

# frontier

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Founder-Editor : **SAMAR SEN**

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Editor : **TIMIR BASU**Assistant Editor : **Subhasis Mukherjee**

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E-mail : [frontierweekly@yahoo.co.in](mailto:frontierweekly@yahoo.co.in)  
[frontierweekly@hotmail.com](mailto:frontierweekly@hotmail.com)

Website: <https://www.frontierweekly.com>  
Telephone : 2530-0065

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

## *Reading Between the Lines?*

**P**OLL DEBACLE HAS COMPOUNDED ORGANISATIONAL CRISIS in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The apparent rift between BJP and its ideological mentor Rashtriyaswayam Sevak Sangh [RSS] seems to be widening with every passing day. Modi is no longer a blue-eyed darling of Nagpur. Then they don't know how to reconcile themselves with unexpected loss in Uttar Pradesh which actually decides the shape of Indian parliament. In truth UP has a tradition of supplying India's prime ministers since the days of Nehru. Modi was a notable exception. As the crisis in the party deepens they are talking in multiple voices.

They are trying to find out a scapegoat for their election disaster in UP while debating whether the party is bigger than the government. It's a meaningless exercise though. The factional fight in UP BJP is more about how to capture chair by using the pretext of set-back in elections. It is not going to weaken BJP politically much but the RSS question is different.

Very recently RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat in a veiled attack on Modi said some people despite being human lacked human qualities and they should inculcate it first. 'Before God, be human'. That was the message from Bhagwat. He was actually addressing a village-level workers' meeting at Bishnupur in Jharkhand's Gumla district. The pointed remark by Bhagwat was a clear indication that RSS boss was not "liking the pride and arrogance" of Modi.

During election campaign Modi began to believe himself to be a "non-biological" person sent to the world by God. The statement was so nonsensical and ludicrous that even the Modi worshippers in the pliant media didn't take much interest in it. That RSS was not subscribing to Modi's absurd idea is now clear from Bhagwat's plain and simple talk.

For one thing Modi has been assiduously trying to build a personality cult around him ever since he became prime minister in 2014 while legalising his dictatorial style of functioning by every possible means. Many in the saffron party see in Modi's authoritarian approach to popular issues as the real reason for their electoral defeat and failure to secure absolute majority. Whether Modi is going to fend his ways remains to be seen.

Modi and his important cabinet ministers have RSS background. At one stage one of his associates expressed his dissatisfaction with RSS and hoped to win elections without their support. But the murmur subsided in no time.

It is not that easy to deny their RSS past and defy the dictate of the supreme authority. Not that only one factor is responsible for BJP's poor show in Parliamentary poll; there are many and Modi is one.

Because of increasing discord in BJP, Congress is reading too much between the lines. To over-read the verdict as a validation of its apocalyptic framing of constitution-in-danger doesn't reflect the ground reality. They have nothing to cheer

about as there won't be any split, not to speak of any vertical split in the saffron establishment without which it will be business as usual.

The fact is that not just the BJP, even the Congress -led Opposition will be deluded if it convinces itself that it has won. This fractured election mandate is made of many parts that must be pieced together state by state, which behaved differently. No doubt the BJP plunged by 63 seats with a decline of less than 0.7

percent in its national vote share than from 2019, and Congress raised its vote share by only 1.7 percent to nearly double its tally of seats from 52 to 99. What it means is that the work of the Opposition is not yet done. What is more they are deriving comfort from their limited success only to allow BJP to regroup itself without changing its basic orientation of appeasing the corporate lobby and spreading the culture of hatred. □□□ 21-07-2024

## COMMENT

### The 'Baba' Phenomenon

THE BABA PHENOMENON IS neither unique nor exclusive to India. Though of course their following has gone up in recent times. The notorious ones like Asaram Bapu and Gurmeet Ram Rahim Insan are cooling their heels in jails for charges like rape and murder. Baba Ramdev has been reprimanded by the Supreme Court for his confident undermining of Modern medicine, Sri Sri Ravishanker was involved in damaging ecology of river Yamuna, Jaggi Vasudev's Ashrams have various criminal charges as well. What is common among these Babas is their astounding self confidence, wealth and promotion of blind faith.

The influence of such people is phenomenal in India. These preachers do wear the garb of religion. They do not belong to the formal clergy, which is part of institutional religion. Most of them are self made and their intelligence in mind reading and taking advantage of the weaknesses of followers is enormous.

Mostly people with severe problems, not easily solvable, look for soothing words, somebody who gives them confidence which tells them that their problems will be solved by the earth where Baba treads, or by subjugating themselves to the Baba,

or by following some advice which Baba gives. The followers throng to these Babas mainly due to their own insecurity in the society. There are many other aspects of success of Babas, their nexus with the political class being one such. Just as an example Gurumeet Ram Rahim has been mostly on parole, especially when elections are due. One recalls Manoharlal Khattar took his whole Cabinet to Gurmeet to take his blessings.

The insecurity aspect of followers is the key to understanding their psychology. More the insecurity, more the submission to Baba, the common sense or rational thinking is given a total goodbye by the followers. Insecurity aspect can be properly understood when one sees the global scenario. In the countries where economic and social insecurity is less, religions are seeing a decline in their active followership. Key finding from Global Research by PEW shows that, "The United States is far from alone in this way. Western Europeans are generally less religious than Americans, having started along a similar path a few decades earlier. And the same secularising trends are found in other economically advanced countries, as indicated by

recent census data from Australia and New Zealand.

Growing numbers of people in the West no longer find religion a necessary source of support and meaning in their lives. Even the United States—long cited as proof that an economically advanced society can be strongly religious—has now joined other wealthy countries in moving away from religion.

Contrary to the Values of Constitution, Article 51A(h) under the Fundamental Duties, "[It shall be the duty of every citizen of India] to develop scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform". But Babas flagrantly violate this clause, and those protecting or promoting them do the same.

In India at social level there are active groups who oppose the Babas. Maharashtra has seen Andhshradha Nirmulan Samiti (Committee for eradication of Blind Faith) associated with Dr Narendra Dabholkar. He was brutally murdered by activists of conservative groups probably like Sanatan Sanstha. Similarly the murders of Govind Pansare, Gauri Lankesh and Prof Kalburgi were also done by similar forces. After the murder of Dr Dabholkar, Maharashtra Assembly passed a law against blind faith and magic remedies. But how far it has been implemented is anybody's guess. □□□

[Contributed by Ram Puniyani]

## NOTE

**'The Process is the Punishment'****BD writes:**

**I**N AN EDIT PAGE ARTICLE titled 'When the Process is The Punishment' published in The Tribune dated July 9 2024, the famous former judge of the Supreme Court of India Justice Madan B Lokur has made some comments on the cases against the renowned writer Arundhati Roy and the highly reputed social activist Medha Patkar which deserve wide attention.

Justice Lokur starts his article by quoting a statement made by the Chief Justice of India in 2022—"In our criminal justice system, the process is the punishment."

