operations. In absence of any physical protest their appeal makes little impact on toilers and war continues affecting ordinary people. □□□

06-02-2025

## COMMENT

### NIA Raids

ON DECEMBER 20, 2024, THE National Investigation Agency (NIA) conducted raids on democratic rights activists across Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. Gestapo-like outfit NIA raided the house of labour rights activists Rampal Singh, his sisters Rajveer Kaur (Member of Forum Against Corporatisation and Militarisation-FACAM), Harveer Kaur from Punjab Students Union and Mother Swaranjeet Singh from Pendu Khet Majdoor Union, Punjab, in Gandher Village of Shri Muktsar Distict of Punjab. Raids were also conducted at Gannaur, Sonipat at the family residence of Bindu Ram from Manesar General Majdoor Sangh, Haryana. In Okhla, the NIA raided the office of DGMF (Delhi General Mazdoor Front), where Priyanshu Kashyap and Ajay Kumar were working. House of Jagdish, Ex General Secretary of Delhi General Mazdoor Front was also raided. Simulta-

neously, house of Damanpreet Singh, the ex-president of Students for Society (SFS) in Patiala and Shri, an anti-displacement activist who was residing in Delhi, was also raided. These activists have been active in the organised struggle against exploitative and oppressive state policies and practices.

Intellectuals, professors, lawyers, journalists, and students who speak for the democratic rights of people are being targeted by the Central Government under the notorious 'Surajkund Scheme' which aims to eradicate "**Naxalism of the pen**", as a pretext to eliminate any voice that demands alternative development model for people and ideologies that challenge the exploitative ruling classes. These NIA raids are supposedly conducted in connection to FIR No. RC-01/2023 NIA Lucknow, which was also used to falsely implicate advocate and Anti-displacement activist

Ajay Kumar in August of this year. Ajay Kumar had worked with the likes of Father Stan Swamy and Dr G N Saibaba to oppose operation Green-Hunt. With this Lucknow Conspiracy Case, the NIA is trying to

create another Bhima Koregaon conspiracy case to crash all resistance against the anti-people policies of the State, this time under the fictitious "attempt to revive the Northern Regional Bureau of CPI (Maoist)".

In truth the NIA has been conducting raids all over the country. The persons in power have intensified the corporate loot of India's natural resources in Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh and corporatisation of the agricultural sector across the country, particularly in North India. While the ruling classes benefit from exploitation, the masses lack access to even basic needs. This severe exploitation and oppression have bred fierce resistance from the Indian masses and have shaken the ruling classes to the core, who have resorted to the most fascistic repression of the people's movements in India.

The NIA, formed in 2008 as a supposed counter-terrorism agency, has been red-tagging, targeting, and suppressing activists since its inception. The BJP led central government utilising the NIA is resorting to all sorts of repression. Under the circumstances of the growing dissent and opposition in the country, it trembles even at the very noise of rustling leaves. □□□

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## NOTE

## Budget in Brief

*A Correspondent writes:*

**I**N THE FIRST FULL BUDGET of Modi 3.0 Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has made income up to Rs 12 lakh tax-free. Along with this, the benefit of standard deduction of Rs 75,000 will be available. Those who are cheering about Modi's middle-class friendly budget simply fail to read between the lines. The budget does not offer a realistic road map to resolve the critical problems of unemployment, poor pay packages and under-skilling.

With the Bihar assembly elections due at the end of the year, Modi's 'budget bonanza' for the middle class could not have been better timed. Then Bihar gets extra attention in project allocation because Modi's party is in alliance with JD (U), both at the centre and in the state.

Sitharaman's budget document shows that the allocation priority that should be given to the social sector is missing—particularly in respect to merit goods such as quality school education, good healthcare, and adequate nutrition that benefit society as well as individuals.

For the 2025-'26 financial year, social services account for only 6% of the budget, at an allocation of Rs 1.98 lakh crores. The allocation for education at Rs 78572 crore, down from Rs 81,000 crore allocated in 2023-'24.

The allocation for sanitation has dropped to Rs 26,000 crore for 2025-26 from Rs 64,000 crore this year, as per the annual financial statement of the budget.

For a country where 35.5% of children suffer from stunting and around 57%, of women suffer from anemia, the allocation for the

Poshan 2.0 scheme to battle malnutrition and improve health, wellness, and immunity through community engagement, outreach, behavioural change, and advocacy has barely increased—to Rs 21,960 crore from Rs 21,200 crore this year as per the Annual Financial statement.

This flies in the face of the finance minister's claim in the speech where she said that "the cost norms for the nutritional support of 80 million children, 10 million pregnant and lactating women under the Poshan 2.0 programme will be enhanced appropriately".

The gap between rhetoric and reality is glaring in social sector allocations.

While the personal tax collection in 2024-'25 increased by 19%, from the previous year, in the case of corporate tax, the increase was only 7%. Concessions to big businesses and corporate tax incentive in the past few years have not spurred private investment and led to job creation.

Neither has the promised upgrade of 1,000 Indian Institutes of Technology started. This is a serious setback to enhancing the skills of workers, which would be critical to improving their compensation package.

The CMIE's last report in December puts the unemployment percentage at 7.8%. The India Employment Report 2024 noted that casual workers, who constitute 25% of the workforce, get a monthly wage of about Rs 4,712. Those in the self-employed category (who form 42% of the workforce) earn around Rs 6,843 per month. Then Gig workers are not recognised as workers; they

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are 'partners'. In other words they have no legal protection as per labour laws.

What is needed is to change in allocation priority towards human capability development, greater investment in education, and a big push to skilling to complement the massive allocation the government has been making in economic infrastructure, spending nearly 23 % of the budget.

Free food grains for the poor, sops for farmers and tax cuts for the middle class may bring Modi a political dividend but his claimed goal of Viksit Bharat will not be realised.

Meanwhile, foreign direct investment limits for the insurance sector have been increased from 74 percent to 100 percent and insurance employees are panicked as they fear further curtailment of job opportunities in this sector. □□□

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## THE END OF BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY

## The Road to Fascism in Trump's America

**Vinod Mubayi**

**A** FEW DECADES AGO, when the Soviet Union imploded leaving the US as the sole global hegemon, ideologues in the liberal, free-market constitutional democracy of the United States celebrated what they called “the end of history.” By this they meant the bourgeois democratic order based on a free market operating under a system of laws guaranteed by a constitution was immutable, destined to be the future of humanity. A few days of the Second Coming of Donald Trump seem to have put paid to the notion of eternal bourgeois democracy quite decisively. Instead, Trump has acted in classic fascist fashion that completely subverts the normal procedures of bourgeois democracy.