He then describes the case against Arundhati Roy in the following words—"Arundhati Roy gave a speech in 2010, perhaps objectionable, according to some. In June this year, that is 14 years after her speech, the Lt. Governor of Delhi gave sanction for her prosecution under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. All these years, the prosecutor's sword was hanging over her head. Consider this in the context of time. Life imprisonment is 20 years of prison in some states and 14 years in others. In a sense, Roy has undergone the equivalent of life imprisonment under the prosecutor's sword. This is nothing but the process being the punishment, as the CJI tells us. But the tragic reality is that her troubles

are just beginning. Her trial hasn't begun; in fact even the charge sheet does not appear to have been filed (at the time of writing). Knowing how our justice system functions, if she is arrested now under the draconian law, it's curtains as far as her personal liberty is concerned."

Keeping in view what this learned former judge has stated and the statement of the CJI he has quoted, isn't there a strong case for withdrawing the case against the famous author, also considering that a very healthy convention of all mature democracies has been to avoid initiating legal proceedings against writers unless extremely serious violations of law or harm to public interest are involved. Even very senior leaders of countries like the USA, UK and Germany generally simply ignore when some very angry, even clearly unjustified statements against them are made by renowned authors, as it is not considered democratically correct to send an author to prison just because of a statement or two.

Coming next to the case involving Medha Patkar, Justice Lokur has stated that this is even worse. He writes—"Worst still is the case of Medha Patkar. She has recently been convicted of criminal defamation for something she said against some gentleman in 2001—that is 23 years

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ago (equivalent to more than one-and-a-half life sentences)." (There is likely to be an appeal against this, so the case appears like to continue).

The learned judge has further raised the question that should not her sufferings over a very long period of the legal battle be an important matter of consideration.

These questions and issues raised by such a senior and highly learned former judge of the Supreme Court deserve attention. Many people including those in leadership roles take pride in India being a mature democracy and so this should also be reflected in decisions regarding renowned writers and social activists who have been honoured at national and international levels. □□□

**HUMRA QURAIISHI'S COLUMN****Shedding Silent Tears****Humra Quraishi**

**O**NCE AGAIN I'M FOCUSING on those jailed. Immediate provocation for this are these very recent news reports—

Politician Mukhtar Ansari's son Umar Ansari plea in Court that his father was given poisoned food whilst lodged in Uttar Pradesh's Banda jail and

there was no medical facility available to help save his life. AAP leader and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's blood sugar levels are a matter of concern as he sits imprisoned in the Tihar Jail; let's not overlook the fact that he is severely diabetic and quite obviously the jailed state would be affecting the blood

sugar levels. And this week's news reports also focused on jailed BRS leader K Kavitha. She is lodged in the Tihar jail, and had to be "rushed" to Delhi's DDU hospital... These are just some of those reported cases of the week.

What is the fate of all those who sit languishing in the jails and prisons of the country for years? A substantial percentage of those are under-trials and with that technically innocent, yet wasted their lives in that jailed state.

Not to overlook another vital fact—even when proven innocent and finally released the going gets absolutely tough for them. They face not just economic struggles but also major social disadvantages. Affecting their health and livelihood and the connected off-shoots.

In fact, these realities hit after viewing the late film maker Shubhradeep Chakravorty's documentary, 'After The Storm'. Focusing on 7 young Muslim men—Mukhtar Ahmed, Md Fassiuddin Ahmed, Umar Farooque, Moutasim Billah, Harith Ansari, Md Musarrat Hussain 'Bobby', Shaikh Abdul Kaleem—who were jailed with terror charges, until they were proven innocent and acquitted from the various courts... Chakravorty had told me that these seven were amongst the hundreds who'd been arrested, falsely implicated in bogus charges. He had detailed that young Muslim men are detained and arrested by the police on the flimsiest of charges and or even without a charge! Merely on suspicion or to create an atmosphere of fear. And even if they are acquitted after years, they sit ruined for times to come. With nobody even bothering to ask this vital—What happens to the lives of inno-

cent men, whom the system had caged for so many years?

This documentary film was made several years back but the situation seems no better today. After reading books written by several of those who were earlier imprisoned, one wonders: Shouldn't books authored by the former prisoners, be read by the heads of the various Human Rights Commissions? The stark truth is that something or everything is wrong the way the system treats the imprisoned yet there is no stopping nor questioning. Where is the much required transparency? Why should we go only by police hand-outs? Why shouldn't a non-governmental agency be allowed to carry simultaneous investigative probes? Why shouldn't the biased and corrupt officials be side-tracked and exposed? Why shouldn't the non-jailed citizens be aware of the prison conditions and how safe and secure are they. Don't overlook the fact that last year several prisoners in the various jails of Uttar Pradesh were found to be HIV positive in that jailed state!

Also, not to be overlooked another reality. It seems that isn't difficult to arrest an innocent and heap charges on him; with that he sits languishing as an under-trial. Not to overlook the patent one-liners that go along with the arrests—the arrested has 'confessed' his or her 'crime' to the police. Who will believe that the arrested 'confessed' without those torture sessions. We are well aware the police can make you confess any possible crime in the midst of torture sessions.

Isn't it time that a full-fledged commission is set up, which comes out with a thorough investigation of the functioning of jails and the treatment meted out to those languishing in there.

I leave you to ponder and keep on pondering on what Mahatma Gandhi had to say on the jailed ...

his views on those amongst us who are sit jailed. To quote from the November 1947 issue of Harijan: "All criminals should be treated as patients and the jails should be hospitals admitting this class of patients for treatment and cure. No one commits crime for the fun of it. It is a sign of a diseased mind. The causes of a particular disease should be investigated and removed. They need not have palatial buildings when their jails become hospitals. No country can afford that, much less can a poor country like India. But the outlook of the jail staff should be that of physicians and nurses in a hospital. The prisoners should feel that the officials are their friends. They are there to help them regain their mental health and not to harass them in any way. The popular governments have to issue necessary orders, but meanwhile the jail staff can do not a little to humanize their administration."

Ending with these lines of Faiz Ahmad Faiz:

#### **'LOVE'S PRISONERS**

*Wearing the hangman's noose, like  
a necklace,  
The singers kept on singing day  
and night,  
kept jingling the ankle-bells of  
their fetters  
and the dancers jigged on riot-  
ously.  
We who were neither in this camp  
nor that  
just stood watching them envi-  
ously.  
shedding silent tears.  
Returning, we saw that the  
crimson  
of flowers had turned pale  
and on probing within ,it seemed  
that where the heart once was  
now lingered only stabbing pain .  
Around our necks the hallucination  
of a noose  
And on our feet the dance of  
fettlers.' □□□*

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## MCCARTHYISM IN INDIA?

## The Return of the Urban Naxal Bogey!

*Subhas Gatade*

**A**T THE STROKE OF MID-night India will awake to freedom. At the stroke of midnight night 1st July 2024 India will awake to police raj.

There are rare occasions when a simple tweet underlines the unfolding reality in stark terms.

Noted lawyer and human rights activist Indira Jaising's tweet a fortnight back created similar ripples. Her concern was over the three new criminal laws coming into operation the next morning.

And she was not alone; other leading lawyers and human rights activists seemed equally concerned about it.

Widespread concerns had already been shared about these laws which enable '[b]road criminalisation of legitimate, non-violent dissent and opposition against the Governments'... 'put in the hands of the Government of the day unguided, arbitrary and virtually unlimited power to selectively arrest, detain, prosecute and convict practically anyone they choose, including by branding them as terrorists and as anti-national.'

The 'police raj' metaphor was an indication that the powers that be only understand the language of force and neither believe in dialogue nor are ready to communication with anyone—barring a select coterie of their friends.

But perhaps nobody had a faint idea that more was in the offing.

Post elections, Eknath Shinde, Chief Minister of Maharashtra in one of speeches had talked of Urban Naxals 'penetrating NGOs and help creating 'false narratives against the government' A speech made during a rally for BJP Konkan Gradu-

ates Constituency in the MLC polls was considered out of tune with the ambiance.

Little anyone had premonition that within a month of this speech the government will come out with a bill supposedly to curb the 'menace' of Urban Naxalism.

### **What is the 'Maharashtra Special Public Security Act 2024'?**

Named the 'Maharashtra Special Public Security Act 2024', the bill is aimed at "curbing the menace of Naxalism and its sympathisers in urban areas" and has "provision of punishment for seven years and a Rs 7 lakh fine if someone commits or abets or attempts to commit or plans to commit any unlawful activity through such an unlawful organisation"; it also mandates "three years' imprisonment and the imposition of a Rs 3 lakh fine, if a member of any unlawful organisation takes part in the meetings or activities or manages or assists in the management or promotes meetings or contributes to the purpose of unlawful organisations."

It also grants the state the authority to declare an organisation as "unlawful"—a decision which can be reviewed by an advisory board set up by the state government. Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha have already enacted Public Security Acts for the effective prevention of unlawful activities.

What is shocking that "all the offences under this act shall be cognisable and non-bailable" and even if "any individual who is not part of the unlawful organisation contributes or receives or solicits for the organisation, they will be punished

with two years' imprisonment and fined Rs 2 lakh."

Looking at the vague provisions of the bill it is susceptible to misuse and a threat to free speech. As per journalists 'even the provisions could be invoked against journalists reporting on natural disasters, a health epidemic or even the collapse of a bridge'.

One can see this as an echo of the past when there were reports about Maharashtra officials thinking of promulgation of such strict law to curb them.

### **Why Human Rights Defenders are Concerned?**

Leading Human rights lawyer Colin Gonsalves wrote an article in leading national daily explaining the vague provisions in the bill which can enable his "[r]ight to freedom of speech and expression be crushed by this Bill." He further adds, "The Bill is crudely drafted to crush freedom of speech and expression. It is meant to make impossible vigorous non-violent struggle against oppression. All the provisions of the Bill are already contained in the Unlawful

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Activities Prevention Act, the National Security Act and the Public Safety Acts. Why, then, is it necessary? The answer is because the state requires a statute that has nothing to do with terrorism but will strike terror in the hearts of human rights activists and cripple their work."

In the end he also exposes the term 'urban naxal' which is being increasingly used.

"Not a single judge in the country has ever called an accused an "urban Naxal". Finding Leftist literature in a house was held to be not incriminating by the Supreme Court in Vernon's case. Yet it finds mention in the Bill. Mere participation is not criminal, said the Supreme Court in ShomaSen's case. Yet even innocent participation will invite a three-year jail term."

Perhaps Maharashtra government's decision to table a bill to 'curb naxalism' so expeditiously tunes in with what was being said in the election speeches or interviews of PM Modi, or his associates, e.g. who had termed the very idea of Congress to survey the state of India's

wealth distribution, or its pitch for caste census

Amit Shah-Modi's closest confidante-has also resonated similar concerns.

Not much attention has been paid to the fact that neither the term has been used by the Judiciary nor does it exist in the vocabulary of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

In fact, Kiran Reddy of the BJP-the then home minister for state-a junior of home minister Amit Shah had categorically stated on the floor of the august house that this term 'Urban Naxal' does not exist in the vocabulary of the government.

Does it mean that this debate around the word Urban Naxal is meaningless-which could be construed as a formal response for public consumption and it does not stop the government or its cheerleaders to stigmatise voices who have refused to be silenced against the deprivations of forces which rule the country.

Does the ruling dispensation feel that since naxals are seen as violent groups who claim to work for people this bogey of Urban Naxal facilitates it to target anyone who refuses to play ball.

It is an interesting coincidence that home ministry's formal acceptance that the word Urban Naxal does not exist in its vocabulary, sounds similar with the way it responded that it does not have any information on the 'tukdetukde gang'-a term which essentially implies the dismembering of India, an attack on its territorial integrity, has been similarly widely used since last 8-9 years to terrorise, criminalise critical voices.

It is now part of history how everybody on the right had joined the chorus to castigate this 'omnipresent' 'tukdetukde gang'. Prime Minister Modi himself seemed to allude to the term during a pre-election rally in May 2019, when he

said, "Deshkotukde-tukdekarne wale kesath Congress khadihai..."

When the home ministry was asked via RTI application about 'banning this gang' under Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and who its members are and the ministry admitted that it has no information on any such gang.

### **Unfolding Agenda?**

What explains the continued usage of these terms?

For the Hindutva Supremacists-who wants to usher India into a Hindu Rashtra and ensure that their vision of majoritarian nationalism should continue their dominance for decades to come, it is important to silence, subjugate or crush all the 'others'. Remember, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, the second Supremo of RSS-their ideological fountainhead had made it absolutely clear how it considers all these others-Muslims, Christians and Communists a Internal Enemies and how it wants to deal with them.

Looking at the fact that both these terms have wider purchase even among articulate sections of society they feel that they may not exist in official jargons or statues but can still be pushed as part of their political-ideological weapon.

In fact, ten years at the helm of affairs of this biggest democracy in the world has demonstrated to them that the broad masses of the people do not feel perturbed if the government is seen going against 'anti nationals', 'naxals' or people engaged in 'sedition', 'waging war against the state', 'overthrowing democracy' etc. The ruling dispensation knows very well that armed with draconian provisions of various anti terror laws, where trials cannot even start for years and obtaining bail itself is next to impossible, such people-who are ready to disagree and dissent-can be kept languishing in jail for years together.

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Any concerned citizen can look dispassionately at the Bhima Koregaon Case (12) or the way the accused in the NE Delhi riots have been languishing in jail—and are not even getting bail—and infer where things have reached.

In fact, Sushant Singh brings out a much neglected aspect in the Bhima Koregaon Case' in his recent writeup—

*“The Bhima-Koregaon case, in which 16 intellectuals and activists were charged under harsh anti-terror laws, was based on the loud narrative created by media outlets for months around a supposed letter that indicated a plot to assassinate Modi. Surprisingly, that letter has never featured in any of the police charges filed in the case so far.”(13)*

The ruling dispensation's behaviour can be better understood if one can take a fresh look at how national security adviser, Ajit Doval, shared his vision of 'future frontiers of war' to the newly-recruited IPS officers in Hyderabad:

“Quintessence of democracy does not lie in the ballot box. It lies in the laws which are made by the people who are elected through these ballot boxes. You are the ones who are the enforcers of the law... Laws are only as good as they are executed and implemented and the service that people can get out of it.”