Trump stated earlier that he would be a dictator on Day 1 and he was true to his word. In addition to pardoning 1,600 criminals from the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 riots, Trump issued an unconstitutional immigration order denying birthright citizenship, a violation of the 14th amendment of the Constitution that guarantees citizenship to anyone born in the United States. Trump also restored the order from his first term that created a new classification for federal civil servants—Schedule F—that would end civil service protec-

tions and allow him to remove tens of thousands from the federal payroll.

By pardoning over 1600 people convicted of violent crimes, including grievously assaulting law enforcement officers on duty on Jan 6, 2020, many of whom had pled guilty and been sentenced to long prison terms, shortly after being inaugurated, Trump, a convicted felon himself, showed the whole world clearly the fragility of the legal order in a so-called nation of laws. Compounding this fragility is the fact that almost no elected member of Congress belonging to the political party that currently controls both the Senate and the House of Representatives expressed any disapproval of Trump's pardons despite the fact that several of them were in acute danger of being assaulted on Jan 6 themselves when the violent mob instigated by Trump forced its way into the Capitol building. Their subservience to Trump evokes shades of the fealty pledged by Nazi Party political leaders to Adolf Hitler.

In a bizarre fashion, Trump was quoted by the *New York Times* (NYT) as saying that in his clemency order he tried to recast Jan 6 as a “day of love” and said the order would “end a grave national injustice that has been perpetrated upon the American people over the last four years” and begin “a process of national reconciliation. “However, NYT also quoted a federal judge who repudiated Trump's twisted logic. In a written court order Judge Beryl A. Howell stated: “No ‘national injustice’ occurred here, just as no outcome-determinative election fraud occurred in the 2020 presidential

election, no ‘process of national reconciliation’ can begin when poor losers, whose preferred candidate loses an election, are glorified for disrupting a constitutionally mandated proceeding in Congress and doing so with impunity. “This court,” Judge Howell concluded, “cannot let stand the revisionist myth relayed in this presidential pronouncement.”

Not content with overturning established legal judgments, Trump went on to issue a slew of new presidential orders touching almost all aspects of life in the US where the federal government plays a role, ranging from science policy to environmental policy, immigration, health issues, energy policy, gender concerns, regulatory concerns, climate change, and foreign aid.

As expected, Trump ordered US withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement. Trump and his cohorts do not believe in the established science of climate change caused largely by greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the burning of fossil fuels, oil, gas and coal. Trump also declared a national energy emergency in the US that allows his government to promote fossil fuel energy projects, such as coal and natural gas based power plants, liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminals, drilling on protected Federal lands and so on. Trump's actions in the energy sector hew closely to the agenda of Project 2025, a kind of Republican Party manifesto directing federal government actions in a Trump second term. The US is by far the largest historical cumulative carbon emitter; it is currently the No 2 annual emitter behind China which is No 1 (India is No 3 currently). The US is also the world's largest oil and gas producer. Encouraging and promoting more fossil fuel production as Trump is doing with his “Drill, baby drill” rhetoric, should

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be regarded as nothing short of insane when global warming is emerging worldwide as a harbinger of devastating climate change and 2024 was the hottest year in recorded world history.

Trump also signed an order to withdraw the United States from the World Health Organisation (WHO), a United Nations agency responsible for global health. This was expected to show Trump and his cohorts' contempt for international agencies and pander to "America First" sentiments.

The fascistic nature of Trump's orders is fully demonstrated by his order to deport all *undocumented* immigrants possibly with the help of the US military, all 11 million of them, which as many observers have pointed out is a logistical impossibility over any foreseeable future time period certainly the four remaining years of Trump's term. But, as Nobel prize winning economist Paul Krugman writes in his blog "As the official immigrant crackdown ramps up, we're also going to see a lot of vigilantism... All of this will be ugly and scary. America may very quickly become a nation in which everyone — or at least every nonwhite—feels the need to carry proof of legal residence with them wherever they go, and even having the right papers may not protect you from detention or vigilante violence." Krugman predicts that this crackdown is going to have very negative economic impacts. Almost half of the workforce in the US farm sector consists of undocumented aliens and their absence, either due to deportation or their fear of coming to work, will lead to an acute farm labor shortage and cause food prices to skyrocket. Also, *undocumented* aliens account for 25-30% of labor in the construction industry and their removal will also cause major problems.

Trump's order cancelling birth-

right citizenship as granted in the Fourteenth Amendment to the US constitution was temporarily blocked by a federal judge who termed it "blatantly unconstitutional." This issue is certain to be appealed all the way to the US Supreme Court.

In another executive order Trump revoked the federal contractor non-discrimination executive order, EO 11246, signed by Lyndon Johnson in 1965 that protected employees of businesses seeking federal contracts from discrimination. Trump and his father were charged under this order with discrimination against blacks and Hispanics in their federal housing projects in the 1970s and it is very likely that Trump has felt a grievance against it ever since.

Another Trump order mandated removal of regulatory burdens on the fossil fuel and other energy and mining industries. It also revoked 12 climate related executive orders signed by Biden and halted federal funds for building infrastructure for electric vehicles.

Unlike most presidential inaugural speeches that try to bring the country together after a partisan political campaign, Trump's speech lacked any promises of national unity, or a toning down of divisive political rhetoric. Trump was brutally upfront with what he wanted to happen: dismantle the regulatory state and expand the imperial state. No doubt, the lowest class of American society, which now includes the millions of undocumented immigrants, will pay the price of this vision in terms of their health and living standards and persecution by a fascist, police state.

On the international front, aka maintaining or enlarging the global US empire, Trump is literally harking back to the imperialist rhetoric of the 1890s by invoking Manifest Destiny and making claims to annex Greenland, the Panama Canal, parts

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of northern Mexico and even Canada to the United States. In addition, his many threats to impose tariffs on imports are political threats aimed at intimidating foreign countries to alter policies or behaviours that Trump dislikes. Thus, when Colombia objected to and banned US military planes carrying Colombians deported from the US as undocumented aliens, Trump was reported to have immediately threatened severe 25% tariffs on Colombian exports, sanctions on its banking and financial sectors and visa restrictions on Colombian government officials that forced Colombian President Petro to change course. (Colombian media had a very different version of this episode. They wrote that President Petro objected to Colombian deportees coming back to Colombia like prisoners on US military planes so he dispatched Colombian military planes to bring his countrymen in a dignified manner back to Colombia). This is the opening salvo of usual fascist or imperialist behavior that, in the past, was usually followed by military action if the target country resisted. Indeed, this is very much part of US history in the 19th and 20th centuries that Trump is attempting to reprise rhetorically at this moment; seizing Texas from Mexico, invading Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico to oust

the Spanish empire, invading Haiti (multiple times) and the Dominican Republic, installing US puppet regimes in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and promoting or organizing military coups to overthrow governments deemed unfriendly to US political or military interests like Chile in 1971. Trump's bluster follows this pattern although it is unclear whether military action to seize territory or install puppets is feasible, much less sustainable, any more as the experience of Iraq and Afghanistan indicate.