“People are most important. The new frontiers of war—what we call the fourth-generation war-

fare—is the civil society. War itself has ceased to become an effective instrument for achieving your political or military objectives. They are too expensive and unaffordable.”

Perhaps it is now easy to comprehend how the regime treats truthseekers, (14) or how it has suddenly deemed it necessary to give sanction to prosecute Arundhati Roy and a Kashmir based academic for a speech they made 14 years back (15)

Or why this bogey of Urban Naxals is being rediscovered and refurbished.

It very well understands that people in search of jobs, better and peaceful life—devoid of hate and ill feelings towards others—and peeved over the government's increasing dalliance with big crony capitalists will rise up again in peaceful manner taking inspiration from our Constitution itself which once promised them life of dignity, equality and justice.

#### ***In Lieu of Conclusion***

The talk of 'Urban Naxalism' in the 'Mother of Democracy' reminds one an equally controversial era in the Strongest Democracy of the World—USA.

It was the year 1950 when Republican Senator McCarthy made a speech which talked about US being engaged in a "battle between Communist atheism and Christianity". He also claimed that he has a list of communists—the number kept changing—who were working in the State Department.

It is now history how these allegations triggered investigations into 'communist subversion', which proved to be a witch hunt against writers, cultural activists, film makers and other thinking people, culminating in people losing their jobs, destruction of careers and some facing imprisonment.

After mid 50s McCarthy, lost his public popularity as many of his accusations proved false. He died a disgraced man few years later (1957)

McCarthy is long dead, McCarthyism also known as second "Red Square" is also buried in annals of history but the penchant of rulers everywhere to 'discover' similar 'bogeys' to silence critical, independent voices ready to speak truth to power continues unabated.

Perhaps the way Colin Gonsalves, who is a senior advocate of the Supreme Court and a founder-director of Human Rights Law Network' concludes his article can be seen as a wake up call.

"[B]ecause the judiciary has let us down again and again, the government has become so bold as to draft a law to trap within its web all those who struggle without guns or bombs for a better India for their children."(16)

Time all peace, justice loving people see the writing on the wall and get ready for another round of sacrifices for a long, arduous and peaceful struggle to strengthen India as a Secular, Socialist, Sovereign and Democratic Republic which has space for everyone. □□□

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## 13 YEARS BEHIND BARS

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### A Prison Memoir

**Joydip Ghosal**

**1** 3 YEARS—A NAXALITE'S Prison Diary by Ramchandra Singh (Publisher Navayana) is an account of gaol, fetters, revo-

lution. Told from the core of inner recesses of the heart this poignant memoir with its raw fragrance offers unprecedented acquaintance with the

inmate's life who was incarcerated due to political reason. According to Vara Vara Rao this memoir raises naxalites' spirit and this memoir in fact bears the fragrance of fire. The world was hell-bent to destroy his humanity and imagination but Ramchandra Singh evoked his empathy and humour in the dark cell.

With the help of his friends he smuggled out his diary. "This smuggled-out account exposes the bosom of gulag that India has become". This representative smuggled-out saga about life and revolution is a deep reflection on society and a gripping chronicle of power play and oppression. While reading the memoir one gets acquainted with the feature which Foucault mentioned in *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the Prison*. It was a state of perennial visibility upon which automatic functioning of power depended. Angela Davis wrote the foreword of the book. Of course it is a stunning narrative of the journey one makes through labyrinth of repression and debased dimensions of pain. Angela Davis is apt when she points out that the author of this memoir develops practices and acquires insights that salvage him from the horrible fate and dehumanising fate the prison is designed to produce. Though it was his own story it was connected with so many political events that were hallmarks of that particular time. Readers of the western world are familiar with the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Nelson Mandela, George Jackson, Assata Shakur, Mumia Abu-Jamal. According to her they are largely unaware of the political turmoil in the seventies which rocked India. Unequivocally she asserted that as the world acknowledges the West's marking of 1968 as

a pivotal year of protests- from the student uprising in Paris to the agitation by athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos—"so also should the Naxalbari uprising of 1967 be globally recognised". During his internment on the island of Ustica Antonio Gramsci prepared a political project which was emulated by political prisoners in Italy during the fascist regime. Ramchandra Singh's account reveals the central debates within the political movement, his engagement with ordinary inmates. Readers also get a detailed understanding of the functioning of the prison. Prisons were veritable hellholes. It dehumanised convicts. After their coming out the prisoners were ill-prepared to cope with the harsh realities of life.

As a naxalite undertrial Ramchandra Singh entered the Hardoi District Jail in September, 1970. He was barely twenty then. His life of expanding prospects was dwindled to bleak canvasses of life term. The original title of the book was *Thehre hue Terah Saal*.

Ramchandra Singh hailed from working class background of Bangarmau village in Unnao district. Madhu Singh, a professor in the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow did the translation. It first appeared in *Samkaleen Dastavez*, a short-lived literary journal in 1991. That journal devoted its second issue to that prison memoir.

It first appeared in *Shaan-e- Sahara*, a Hindi weekly from Lucknow. It was its revised version. Madhu Singh in the section Translator's afterword wrote that during the thirteen years he spent across five prisons in Uttar Pradesh he internalised that jail had metamorphosed into an outdated institution. A heavy colonial hangover pervaded the entire atmosphere. "It was infested with corruption and all sorts of mal practices. An institution that benefitted none-neither the society nor the prisoners and their families, not even the bureaucracy". No good could yield of a mega structure which wrecked people so thoroughly that they had little opportunity to reform or recuperate from the physical or mental suffering. This memoir also brings to the fore the multidimensional complex of relationship within the confined space of prison. Methods employed to destroy the spirit, 'panopticon' nature of prison, surveillance, isolation found prominent mention in this book. Once the prison gates had slammed shut behind the inmates, they learnt to live in a sort of nether world. They were stripped of autonomy. This world was invisible to the outside world. The prisoners were bereft of any identity. It was a prolonged existence of trauma and powerlessness. Translator did justice to the original writing. With evocative prose it retained the earthy flavour. This book is an important document to get a vivid account of prison's life. □□□

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## ARUNACHAL IS SATURATED WITH DAMS

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### 'Dam Means Destruction'

*Tapo Neeya*

**D**AMS ARE JUSTIFIED IN national interest, but people from Narmada valley to Uttarakhand have realised their destructive potential.

There are more than 169 pro-

posed dams in Arunachal Pradesh (AP), which will exploit nature and will be a threat to people. It is imperative to highlight that the dams in AP induce floods in downstream Assam. As Arunachal Pradesh is an

earthquake prone zone and with the change in climate, melting glaciers become more threat to its people and the downstream Assam. There are many formations of new glacial lakes with thousand of lakes existing already in the mountains of AP.

China is constructing 60,000 Megawatt dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo River on the Medog border in Tibet across from Arunachal



Pradesh. Tsangpo becomes Siang as it enters AP. The reason being given for construction of 11,000 MW Upper Siang project by National Hydroelectric Power Corporation is that it will act as reservoir to counter the effects of potentially reduced flow caused by the Chinese super dam, three times the size of biggest dam—Three Gorges on Yangtze River. How can a dam counter another dam on the same river? If anything, the Arunachal Pradesh dam will reduce the flow of water to Assam, where the river becomes Brahmaputra, just as the Chinese dam will reduce the flow to Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese dam will be a disaster, the Upper Siang will double that disaster, not mitigate it as the Indian authorities would like us to believe.

Meanwhile the Dibang valley, home to the 2,880 MW Dibang multipurpose dam and 3097 MW Etalin Hydro Project, faces increased risks due to climate-induced changes.

The breach at 60 metre Teesta dam in Sikkim on October 4, 2023 is a recent example of how hydroelectric projects are prone to accidents. We cannot afford to ignore these lessons.

Meanwhile developers like NHPC mislead people. The dam-induced floods in Assam have devastated the public downstream. Assam flood relief is a mere damage control. The only solution to prevent such tragedy is to not build dams upstream. The Indian government instead of building a dam should channelize its energy in trying to stop China from building a dam further upstream.

Agitation and protest of the various northeastern based activists are deliberately being ignored by the government owned NHPC, State government and Union government. Yet, campaign against the proposed dam 11,000 MW Upper Siang multipurpose storage project are going on, in the light of its possible adverse environmental repercussions. Also, the affected villages of the Siang were not consulted prior to the allocation of CSR funds, and were unaware of the related notification until 1 March 2024. As per the Companies Act, 2013, questions have been raised on the allocation of the CSR funds in Siang by NHPC. The activists opposing the project have condemned the CSR fund allocation of 16.61 crores, stating that it would encourage corrupt practices and irresponsible district administration. We also demand transparency from the departments involved in the CSR scheme. Despite numerous official objections, the survey attempts continue. The Siang Indigenous Farmers' Forum (SIFF) has expressed strong disapproval of the model villages sanctioned by NHPC.

On 8 July, 2024 social activists Advocate Ebo Mili and DuggeApang were detained under the section 128 of the Bharatiya Nagrik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) to suppress their right to free expression, which is clearly a violation of his fundamental right as part of Constitution of India. They were released only after the completion of legal formalities. We condemn such high

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handed action by the state.

The government must explore renewable energy alternatives like solar and wind in order to fulfil its energy needs instead of pursuing the destructive hydroelectric option. Moreover, any energy solution must be worked out in partnership with the indigenous people ensuring that they exercise ultimate ownership rights over any enterprise. The Arunachal Pradesh State Hydro-power Policy 2008 must be amended to honour the rights of indigenous people rather than benefitting the profit seeking corporates.

Socialist Party (India) supports the civil society groups such as Siang Indigenous Farmers' forum (SIFF), Dibang Resistance, Northeast Human Rights which strongly oppose such large-scale mega dams in Arunachal Pradesh. □□□

[Tapo Neeya, Member, National Committee, Socialist Party, India]

## JAL SAHELIS OF BUNDELKHAND

### Water Warriors

*Bharat Dogra*

**B**UNDELKHAND REGION IN central India is spread over 14 districts of two states—Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

It has frequently been in the news due to water scarcity but now the Jal Jeevan Mission is hard at work to provide a tap connection in every

village home. While people are happy about this, there is also concern regarding the adequacy of water sources. With water table already declining in a large part of the region several people are apprehensive that with bore-wells extracting more water to feed into pipelines, water sources would soon be depleted badly

unless water conservation can be stepped up in very significant ways.

With increasing importance of water conservation, the inspiring work done by Jal Sahelis (women water friends or water protectors) has attracted a lot of attention in recent times. These are women volunteers encouraged and trained to work on water conservation, sanitation and related issues by a voluntary organization Parmarth, Recognized widely in these villages by their sky blue sarees, without any salary or honorariums they have contributed much to water conservation as well as improving water supply and sanitation.

Recently this writer visited several of these jal sahelis at their homes, farms or training places. Profiles of four of these jal sahelis are presented below.

#### **Sirkunwar**

Extreme personal distress and adversities can sometimes push people into despair and loneliness, but some also respond with a strong determination to overcome extremely difficult situations. Sirkunwar is one of those persons who never give up. Her struggle is all the more inspiring because this led her not only towards providing better security for her family but she could go much beyond this to help hundreds of people in her village and some neighbouring ones as well.

Sirkunwar is a middle-aged woman of Udguwan village in Taalbehat block (Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh). As their farming

based livelihood faced several problems, her husband had to frequently go to Indore city for work. Here he had a serious accident due to which he has been disabled. Even after several years he cannot walk properly and cannot do any work requiring much physical activity. Now she had a lot of hopes from her son for helping the family to get some security. But one day he suddenly died at a very young in what appeared to be an accident but have been an assault. Now Sirkunwar was suddenly denied her son's help and instead had the additional responsibility of helping her daughter-in-law and her two children.

What has been Sirkunwar's response to these adversities? She has gone right ahead to take up several social responsibilities relating to the welfare of her village and neighbouring areas. She in fact had the honour of becoming the first Jal Saheli under this programme which has been widely appreciated.

Sirkunwar played an important mobilisation role in the considerable stepping up of water related programmes in her village, resulting the construction of three check dams and providing more hand pumps, hence meeting needs of conserving water as well as providing water supply nearer home. A lot of water conservation work is being done these under NREGA program of rural employment, and Sirkunwar also helped to improve it, first independently and then also by becoming a mate under this program. Her involvement has been helpful in improved functioning, including more timely payment of wages, of NREGA.

As several households had been left put in the first phase of toilet construction, she took up a campaign to get these toilets constructed, resulting in the construction of about 120 more toilets. She has also campaigned for improving drainage sys-

tem and has extracted an assurance from the pradhan or village headperson that this work will be taken up soon.

Sirkunwar makes periodic rounds of anganwadis and mid-day meal cooking centres to see if the nutrition and maternity care programs in her village are functioning properly or not. Sirkunwar has extended her social mobilization role beyond her village and contributes with her experience and enthusiasm in neighbouring areas too. Her presence in various development initiatives and meetings of the area is considered a must. Not just villagers but even village and block-level officials have taken to addressing her as 'NetaJi'.

#### **Sona Saharia**

Sona was sitting with some of her family members near her farm. The lush greenery of crops, fruit trees and vegetable plants served as a symbol of the improving prospects of this Saharia tribal family based in Bamhori village of Talbehat block, Lalitpur district (Uttar Pradesh).

However her face grew grim as she recalled the condition till just a decade back—For the most part we were not able to cultivate our fields, or else the yields of on farmland was so low as to make the entire effort non-viable. Hence the family had become dependent on migrant labor work for sheer survival. My husband went to Indore or other places, generally to work in brick kilns. Sometimes I too went. We had to work and live there in very difficult conditions.

Her husband added—there were certain phases when we got caught in very exploitative conditions and despite toiling very hard we could hardly send anything back home.