When it comes to India, that touts itself as the world's largest democracy, a poll by the Pew organization reported that the Indian public welcomed Trump's victory by the largest margin compared to the people of all other major countries. While the coverage of this poll could be questioned, considering that Modi had frequently referred to Trump as his best friend, this result is understandable, although it is pertinent to ask whether this sentiment is reciprocated, either by Trump or his wider entourage. The Indian media breathlessly focused on whether Modi, who is styled by his followers as the *vishwaguru* (world's guru) would be invited to Trump's inaugural. The difference in power status was revealed when China's Xi Jinping was formally invited although he declined to attend while Modi was not invited. Another Pew poll carried out in the US reveals that India has the third highest number, 725,000, of illegal immigrants in the US behind only Mexico and El Salvador, with the largest number of illegals thought to be coming from the *vishwaguru's* home state, Gujarat. Meanwhile, the *goddi* (lapdog) media in India highlights the 18,000 illegal immigrants (a mere 2% of the total) that India will agree to take back from the US when Modi talked with Trump on the phone and focuses on a possible

visit by Modi to the US in February, while it ignores why middle class Gujaratis with some assets, along with others from India, who can afford to pay many lakhs to smugglers are so desperate to migrate illegally to the US even at the cost of their lives. Is the Gujarat "model of development" not all that it is cracked up to be? It is also revealing that among the blizzard of executive orders Trump unleashed in the last week there was no cancellation yet of the cases against Adani and his cohorts or against the (former?) RAW agent that were launched by the US Dept of Justice under the Biden Administration. While this may well happen after the *vishwaguru* meets with Trump and pleads for his pal Adani it would be wise not to bet on it with someone as transactional as Trump. The BRICS compact, of which India is a founding member, has come under severe criticism from Trump and he has already threatened tariffs on India, China and Brazil if they don't allow unhindered, untaxed import of US goods.

How feasible Trump's fascist visions for America are in practice is addressed in an article in the progressive magazine *Jacobin* by columnist Branko Marcetic who emphasises the contradictory nature of Trump's orders:

"One of Trump's signature issues, massive across-the-board tariffs on imports from the United States' two closest neighbours and China, is tipped to make everything from vegetables and beer to toys, cars, and a host of other consumer goods more expensive. At the same time, the centerpiece of his domestic agenda is another tax cut for the rich, which congressional Republicans plan to pay for by taking a hatchet to safety net programmes like Medicare and Medicaid. This self-contradictory effort has actually already begun". Maybe *the* funda-

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mental contradiction at the heart of Trump's coming presidency is that he campaigned as the working man's champion against the Washington swamp but has now handed the reins of government over to a group of creatures from that same swamp, namely the record thirteen billionaires named to his cabinet and the numerous others he gifted front-row seats to his inauguration to. His machine-gun spray of executive orders has so far overwhelmingly ad-

vanced the goals of the same corporate-driven Project 2025 he thought was so politically toxic he distanced himself from it during the campaign.

For one, cracks are already starting to show in Trump's coalition, having appeared before he was even inaugurated. Late last year, a nasty split formed between the immigration-restrictionist, "America First" segment of his support, and the H-1B visa-supporting billionaire cohort, represented by people like Elon Musk.

Trump is doing all this, and engaging in breathtaking new levels of graft, at the same time that a recent poll purporting to show public support for some of Trump's views also found that large majorities of Americans across party lines believe the US political system is broken and exists to benefit the wealthy and elite. This poses a major possible vulnerability for Trump as he proceeds with what is shaping up to be a plutocratic agenda." □□□

#### DAVOS—"TAX THE SUPER RICH"

## Billionaires in Pursuit of Equality

*Ashok Nag*

**M**ILTON FRIEDMAN asserted in his 1962 book *Capitalism and Freedom*, "A society that puts equality before freedom will get neither. A society that puts freedom before equality will get a high degree of both." This firm belief in market capitalism is no longer justifiable, as 62 years later, societies have become more unequal, and the market has not become more competitive. The growing gap between the rich and poor across nations has raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of market capitalism as the sole economic system.

The World Inequality report 2022, published by The World Inequality Lab, gives a comprehensive data driven summary of the present level of global inequality. The main findings of this report are:

1. The richest 10% of the global population currently takes 52% of global income, as against 8.5% earned by the bottom 50%.
2. Global inequality becomes more pronounced when we consider the distribution of wealth. The poorest half of the global population owns only 2% of total assets (measured in terms of PPP

USD), while the richest ten percent controls 76% of the wealth. The average value of assets owned by an individual in the bottom 50% is just US\$ 4,100, while an individual in the top 10% owns an average of US\$ 771,300

3. In the USA, the top 10% has increased their income share from 34% in 1980 to 45% in 2021 and a drop in the bottom 50% (from 19% to 13%). As regards wealth, the share of the bottom 50% is as low as 1.5% as against 70.7% of the top 10%.
4. Although income inequality of China is little less than that of the USA and India, in terms of wealth inequality it is at par with USA. The income share ratio of the top 10% to the bottom 50% is 14 in China as compared to the corresponding shares in India (21) and USA (17). In terms of inequality of wealth, China is at par with USA.

The sustainability of this level of inequality, both in terms of wealth and income, without any social upheaval, is of deep concern to the advocates of market capitalism with a reform. The origin of the idea of

'stakeholder capitalism' by Klaus Schwab, stems from this concern. Klaus Schwab, a professor and founder of the World Economic Forum (WEF) started an annual business conference in 1971 in Davos, a ski resort, near Zurich, Switzerland to bring together all stakeholders, as identified by him, on a single platform. The stakeholders are- Governments, Civil Society (including but not limited to, Unions, NGOs, schools, Universities, religious organisations), Business enterprises (including corporates, small and medium size enterprises, free lancers amongst others), and the International Community (including UN, WHO, OECD etc.).

One fundamental assumption of this concept of stakeholder capitalism is-"Private individuals and companies must be able to innovate and compete freely". The WEF has more than 100 strategic partners, apparently, "each selected for their commitment to improving the state of the world" It is difficult to find anything specific about social concern of these multinationals, except their relentless pursuit of higher market share and profit. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this concept of Stakeholder Capitalism is a perfect example of a Bengali proverb—a stone bowl made up of gold.