Sona continued—A lot of the problems arose due to lack of water. So when we learnt that efforts were being made to conserve water we de-

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cided to come back and see if something can still be done in our village. After all we have land here, and the desire to go back to our farm-based livelihood was always there.

When they came back to their village, they found some young men and women from an organization called Parmarth visiting their village repeatedly, holding meetings to discuss the possibilities of improving water conservation.

"This is exactly what I had yearned for, so I quickly became involved with their efforts", Sona recalls.

The Parmarth visitors too were on the lookout for village based volunteers who can help with community mobilisation. The most promising women volunteers were being selected as jal sahelis (water friends) and taken for training workshops and exposure visits to see good examples of water conservation work. Sona liked it all, all the more so when she was selected as a jal saheli. In addition a wider community-based organization on water-related issues called paani panchayat was also formed.

Now Sona started mobilizing women for water conservation work, whether taken up under NREGA (rural employment program) or in other ways. As most such work involves work under NREGA, these women were involved in trying to improve the functioning of NREGA work too. Things began to look up once people were involved in the functioning of the programme and in issues like site selection. The most promising water conservation work here was taken up on Naraininullah where a check dam was constructed using NREGA budget. As a result neglected, deserted fields started blooming with green crops. While about 50 acre of land benefited directly from this irrigation, water level in wells rose over a much wider

area, helping other farmers too.

With more water available now, Sona and her family also returned to farming with more hopes and enthusiasm, determined to be successful in earning a satisfactory livelihood within their village.

#### **Sharda Vanshkaar**

Sharda may appear to be a very simple, also very gentle woman from a remote village of Bundelkhand, but in reality she has some very extraordinary achievements to her credit for which she recently received the prestigious 'Catch the Rain' Award from the President of India, Draupadi Murmu, at a big presentation ceremony in New Delhi.

Sharda belongs to a small farmer family in Vijaypura village of Taalbehat block (located in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh). She has been observing closely that due to water scarcity many farmers are not able to cultivate their fields properly and hence have to accept work in exploitative conditions as migrant workers far away from home. So when some activists from a voluntary organisation Parmarth came to her village to organise meetings on water conservation, Sharda responded enthusiastically and mobilised about 30 other women to work for water conservation in cooperation with Parmarth.

Most villagers appeared to agree that some work was urgently needed to tap the water of Barua river flowing nearby so that the thirsty fields could get water. Unfortunately an old check dam on the river had fallen into disrepair and there were no signs that the funds or approval for a new structure could materialise any time soon.

#### **Pushpa**

Pushpa lives in a very remote village Khakraun of Mohangarh block (located in Tikamgarh district of Madhya Pradesh). As she says—this is a remote village of a remote

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development block.

However the graduate young lady was not overwhelmed by the remoteness of her new surroundings. She decided to study further in a Master of Social Work course. What is more, she was always looking out for opportunities to use her education in ways that would contribute to the welfare of her village. She got together a number of children who had lagged behind in school education and started teaching them.

Her efforts soon attracted the

attention of a voluntary organisation Parmarth which was trying to mobilise and train several women for water conservation and other related constructive works. Pushpa appeared to be ideally suited for this role and she was soon selected as a jal sahebi. She started attending training workshops and went for exposure visit to villages of Sagar district where exemplary water conservation work had been carried out earlier. This widened her horizons and she started thinking of similar possibilities of

improving water conservation in and around her village where water scarcity was frequently an important constraint for people trying to improve or enhance their rural livelihoods.

She now had a better appreciation of the need for mobilising more people and by talking over with her friends in her village, she soon managed to create a group of about 25 to 30 women who were willing to come together for work of community's welfare.

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#### THREAT TO CIVIL LIBERTIES

## The Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill 2024

*Mihir Desai*

*Lara Jesani*

**T**HE MAHARASHTRA SPECIAL Public Security Bill, 2024, tabled in the Monsoon session of the Vidhan Sabha on 11th July 2024, is a threat to civil liberties. It is repressive, unconstitutional, overbroad, arbitrary and inherently allows for misuse.

It has been claimed that the Bill, approved a few days back by the Cabinet of the Eknath Shinde Government, was drafted on the lines of the Chhattisgarh Vishesh Jan Suraksha Adhiniyam (2005) ("Chhattisgarh Act") and the Andhra Pradesh Special Public Security Act (1992). In the states of Chhattisgarh, and Jammu and Kashmir where similar laws were first introduced, it has received extensive criticism for being used to target journalists, lawyers, environmental defenders, citizen activists, and Adivasi protesters who have dissented against state action. A constitutional challenge to the Chhattisgarh Act is pending before the Hon'ble Supreme Court.

Firstly, the draft of the Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill was not made available in the public domain nor was it vetted by

any body of legal experts and practitioners. The tabling of the Bill in haste in the last few days of the Monsoon Session, just two months before the State Assembly elections are to be held, is itself indicative of the opacity of the entire process and suspect motives behind its introduction at this critical time of democratic engagement.

Given that there is already in existence an extremely harsh law for unlawful activities and terrorism in the country—namely The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 (UAPA) amended as recently as in 2019 (also draconian in nature); and a stringent State Act—The Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999 to tackle organised crime; the present move of the State Government and its timing seems to be aimed not at dealing with violent or terrorist activities; but in reality to suppress political opponents, public protests, people's movements, and civil society and human rights activists, journalists and lawyers.

The Statement of Objects and Reasons of the Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill of 2024, signed

by the Deputy Chief Minister, Devendra Fadnavis, claims that the law is being brought in to address the menace of Naxalism in urban areas and tackle frontal organisations of Naxal groups by effective legal means. By using the broad and non-descript label of 'urban Naxal', which has become a common slur used for any citizen who expresses their opposition to state policy or is not aligned with right-wing majoritarian views, the state government through this law, aims to legitimise the criminalisation of dissenting citizens, human rights defenders, and political opponents.

The Bill contains an unacceptably broad and vague definition of "unlawful activity" that includes any action which 'constitutes a danger or menace to public order, peace or tranquillity'; or even 'interferes or has a tendency to interfere with the maintenance of public order'; or 'interferes or tends to interfere with the administration of law, or its established institutions and personnel'. Even the time-honoured practice of Satyagraha and any non-violent act of civil disobedience would be hit by such provisions, as also peaceful protests which are in no manner associated with violence or terrorism, but are in fact a constitutional right associated with the democratic expression of citizens. In any event, these

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activities are already provided for and could easily be dealt with under the ordinary criminal law.

Moreover, 'any action taken by an individual or organisation whether by committing an act or by words either spoken or written or by signs or by visible representation or otherwise', could constitute an "unlawful activity" under the Bill. Hence, it includes not just actions but any act of expression, like spoken words, online messages or posts, articles, artworks, demonstrations, placards, and even gestures. Even an act or expression of support or solidarity provided by a person or group of persons could constitute an unlawful activity. It follows that all freedoms protected under Article 19 of the Indian Constitution can thus be curtailed—including freedom of speech and expression, association and assembly, press freedoms, academic freedoms, etc. Even making a statement, lending a book, or social media meme prepared or posted by an individual could be considered "unlawful activity" under the Bill. This is wholly dangerous and can be potentially used against journalists, writers, filmmakers, artists, and any citizen expressing their dissent or critiquing the government, in any form or manner.