Along with this movement for Stakeholder Capitalism, groups of

wealthy millionaires in developed countries have started a parallel movement for higher tax on super-rich to mitigate the social abhorrence for prevailing extreme inequality in the advanced countries. The organisation spearheading this movement is Patriotic Millionaires, founded in 2010 by Erica Payne. Members of the Patriotic Millionaires are business people, investors, and philanthropists with annual incomes of at least \$1 million and/or assets of at least \$5 million. The motto of this organisation is “a highly progressive tax system, a livable minimum wage, and equal political representation for all citizens.”

The organisation started a signature campaign, titled “Proud to Pay More”, an open letter to the participants of Davos 2025. The letter starts with the following lines:

*We are surprised that you have failed to answer a simple question that we have been asking for three years: when will you tax extreme wealth? If elected representatives of*

*the world's leading economies do not take steps to address the dramatic rise of economic inequality, the consequences will continue to be catastrophic for society.*

The letter ends with the following lines:

The true measure of a society can be found, not just in how it treats its most vulnerable, but in what it asks of its wealthiest members. Our future is one of tax pride, or economic shame. That's the choice.

*We ask you to take this necessary and inevitable step before it's too late. Make your countries proud. Tax extreme wealth.*

260 millionaires and billionaires have signed this letter. The letter calls for a 2% tax on people with more than \$10 million wealth.

This exhortation to fellow millionaires by an enlightened section of the wealthy citizen may sound a great leap forward for making the society equal. However, a little digging into this proposal would prove

that all these pro-poor policy recommendations are “full of sound and fury” signifying nothing for the wretched of the society. According to Forbes data on billionaires, the total wealth of the USA billionaires in 2022 was 4.7 trillion USD. A 2% wealth tax only on these billionaires would have fetched in that year only 94.02 billion USD. If one considers all millionaires, their total wealth, assuming all of them belongs to top 10% of the wealth owners, would have been 6.46 trillion in 2022. A 2% wealth tax on them would have fetched at the most 130 billion USD. In 2022, the total US Tax receipts worked up to 4.54 trillion USD. Thus, around 130 billion wealth tax from rich would add only 2.8% to the existing kitty. It is anybody's guess how much dent it will make to the existing inequality. The US newspaper Boston Globe has best described these “Tax the Super Rich” people as those who are “uncomfortable with having fortunes in a world of misfortune.” □□□

## MORE ON BENEGAL

### An Artist's Reflective Voyage through the Lens

**Arijit Ray**

**I**N REFUSING TO PREACH, YET being intrepid to probe, there lies a deeper state of consciousness in the realm of true art. He created a profound cinematic journey in that very space what could give the efficacious ‘voice’ to countless characters of the country. Shyam Benegal, one of India's most celebrated cinema-creator, is widely regarded as the pioneering figure in what then emerged as to be known as ‘New Wave’ Indian ‘Parallel Cinema’ encapsulating its counter response to the song and dance-bundled-phenomenologically hyper-commercial masala fried mainstream Bollywood Hindi movies of formulaic story tell-

ing. Although at the stroke of post-independence scenario of myriad changes, the Holy trinity of Ray-Ghatak-Sen had already sowed the seminal seeds in country's cinematic land by then around a decade and half ago. And Shyam Benegal, thus, could take the ‘independent’ impetus from there to germinate those seeds more into the further lands of a complete different socio-geographical realities. From the very essence of his first film, ‘Ankur’, Benegal showed his exceptional vision as a socially-committed artist by addressing some of the most thought provocative issues submerging with the lenses through the cinematograph.

Born on 14 December, 1934, at Trimulgherry, Secunderabad, having had legendary Guru Dutt as second cousin, Shyam Sunder Benegal showed his fascinating interests towards the celluloid since his later childhood. Albeit, he could never grant this genuine interests to that certain high level from where he can think that filmmaking can be the potential option to live for. And right then a remarkable event happened in his life! In this today's world of gigantic ‘virtual space’ where people and their livings are obnoxiously determined by their social media posts and created digital-dystopia’ by Zuckerberg, Musk and where also the actual co-ordinate geometry of true cinema aca art can hardly be located at the pulse of utter bewilderment, this simple true story of Shyam Benegal's life could give the



glimpses of sheer light to the all budding artists out there. This real story is from the time when Shyam was in his university days and visited Kolkata to participate in an interstate swimming competition. And during then, upon over a strong suggestion coming from his uncle, who used to live there, he went on to see a film, made by a debutant director of that time, on a big screen at the theatre hall. Watching that film gave “Bombardment” in his head! And he rushed to buy the next ticket immediately of the next show and next also. Thus he watched the film 3 times in a single day and eventually 8 times during his that tenure of Kolkata’ staying, as he never saw something of this level of artistic height before. The name of the film was ‘Pather Pachali’ by Satyajit Ray!

Shyam Benegal always believed in the true spirit of life and therefore the envisioning spirit of making art till the very end. In his last given public interview thus he could say alike “*I never stop, until of course nature stops me*”. Even one could get to see the joyous expression of grace at his face just a week before of his passing during the celebration of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, surrounded by some great actors who acted in his film throughout the long span of different times included Nasiruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi. To write obituary is not easy. But Shyam own-self made it easier to look it through life, synthesising at art and vice versa.

Shyam Benegal’s legacy as a filmmaker is often regarded as a pivotal cornerstone in Indian ‘Hindi’ Cinema to represent the world cinema in a true sense. Some common threads and paradigms of thematic exploration of Benegal’s works can well be traced vividly. Some significant among these are being illustrated here very briefly.

### **Socio-Political underpinnings along with Celluloid Realism**

Celluloid realism marked a new reigning beginning in the works where Benegal could successfully created the ecosystem, which was sought to extricate Indian cinema from the strait-jacket of melodramatic escapism. His unflinching depiction as a realist storyteller in portraying of systemic inequities and other socio-political nuances—epitomised his significant style. His debut film one of most important seminal work, ‘Ankur’, regarded as one of landmark film in Indian Cinema, delves into the fetid underbelly of feudalism, caste orientation, patriarchal oppression, power hierarchy and social injustice-inequality presenting a tableau of grim realities of the real life.

### **Cinematic Gazing on Margins**

Benegal’s cinema possesses an unsparing gaze, which has often been trained on society’s most marginalised sects. Whether, in Ankur’s portrayal of Dalit woman’s quiet defiance against feudal exploitation, or in Nishant (1975), the intersection of power, gender, and class unfolding in a rural setting, along with the collective uprising of the oppressed challenges entrenched patriarchy and feudal authority, or in ‘Manthan’ (1976) where the co-operative movement becomes a symbol of empowerment, portraying the collective spirit of farmers as they reclaim their dignity and agency against exploitative systems.