Under the Bill, an "organisation", is again very broadly and vaguely defined as meaning 'any combination, body or group of persons, whether known by any distinctive name or not, and whether registered under any relevant law or not, and whether governed by any written constitution or not'. According to this definition, the Government can name as an "organisation" any group of people it aims to target—even if no such "organisation" per se exists, for instance a group of so-called urban naxals! This means that the government has the power to bring an entirely fictitious organisation into existence by naming a group of people as belonging to such an organisation.

The Bill provides that an "organisation" can be notified as 'being unlawful or having become unlawful' even before such notification is placed before an Advisory Board within 6 weeks, and the Advisory Board can take up to three months to decide whether there is sufficient cause for the issuance of the notification. The notification that the government issues regarding the declaration of unlawful organisation requires only the grounds to be stated (which is likely to be vague terms around danger to public order), but the Bill provides that the disclosure of any fact can be dispensed with by the Government in the public interest, making the entire process non-transparent and making it easy for the Government to outlaw an organisation and target its members, without even providing reasons. Even if such an organisation has formally dissolved itself, it can be prosecuted. The organisation in question is granted an opportunity to make a representation to the government only within 15 days of such notification. Even personal hearing before the Advisory Board is provided only to the authorized office bearer of the organisation, who can be promptly arrested since being a member per se is an offense under the Act. Moreover, no hearing whatsoever is provided before issuing such a notification against the organisation.

Meanwhile, an "unlawful organisation" is defined under the Bill as 'any organisation which indulges in or has in pursuance of its objects abets, assists or gives aid, or encourages directly or indirectly through any medium, devices or otherwise, any unlawful activity'. This basically means that any or every organisation, whether fictitious or real, whether directly or indirectly engaging in any of the broad activities defined as "unlawful activity", could be potentially declared as an

"unlawful organisation". The definition of "unlawful organisation" also mischievously fails to mention that it is required to be declared as unlawful under the Bill.

Owing to such broad definitions provided in the Bill, the government is only required to be of the opinion that an organisation is or has become unlawful. There is no burden of proof whatsoever that is required to be borne by the government in declaring any persons or group and their activities as unlawful. In effect, the Bill gives the government the power to go after any individual or organisation that it perceives as a threat, can declare all its activities (including non-violent activity, speech or communications) as unlawful, and restrict its activities and punish some or all the individuals associated with it. Furthermore, the government will also have the power to bring an entirely fictitious "organisation" into existence, simply on account of a common purpose or shared ideology of a group of individuals, and act against the individuals that it deems to be associated with it, even in the absence of any evidence to substantiate the claim.

According to the Bill, any person who is 'eligible to be appointed as a judge of the High Court' may be appointed as a member of the Advisory Board; this would include pro-government lawyers or district judges since it is a body appointed by the government itself. An organisation can be declared unlawful for a period of one year at a time, by a publication in a local newspaper, and this notification can be extended indefinitely, a year at a time, without disclosing grounds if the government feels it is not in the public interest. Thus, the oversight process under the Act is not at all efficacious.

The Bill has also delegated draconian powers to a District Magis-

trate or Commissioner of Police or any officer authorized by him, who can notify a particular area or a particular building which in his opinion is used for unlawful activities; and then proceed to take possession of it, seize all articles in it and evict all persons in it. No notice or opportunity of hearing is provided before issuing notification in respect of an area or building, instead sweeping powers have been given to notify, raid and take over possession of notified places without recourse to the aggrieved organisation or individuals. Discretionary powers have been given to take possession of moveable property (including money, security, and other assets found in the notified place) and even forfeit articles in favour of the government after considering the representation of the person claiming the same.

Even appeal from such an order of forfeiture is before the Government itself! This gives rise to a serious apprehension of mass arrests, forfeiture of property, and evictions, especially in remote areas where Adivasis and forest-dwelling communities are protesting against forest diversion and deforestation activities, mining, or high impact, high stake developmental projects that seek to displace them. Meanwhile, the Bill gives excessive powers to the Government to issue an order for investigation which can act as a warrant empowering the police officer to enter into the premises of any individual and conduct searches, raising actual fear of individuals being targeted for the literature, books, writings they personally collect, keep or hold.

Penalties are so arbitrarily defined in the Bill that a particular act

could be variously liable for imprisonment of 2, 3, or 7 years. Mere membership of an unlawful organisation is punishable by 3 years; and even a person who is not a member, but who contributes, solicits contributions

or harbours a member of an unlawful organisation would be punishable by imprisonment of 2 years. While the Monsoon Session of the State Assembly came to an end without the passing of the Bill and consequently the Bill stands lapsed, in spite of the massive civil society and political objections reported in just a matter of days, no formal statement has been issued by the Maharashtra Government assuring that the Bill will not be reintroduced and will be scrapped. □□□

*[Mihir Desai, is President and Lara Jesani, is General Secretary of PUCL, Maharashtra]*

#### INSIDE A MILITARY PRISON

## The Moral Dilemma of an Israeli Doctor

*Luis de Vega*

**T**HE PRISONERS—ALL FROM Gaza and some seriously injured—are held at all times in a supine position with their eyes covered. Their hands and feet tied to the bed, and they are naked except for a diaper, which they use to relieve themselves, and a quilt. An hour and a half visit is enough for a doctor to conclude that the Israeli army's Sde Teiman detention centre and its field hospital must cease to exist.

EL PAÍS interviewed the Israeli surgeon, who describes that scene. He is a man who—in view of the Hippocratic oath, the professional code that defends a patient's well-being above all—feels “complicit” and “guilty” about the violations being committed by Israeli authorities at Sde Teiman. But he is aware that someone had to care for those de-

tainees at risk of dying.

In the midst of the controversy, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked the Supreme Court on Monday for Sde Teiman to be kept open to temporarily detain prisoners before they are transferred to other prisons. The Prosecutor's Office reported, however, that the ultranationalist Itamar Ben-Gvir—who is the Minister of National Security and head of prisons—is hindering the process of relocating inmates. According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, there are 166 prisoners at Sde Teiman. A few days ago, Ben Gvir proposed executing Palestinian prisoners with “a shot to the head,” according to a video that went viral.

The Israeli doctor, who requested during the telephone interview that details that could lead to his identification not be published, was

authorised to care for one of the inmates, but they ended up asking him for help to care for two others. The three were in serious condition after being hit with large-caliber bullets in the abdomen, and one of them, also in the chest. He says surprised: “They were shots from long guns.” The military personnel in charge do not have the capacity to take care of these types of patients, he says.

The doctor, who is not the only one who has accessed these facilities, located in the Negev desert (in the south of Israel, about 18 miles from the border with Gaza), describes the field hospital as a large white tent that houses between 15 and 20 beds. Although it was the middle of winter when he visited, it was open to the cold outside. Next door, several metal containers used in maritime transport are used to store medical supplies, all “provisional” facilities.