It is worth mentioning here that ‘Manthan’ was distributed by Gujarat co-operative milk federation limited where 500,000 farmers directly involved to fund as 2 rupees each to make this film as first crowd-founded film in a distinct manner of marginal involvement. This never happened in the history of cinema before in the entire world alike.

Furthermore one can see the plight of a sharecropper embodies

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the systemic exploitation of India’s agrarian underclass in rural Birbhum district of West Bengal in “Arohan” (1982), with Benegal’s lens capturing the quiet dignity of the oppressed even amidst despair.

In *Antarnaad* (1991) people can see how Benegal’s exploration of the *Swadhyay movement* showcases the spiritual awakening of marginalised communities, blending collective redemption with cultural introspection.

### **Gender Dynamics and Feminism in Frame**

The work of Shyam Benegal’s represent a nuanced and empathetic exploration of women’s lives in different strata, challenging patriarchal norms and highlighting their struggles, agency, and resilience. Where in *Ankur* one sees Laxmi, a Dalit woman, embodies silent strength, resisting the oppressive forces of caste, class, and patriarchy, on the other hand in *Bhumika* people can examine Usha’s journey through marriage, love, and professional life on the verge of woman’s quest for autonomy in a male-dominated society, reflecting her existential struggle for identity.

In *Mandi* (1983), people witness Benegal critiques societal hypocrisy on surrounding sex workers, and powerful nuanced portrayal of the women inside brothel as survivors with dignity and agency, resisting moralistic judgement.

Thus in a different context of circumlocution in *Sardari Begum* (1996), Benegal explores the challenges faced by women in the performing arts, addressing the intersections of tradition, modernity, and gender prejudice.

### **Cinema as Cultural Praxis with Paradigmatic Aesthetics**

New wave cinema, and particularly Benegal's oeuvre, can be understood through the Marxist concept of praxis with a cultural backdrop of wretched aesthetics where theory and action coalesce to produce meaningful change or self-provocative thoughts or realisation. Films like 'Ankur', 'Nishant', 'Manthan', 'Arohan', 'Mandi', 'Susman', 'Surajka Satvan Ghora' are not only the great cinematic story-telling narratives; they are also the acts of resistance, confronting the viewer with the stark realities of caste, patriarchy, feudalism, capitalism and consumerism while simultaneously imagining the possibility of emancipation.

### **Interior Vignette of Minorities- Benegal's 'Muslim Trilogy'**

Shyam Benegal's *Muslim Trilogy*-

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*Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996), and *Zubeidaa* (2001) portrays the nuanced realities of Muslim lives, emphasising identity, cultural heritage, and the intersection of personal and political struggles in India. In 'Mammo', the story of an aging woman displaced by Partition reflects the alienation and identity crisis faced by minorities in post-Independence India. In 'Sardari Begum', Benegal explores the challenges of a female Qawwali singer, addressing the constraints of tradition, gender, and societal prejudice within a minority community. In *Zubeidaa*, the titular character's struggle for freedom symbolises the broader tensions between individual aspirations and conservative familial expectations in a minority setting.

### **Bringing forth the pool of some of best talents into silver screen**

Shyam Benegal is celebrated and intensely known for either introducing or bringing forth prominently some of the finest and greatest talents to Indian cinema, actors who went on to redefine the craft of Hindi cinema on the silver screen. Some of the most significant names are Nasiruddin Shah, Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Om Puri, Anant Nag, Khulbhusan Kharbanda, Mohan Agase and Neena Gupta. His casting choices were deeply rooted in the actors' ability to embody complex characters, bridging the gap between realism and artistic brilliance. Benegal's mentorship nurtured a generation of performers who brought gravitas to Indian cinema, setting new benchmarks for acting in decades to come.

### **Insightful Psychological depth and Visual Tapestry**

Benegal's cinema is deeply humanistic, offering intricate portraits of Human relationships shaped by the deep essence of cultural, social, and psychological inter-forces. 'Suraj Ka Satva Ghora' (1993) is a fragmented

narrative that explores love, desire, and societal constraints and complication depicted in psychologically stimulant counter cross narrative style storytelling like Akira Kurosawa's famous 'Roshomon'. Here, Benegal examines the subjectivity of human experiences and the elusive nature of truth.

'Trikal' (1985) set in Goa during the post-colonial transition, is an atmospheric exploration of memory, nostalgia, and identity in a critically thought-provocative manner. The film's interpretative nonlinear structure with the entire epitomic details of Portuguese Christianity and myths as background reflects the fluidity of time and the complexity of human emotions.

Shyam Benegal, an incredibly brilliant raconteur, pioneering Cinema Artist's exceptionally colossal contribution to the Indian cinema, art and culture will be remembered globally in perpetuity. □□□

[Arijit Ray, Scholar and Faculty, Santiniketan / Bodhgaya]

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## THE RG KAR JUDGEMENT

## A Conviction That Raises More Questions Than Answers

*Deeptangshu Kar*

ON AUGUST 9, 2024, India woke up to a tragedy that shook the nation—a young doctor on duty at R G Kar Medical College & Hospital (RGKMCH), Kolkata, was brutally raped and murdered. The case sparked widespread outrage, triggering protests, media debates, and political interventions. Within months, the trial concluded with the conviction of Sanjay Rai under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) Sections 64, 66, and 103(1) for aggravated sexual assault and murder.

While the verdict brings a sense of closure, it raises crucial legal and systemic questions. Was justice served in full measure, or did the urgency to deliver a judgement overshadow the need for thorough scrutiny? This article critically examines the case's handling, the judgement's strengths and weaknesses, and its broader implications for women's safety and legal accountability in India.

The case moved at an unusually fast pace:

- **August 9, 2024:** FIR registered at Tala Police Station.
- **August 10, 2024:** Accused arrested.
- **October 7, 2024:** Charge-sheet filed.
- **November 4, 2024:** Charges framed.
- **January 18, 2025:** Verdict delivered.
- **January 20, 2025:** Sentencing.

While speed in sexual assault cases is desirable, it must not compromise due process. The urgency to convict brings up the crucial question: did it limit the defense's ability to build its

case? If that is so, it surely will raise concerns about fairness in a high-pressure trial environment.

The case saw an unusual sequence of investigative transitions:

1. Kolkata Police initially handled the case.
2. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) took over thereafter.
3. Subsequently, the Calcutta High Court transferred it to the CBI.

Such overlapping jurisdictions often create gaps in evidence handling. The judgement does not critically assess whether these transitions affected forensic reliability. Was the chain of custody for crucial evidence—DNA samples, CCTV footage, medical reports—maintained properly? Without addressing these concerns, the case risks setting a precedent where procedural lapses are overlooked in the name of swift justice.

The prosecution's case rested on three main pillars:

- **Forensic and medical reports** confirming sexual assault and fatal injuries.
- **Eyewitness testimonies**, particularly from the victim's father and colleagues.
- **Electronic evidence**, including CCTV footage and call records.

While forensic reports indicated sexual violence and homicide, the judgement does not explore potential inconsistencies in the medical opinions as were available for the criminal trial. There remains also the possibility that as multiple agencies have handled the investigation; it could have led to conflicting interpretations. The court does not criti-

cally engage with this possibility.

The victim's father's emotional testimony played a key role, but circumstantial evidence alone cannot substitute for concrete forensic proof. Additionally, it is apposite to indicate that the witnesses that have rendered testimonies in this trial are hardly such whom one can call "independent", therefore there remains a huge void vis-à-vis confirmation of crucial details of the ghastly incident by direct evidence. This is one of the weaknesses of this judgement, for which the investigative agency which was at the helm of investigation was primarily to be blamed.

In cases involving electronic evidence, courts must ensure compliance with Sections 58, 61 and 63 of the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam 2023, which mandate strict conditions for admissibility of digital records. The judgement does not clarify whether the forensic authenticity of CCTV footage and phone records was independently verified. In an era of deepfakes and digital manipulation, such oversight is concerning.

### **Strong on Conviction, Weak on Precedent**

The accused was convicted under:

- Section 64 BNS (Aggravated Rape)
- Section 66 BNS (Causing Death by Sexual Assault)
- Section 103(1) BNS (Murder)

However, the judgement lacks depth in analysing criminal intent—a key factor in distinguishing murder from culpable homicide. The judgement preferred not to explore much so as to establish what actually worked to develop the motive and intent of perpetrating such an inhumane criminal act in the mind of the accused, Sanjay Rai. Additionally, it does not cite relevant Supreme Court precedents, such as:

- **Mukesh & Anr. v. State**

**(Nirbhaya Case, 2020):** Guidelines on sentencing in rape-murder cases.

- **Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997):** Institutional responsibility for workplace safety.
- **Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum v. Union of India (1995):** Victim compensation frameworks.

By neglecting these references, the judgment missed an opportunity to strengthen legal reasoning and set a precedent for future cases.

Given the brutality of the crime—a young doctor on duty was raped and murdered—the question arises: Why was Sanjay Rai not awarded the death penalty? Why did the court sentence him to life imprisonment instead?

The death penalty in India is reserved for the 'rarest of the rare' cases—a doctrine established in the case of Bachan Singh v State of Punjab (1980). According to this judgement, capital punishment can only be imposed when:

- The crime is of exceptional depravity or heinousness, AND
- The accused shows no possibility of reformation.

This doctrine was later reaffirmed in the case of Machhi Singh v State of Punjab (1983), where the Supreme Court laid down key tests for determining whether a case qualifies as 'rarest of the rare':

1. **Manner of Commission**—Was the crime executed in an exceptionally brutal, grotesque, or inhuman manner?
2. **Motive**—Was the motive shocking to societal conscience?
3. **Nature of Victim**—Was the victim vulnerable (e.g., minor, disabled, helpless)?
4. **Impact on Society**—Did the crime create a deep societal impact or widespread terror?
5. **Possibility of Reform**—Can the convict be rehabilitated?

For example, the Nirbhaya case (2012) met these criteria, leading to the execution of the convicts. But did the RG Kar case meet the same threshold?

The RG Kar case, while horrific, did not meet all the criteria for the 'rarest of the rare' category, according to Justice Anirban Das, for the following reasons:

The victim was sexually assaulted and murdered, but as per the post-mortem report, the level of brutality was not on par with cases like Nirbhaya, where the victim was gang-raped, brutalised with an iron rod, and left for dead with fatal intestinal injuries. In this case, while rape and murder occurred, the judgement does not mention mutilation, post-mortem injuries, or sadistic elements beyond the sexual assault itself.

In the case of Dhananjoy Chatterjee v. State of West Bengal (1994), the Supreme Court awarded the death penalty due to the pre-planned nature of the attack and extreme cruelty. However, in the case of State of Maharashtra v Sukhdev Singh (1992), the Court ruled that while rape and murder were heinous, the death penalty is not automatic unless the crime exhibits extraordinary brutality.

#### **Sole Accused vs. Group Crime**

The Nirbhaya gangrape case involved multiple assailants, making it a predatory, premeditated act of extreme sexual violence. In the RG Kar case, the investigative agency could bring up only one accused (Sanjay Rai), and there was no prolonged torture, gang involvement, or planned assault. The court may have considered this a lesser degree of brutality.

#### **Pre-Meditation and Motive**

Courts consider whether the crime was pre-planned or committed in the heat of the moment. The judgement does not establish clear pre-meditation. Sanjay Rai did not lure the victim with an elaborate plan

like in cases where minors were kidnapped, raped, and killed. In the case of V Shankaran v State of Tamil Nadu (2022), the Supreme Court ruled that lack of premeditation is a mitigating factor in sentencing. In the RG Kar case, the crime was not deemed pre-planned, which weighed against awarding capital punishment.

#### **Possibility of Reform**

It is a trite law established by the Supreme Court that if a convict can be rehabilitated, the death penalty should not be imposed. The judgement does not suggest that Sanjay Rai is beyond reform—he had no prior convictions, no history of violent behaviour, and was not part of a criminal network. This aligns with the judgement of Santosh Bariyar v State of Maharashtra (2009), where the Supreme Court held that "if the convict shows any possibility of reform, life imprisonment should be preferred over capital punishment."

While the RG Kar case was horrific, the legal standards for capital punishment demand extreme brutality and irrefutable evidence that the convict is beyond reform. Some might argue that the murder of a doctor on duty warranted the harshest punishment to set an example and a death sentence would have sent a stronger deterrent message. However, the judiciary must balance retribution with justice. Given that the accused's actions, while heinous, did not reach the 'rarest of the rare' threshold, the court followed established principles of criminal jurisprudence. It must be reminded that despite mass outrage around this case, courts must sentence based on law, not emotions.

The father's testimony revealed that hospital authorities misled him about his daughter's condition before revealing her death. This raises critical questions: Was this an attempt to manage media outrage

before informing the family? Should medical institutions not have clear protocols for handling such cases? These questions remain unanswered.

The case saw active involvement from the West Bengal Chief Minister, who spoke directly to the victim's father. While political intervention may offer moral support, on most occasions what it actually transpires into is an undesired influence on the legal proceedings. The judgement does not tread into the trail of finding out whether the political pressures and overwhelming public sentiments impacted the neutrality of the investigation.