The doctor says that during his visit he was not able to verify first-

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hand any signs of torture such as electric shocks or beatings, despite the repeated complaints that have been made. But he clarifies that “being tied to a bed, unable to move, unable to see, unable to speak, unable to understand what is happening and with a diaper... Very cold. And with this going on for days and days, for weeks. I think that is already a form of torture.”

Amid the constant reports of abuses and deaths in the military prison, the Supreme Court and humanitarian organisations are putting more pressure on authorities to shut it down. The Israeli army is investigating 48 deaths of Gazans, 36 of which took place in Sde Teiman, according to Haaretz. In early June, the state told the Supreme Court that all the detainees were going to be transferred to other centres or returned to the Gaza Strip.

When asked by EL PAÍS about whether Sde Teiman—in a military base of the same name and near the city of Beer Sheva—is still in operation and how many prisoners are there, a military spokesperson only responds that 4,700 detainees have been detained there throughout the war. “We cannot comment further,” concludes the brief response.

Regarding the 36 deaths and possible results of the investigations, the spokesperson says that of the “approximately 70 investigations” opened, “some refer to the deaths of Palestinians, including the death of detainees during their transfer to military detention centres or in their own facilities, as well as other deaths that occurred during operations in the Gaza Strip.” “Most investigations are still ongoing,” adds the spokesperson.

The Israeli doctor’s description of the situation at Sde Teiman reflects what another doctor wrote in a letter to the authorities in March that was published by Haaretz. “Just

this week, two prisoners had their legs amputated due to handcuff injuries, which unfortunately is a routine event,” said the letter.

During the conversation with EL PAÍS, the doctor often raised his and deontological ethical doubts about his visit. “Doctors should never treat patients with their eyes covered,” he laments, even though he ended up doing so. What happens in Sde Teiman “goes against any medical code and against [what is stipulated by] the World Health Organisation,” he adds.

The latest controversy surrounding these facilities was sparked by the decision to release Mohamed Abu Salmiya, the director of Al Shifa, the largest hospital in Gaza, who was returned to Gaza along with 50 prisoners on Monday. His release has led to clashes within the Israeli government. Netanyahu has called for an investigation into his release, stating: “The place of this man, under whose responsibility our abductees were murdered and held, is in prison.”

Netanyahu is referring to security camera recordings—released by Israeli authorities—which show some of the Israeli hostages from the Hamas attack on October 7, in which Palestinian radicals murdered some 1,200 people, in Al Shifa Hospital. Meanwhile, the Defense Ministry, Israeli secret services and the prison service have avoided taking responsibility for Salmiya’s return to Palestinian territory.

The Sde Teiman centre—which is exclusively for investigating people detained in Gaza—was launched at the start of the war last October. Given the “human rights violations,” the doctor thinks that “the only possible solution is to close the field hospital completely and treat these patients in real hospitals.” The Israeli NGO Physicians for Human Rights has the same opinion, recall-

ing that the presence of medical personnel in these facilities is prohibited, according to a report on abuses presented in April. The report states that the Sde Teiman hospital was opened after different centres in Israel refused to treat Gazan prisoners, as they considered them “terrorists.”

“The medical staff working in this facility face a significant risk of committing severe violations of medical ethics,” says the document. The NGO argues that care provided to detained Gazans “falls far below acceptable standards,” departing from “established protocols and ethical norms in many cases.” Physicians for Human Rights also denounces political interference in the decision-making process in the healthcare field.

The NGO estimates that Israeli authorities have detained thousands of men, women, children and the elderly in Gaza since the fighting began in October and have kept them—and continue to keep them—completely isolated from the outside world. Detainees are often classified as “unlawful combatants,” which deprives them of being of prisoners of war status and prevents them from receiving visits from lawyers for prolonged periods, the report adds.

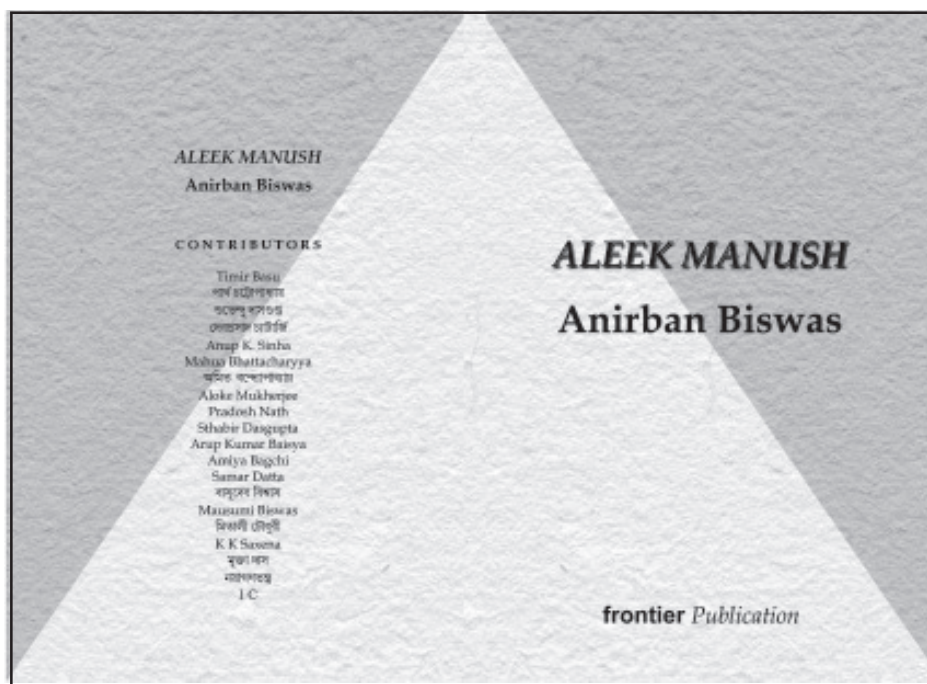
Given this reality, there is one last question for the doctor. How does he feel after treating patients in these conditions? “As an Israeli doctor who treats Gazans in these types of conditions, I am complicit. Deep down, it doesn’t matter why I did it, but from the moment I did it, I was part of this. Of course, I feel guilty. □□□

[Source: EL PAÍS]

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**COMPILATION TEAM:**

TIMIR BASU, ARUP SEN, NABINANDA SEN, TARUN BASU

**CONTRIBUTORS:**

TIMIR BASU, PARTHA CHATTOPADHYAY, SHUBHENDU DASGUPTA,  
DEBAPROSAD CHATTERJEE, ANUP K. SINHA, MAHUA BHATTACHARYYA,  
AMIT BANDYOPADHYAY, ALOKE MUKHERJEE, PRADOSH NATH, STHABIR  
DASGUPTA, ARUP KUMAR BAISYA, AMIYA BAGCHI, SAMAR DATTA,  
BASUDEB BISWAS, MAUSUMI BISWAS, MITALI CHOWDHURY, K K SAXENA,  
MUKTA DAS, NAYAGANATANTRA, I C

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