Eyewitnesses, including the victim's father, stated that authorities fast-tracked the cremation, bypassing standard procedures. This makes people to think: was this an attempt to prevent a second autopsy? If so, it reflects a dangerous precedent where evidence is destroyed before proper scrutiny. The judgement fails to delve deep into this possibility.

The victim was attacked inside

her workplace—a public hospital, a space meant for healing and care. The judgement does not recommend institutional reforms such as:

- Mandatory CCTV surveillance in critical areas.
- Improved security protocols for female staff on night shifts.
- Establishment of independent workplace harassment redressal mechanisms.

Though one can argue that these issues are already addressed by the Supreme Court in the suo motu cognisance case, Justice Anirban Das should have spared a few words in this regard, which could have gone long way in strengthening the jurisprudence on safety and security of women in workplaces.

This case echoes systemic issues from past sexual violence cases:

- Delayed and insensitive police response, as seen in the Unnao and Kathua rape cases.
- Failure to protect evidence, as in the Hathras gang-rape case.
- Lack of institutional accountability,

seen in the Bhopal shelter home abuse case.

Without police reforms, legal accountability, and a survivor-centric approach, high-profile convictions alone cannot fix a broken system.

While the conviction of the accused may bring relief, the RG Kar Rape Case judgement leaves serious gaps in legal and procedural scrutiny. Key concerns remain:

- Was the accused given adequate time to prepare his defence?
- Was digital evidence properly authenticated?
- Why were hospital authorities and the police not held accountable for lapses?

This case must serve as a wake-up call—not just for judicial efficiency but for systemic reforms in hospital safety, police accountability, and gender-sensitive legal processes. True justice is not just about conviction; it is about ensuring that no woman, anywhere, ever faces such horror again. □

*[Deeptangshu Kar is an advocate at Calcutta High Court]*

## PLIGHT OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

### Rona Wilson's Interview

*Tabassum Barnagarwala*

**A**T 53, RESEARCHER RONA Wilson is trying to pick up the pieces of the life he was forced to leave behind when he was arrested in the contentious Bhima Koregaon case six years and seven months ago.

His hair is graying, perhaps the most visible physical change since he was put in jail. Still intact, though, is his quiet smile. "The sense of time I lost is slowly sinking in," he said on January 31, four days after he walked out of Navi Mumbai's Taloja jail after fulfilling the conditions on which he had been granted bail.

"In prison, whether you like it or not, tea and food is coming at a

specific time. Everything is in order," he said. "Now that I am out, I am left on my own."

To begin with, since his bail conditions do not allow him to leave Mumbai, he is trying to find an affordable home to rent in the expensive city.

Wilson and Dalit rights activist Sudhir Dhawale were granted bail on January 8 after the Bombay High Court acknowledged that they had spent a long time in jail without trial or even the charges against them being framed.

Wilson, the public relations secretary of the Committee for Release of Political Prisoners, had been ar-

rested from his home in Delhi early in the morning of June 6, 2018. He was charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for allegedly being part of a conspiracy to instigate caste violence in the village of Bhima Koregaon near Pune on New Year's Day that year. Wilson was also accused of plotting to assassinate Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

He was among the five people arrested in the case that day from across the country.

Eventually, 16 academicians, activists, lawyers and writers would be arrested in the Bhima Koregaon case.

The authorities claimed that an incriminating letter written to a Maoist militant about assassinating Modi had been found on Wilson's laptop. But an independent digital forensics

firm in the US called Arsenal Consulting that reviewed the evidence claimed that the letter had been planted on Wilson's computer using sophisticated Pegasus spware.

At the time of his arrest, Wilson, then 47, had been planning to move to the United Kingdom to pursue a PhD at the University of Surrey. His topic was "The Fiction of the Muslim Other: State, Law and The Politics of Naming in Contemporary India."

Wilson had the first inkling of the challenges that lay ahead on April 17, 2018, when a posse of armed police officers entered his home at 5.50 am. Some of them held cameras with which to record the proceedings. He handed over his mobile phone, computer, and passwords for all social media and e-mail accounts to the police without hesitation.

"I realised later that was a mistake," he said.

A little over a month later, the day after returning from a family celebration in Kerala, Wilson was arrested. He had spent the previous two decades working on a campaign to assist political prisoners. Among them was SAR Geelani, the Delhi University professor who had been sentenced to death in the 2001 Parliament attack case, before being acquitted by the Supreme Court.

Wilson was also passionate about Adivisi rights and other human rights causes. This work, he surmises, brought him into the "cross hairs of the state".

His arrest, he suggests, was "a warning to everyone who wants to stand up, call out the [abuse of] state power".

In June 2018, when Wilson was arrested along with lawyer Surendra Gadling, Dalit rights activist Sudhir Dhawale, university professor Shoma Sen and Adivasi rights activist Mahesh Raut, he hoped that he and the others would be released quickly.

In fact Wilson recollects that when the Pune Police informed court that he was part of an alleged plot to assassinate the prime minister, he laughed at the seeming absurdity of the allegation.

But soon, that hope faded. In 2019, when the coalition government in Maharashtra that included the Bharatiya Janata Party lost power, the BJP central government transferred the case to the National Investigation Agency that was under its control.

"These were clear indicators of how long this would go on for," Wilson said. "Everywhere politics took precedence, and law and justice were mute spectators."

He said though the judiciary is supposed to safeguard a prisoner's rights, "procedures were by-passed and courts were just standing and watching".

In Pune's Yerwada prison, he was housed in the high-security egg-shaped "anda" cell. Sudhir Dhawale and lawyer Arun Ferreira, who had also been arrested in the Bhima Koregaon case, were in the same complex. So were gangsters Pappu Kalani and Nilesh Gaiwal and 1993 bomb blast convict Salim Shaikh.

The month before the nationwide Covid-19 lockdown was declared in March 2020, Wilson was moved to barrack number 3 in Navi Mumbai's Taloja prison.

The 45 prisoners in his barrack had to share two toilets. There were two others, but they did not work. "According to physical distancing norms, not more than 12 to 13 inmates should be in the barrack," Wilson said.

The prison hospital was woefully underequipped, with no ventilator or oxygen cylinders.

"How we survived the Covid phase is miraculous," Wilson said. "Those were extraordinary circumstances."

Though Wilson had worked for almost two decades on campaigns to highlight the injustice faced by political prisoners, his six years in jail gave him a clearer understanding of how the penal system really works.

"I have seen corruption in black-and-white, up close," he said.

For instance, to make a hospital visit, prisoners had to bribe the prison staff with amounts ranging from Rs 10,000 to Rs 30,000, he said.

The inadequate medical care took a hard toll on some of the others accused in the Bhima Koregaon case. Wilson said that the prison staff did not change poet Varavara Rao's catheter as often as required, leading to an infection.

"By the time it went to court and they ordered the prison authority to look into it, there was already a delay," he said.

English professor Hany Babu had a near-miss when he developed a severe viral infection in his eye. "This was during the Covid-19 pandemic," said Wilson. "Because of the pressure from outside, he was taken to JJ Hospital where doctors said if it had been delayed for even few hours; the virus would have reached his brain."

The most tragic example was that of 84-year-old Jesuit priest Stan Swamy, who died in custody in 2021 after the court delayed hearings on granting him medical bail, Wilson said.

While in prison, Wilson helped other inmates write legal applications since many were too poor to afford lawyers. Many were uneducated and had no idea about the

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status of their cases, he said. Till the day before he was released, inmates were approaching him to write legal applications.

His time in jail also gave Wilson a sense of the stigma attached to people who have been in jail after they are released. Months after some prisoners had been acquitted; he would find them behind bars again.

“In Taloja prison I met one man we had helped get acquitted while we were in Pune prison,” Wilson said. He was back for petty theft. “He said, ‘Koi naukri nahi deta

hai,” said Wilson. Nobody will give me a job.

Since his release, relatives and friends, several from other parts of the country, have flocked to see Wilson. But he is yet to meet his elderly mother who lives in Kerala. She is worried about him continuing his work on human rights.

His arrest, Wilson said, has affected her badly. “She looks thin, frail, emaciated,” he said.

During his six years in prison, he received temporary bail just once—in 2021.

Had he not been jailed, Wilson said, he would perhaps have finished his PhD and started teaching, in addition to continuing his work for Adivasi rights and campaigning for justice for political prisoners.

Did he lose hope at any point? “No no, definitely not,” Wilson said with a smile. “Compared to us, there were others who had far greater issues in prison. Nobody to represent them, nobody to meet them, broken families.”

For now, Rona Wilson plans to restart work on enrolling for a PhD. □

[Source: Scroll.in]

## LETTERS

### Going off Track?

Now Patient has become customer, Medical has become commercial, water is sold and bought due to fear of ill-health, students have become vote banks and textbook content has become political battleground. People have been made to forget—that which unites is strength and that which divides is weakness. Where are people heading with respect to nation building?

No doubt AI makes life simpler, saves time, but free time is most dangerous. If 10 hours work is completed in 1 minute, the question is how can youth be made to use excess time, 9 hours & 59 minutes productively by channeling and focusing their effort, energy and time?

In olden era guidelines were followed on -what products and services could be traded and what should not. *Now slowly are people going off-TRACK?*

*Well, bad things can be turned into good. It is said a room without books is like body without soul. Innovations like Mobile Book Libraries on bicycles, bullock-carts, tractors or magazines delivered by drones inculcates reading habits. As AI saves time the society needs more books to keep the youth occupied in excess free time, as free time is*

*most dangerous.*

**T S Karthik, Chennai**

### Harpal Brar

INDIAN communist, politician, writer and businessman Harpal Brar has died aged 85.

The founder and chairman of the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist) died on January 25, 2025 in Mohali, Punjab, India.

Paying tribute, the Indian Workers' Association (IWA) said: “It is with deep regret that [we] share the news of Comrade Harpal Singh Brar’s sad demise.

“Comrade Harpal had struggled for a number of years from a spinal operation.

“He had written many books, from Perestroika onwards, and edited Lalkar,” the Marxist-Leninist journal.

“He was a brave, courageous and charismatic leader with a super intellect; a powerful orator who held his audience spell bound; full of love and humour.

“Our thoughts are with his family, Macel, Ella, Ranjit, Jyoti, Carlos, and his grandchildren.

“The IWA extends its sympathies and condolences to all Harpal’s comrades, friends and members of his extended family.

“We shall remember him for his lifelong contribution and commitment to the emancipation of humanity.

**Morning Star, London**

### Fighting for Citizenship

For those ensnared in the ruthless NRC process, the threat of losing their citizenship is not just a legal ordeal—it is a personal catastrophe. Lives are upended, identities stripped away, and the emotional wounds linger long after the fight.

Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP), has been on the frontline for over five years, witnessing this suffering firsthand. CJP’s Assam Team doesn’t just provide legal aid—it fights for dignity, for hope, for survival.

CJP’s efforts include:

- Providing critical legal aid in foreigners’ tribunals and courts.
- Offering counselling and dialogue to bring hope to those in despair.
- Delivering para-legal and direct legal support to individuals and families in need.

The clock is ticking. Lives hang in the balance. CJP needs your help—NOW.

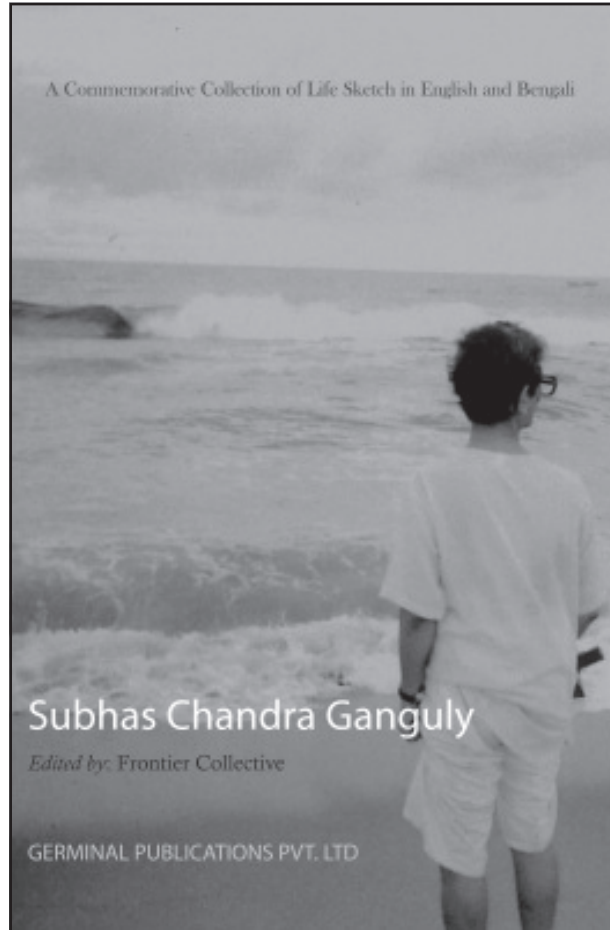
Every contribution ensures that another innocent person is not left defenceless. Act today.

Your support can transform lives.

**CJP**

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